

ABSTRACT

HARDIN, SHERRY MICHELLE. The Christianization of the Kerak Plateau in Ancient Times. (Under the direction of S. Thomas Parker.)

Historians of both the Roman Empire and early Christianity have long debated the pace and extent of Christian conversion. This thesis attempts to add a significant new contribution to this debate. Conversion to Christianity was a complex process that moved differentially from region to region. This paper attempts to understand when and why Christianity penetrated the Kerak Plateau in Jordan by examining the full range of environmental, documentary, and archaeological evidence from the plateau itself as well as from adjacent regions that may offer instructive parallels to this process.

Christianity was slow to make significant inroads to the Kerak Plateau until the sixth century for many reasons. Its geographical isolation and thriving polytheistic community acted as a deterrent for Christianity. Archaeological and literary sources provide several lines of evidence for this, including a lack of churches before the sixth century and a lack of bishops before the fifth century. Out of a corpus of 135 dated Christian tombstones from the Kerak Plateau, seventy-four percent are dated from the mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries, which fall in line with dated churches in the area. In addition literary and archaeological sources suggest that polytheistic practices were tenacious. Two hundred years after Constantine converted to Christianity, emperors were still issuing edicts against polytheism.

The Christianization of the Kerak Plateau in Ancient Times

by
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends.

Thank you for being my light in the darkness.

BIOGRAPHY

Sherry Hardin was born in Gastonia, North Carolina on January 17, 1973. She graduated with honors from Winthrop University in 1995 with a Bachelor of Arts degree double majoring in History and French. In 1999 she graduated with an Associates of Science degree in Advertising and Graphic Design from Central Piedmont Community College. She has won awards in art and design and is also a published photographer. Since 2004 she has pursued a graduate degree in Ancient History from North Carolina State University. Her future goals include teaching Ancient History at a collegiate level and publishing more photography.

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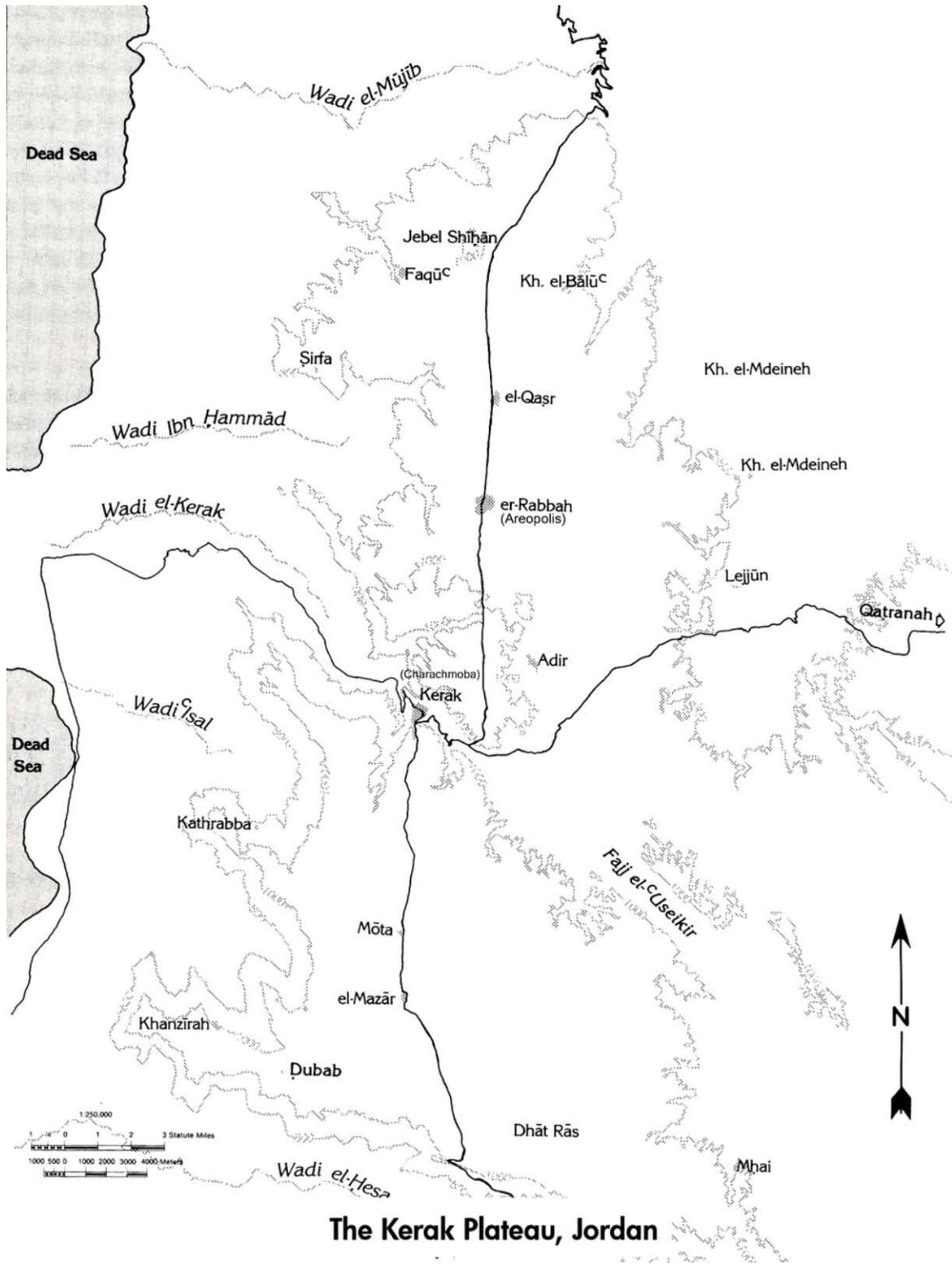


Figure 1. Map of the Kerak Plateau

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Historians of both the Roman Empire and early Christianity have long debated the pace and extent of Christian conversion. How rapidly and by what means did the diverse population of the empire convert from “paganism” (polytheism) to the new faith? The answer depends on a variety of factors. Conversion to Christianity was a complex process that moved differentially from region to region. The recent burst of archaeological research (both excavations and surveys) in the Roman and Byzantine periods in Jordan generally and on the Kerak Plateau specifically, combined with long available evidence, offers the possibility of a significant new contribution to this debate. Preliminary analysis of the evidence suggests that Christianity was slow to make significant inroads on the Kerak Plateau until the sixth century, contrary to some who argue for an earlier date. This paper focuses on the Kerak Plateau because it forms a contained geographical unit and has only recently been the focus of intensive regional surveys and excavations.¹

While there is no direct evidence of how Christianity spread on the Kerak Plateau, it is reasonable to infer that some of the mechanisms used in Christian conversion elsewhere in the empire were also employed on the Kerak Plateau. Christianity initially spread by conversions in the urban centers of the empire, especially among lower class artisans and merchants. Meeks describes Christianity’s transition from its rural village roots to the urban centers of the empire:

Within a decade of crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement. So it remained, from the

¹ S. T. Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006), 19.

dispersion of the “Hellenists” from Jerusalem until well after Constantine.²

Several lines of evidence can be used to research Christianity on the Kerak plateau.

One line of evidence is the Episcopal lists from various church councils. These detail which bishops attended each church council and which city they represented. Further, a substantial collection of Greek funerary inscriptions from the region offers an independent line of evidence about conversion to Christianity on the plateau.³ The majority of these tombstones date to the sixth and early seventh centuries. In addition, archaeological evidence attests to Christian churches built in the region. Though many of the churches cannot be firmly dated, those that are dated point to mainly a sixth century Christian presence. This evidence from the plateau suggests that Christianity made no significant inroads until the sixth century.

Parker describes this lack of evidence on the Kerak Plateau as:

In short the funerary evidence suggests that Christianity was slow to make deep inroads among the population of the Kerak plateau. This conclusion is further supported by other evidence. Kerak was one of the two major cities on the plateau whose population might reasonably be expected to have converted fairly early. Yet of its 43 dated texts, none dates before 449-450 and the vast majority date to the 6th century or later.⁴

The early Christian church was a different entity than the later church of grand basilicas and powerful bishops. The early Christian community was fragmented and secretive, which makes it difficult to find ancient sources on the theology and practices of the early church. Moreover, early Christians were not of the elite; they were craftspeople and

² Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 11.

³ Reginetta Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab*. (Citté del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1954).

⁴ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-198*, 570

often the poor. Church meetings were secretive, held in people's homes, and difficult to control in regards to a common Christian doctrine.⁵

Surviving ancient literary sources referring to early Christianity in Arabia are scarce. The writings of the late third and early fourth century church historian, Eusebius, are crucial in gaining an understanding of pre-Constantinian Christianity in Arabia. Eusebius was a bishop of Caesarea in Palestine during Constantine's reign. He became personally associated with Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. One of his most famous works, *The Onomasticon* (written between A.D. 313 and 325) identifies sites mentioned in the Bible (mainly the Old Testament). Eusebius probably took several excursions to personally visit many of the sites he described. In many cases he gives specific directions and even distances in Roman miles. Eusebius describes several sites located on the Kerak plateau, including one of the main cities, Areopolis. This work has been invaluable to archaeologists searching for sites mentioned in the Bible.⁶ Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* detailing the early history of the church was probably begun during the reign of Diocletian (284-305). He also wrote *De Vita Constantini*, chronicling the life of the Emperor Constantine and describing his conversion to Christianity. Eusebius died in A.D. 339 before completing *De Vita Constantini*.⁷ Other than Eusebius's personal experiences of the early church and his personal interactions with Constantine, he also used official documents available to him for

⁵ Harry Maier, "Heresy, Households, and the Disciplining of Diversity" In *Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burris (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 215-220.

⁶ Joan E. Taylor, "Introduction" In *The Onomasticon by Eusebius*, ed. Joan E. Taylor (Jerusalem: Carta, 2003), 3-8.

⁷ Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall, "Introduction and Commentary" In *Life of Constantine by Eusebius of Caesarea*, trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-4.

his research. These included legal texts, literary texts, and actual letters from Constantine.⁸

He specifically mentions that he used library sources available to him at the time.⁹

Eusebius's works aimed to promote and glorify Christianity and Constantine; but, despite this, they serve as an important source for early Christianity.¹⁰

This paper attempts to understand when and why Christianity penetrated the Kerak Plateau by examining the full range of environmental, documentary, and archaeological evidence from the plateau itself as well as from adjacent regions that may offer instructive parallels to this process. Although geographically isolated, the Kerak Plateau was a rich, densely inhabited region of provincial Arabia with urban centers accessed by a major trunk road (*the via nova Traiana*) that passed through the plateau. If the central government outlawed and then actively persecuted paganism by the late fourth century, why does most of the evidence for Christianity on the plateau (churches, Episcopal lists, and Christian tombstones) date to the sixth century?

To answer these questions it is necessary to cover a variety of subjects. This paper will first describe the geography and climate of the Kerak Plateau, then present a history of the region. Next will be an investigation of indigenous religion on the Kerak plateau before Christianity using documentary and archaeological sources. After a review of the pre-Christian religion of the area, this paper will discuss the emergence of Christianity; as a religion of the Roman Empire and its presence in the region. Finally, this paper will investigate evidence for Christianity on the Kerak plateau after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity.

⁸ *ibid.*, 3, 13.

⁹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI.20.1.

¹⁰ Cameron and Hall, "Introduction and Commentary" In *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea 47.

Chapter II - Geography and History of the Area

This chapter describes the geography and history of the people who settled the Kerak Plateau (figure 2). In order to understand how religion changed among the people settled on the Kerak Plateau, it is necessary to know what sort of land they settled, including its climate and history up to Roman times.

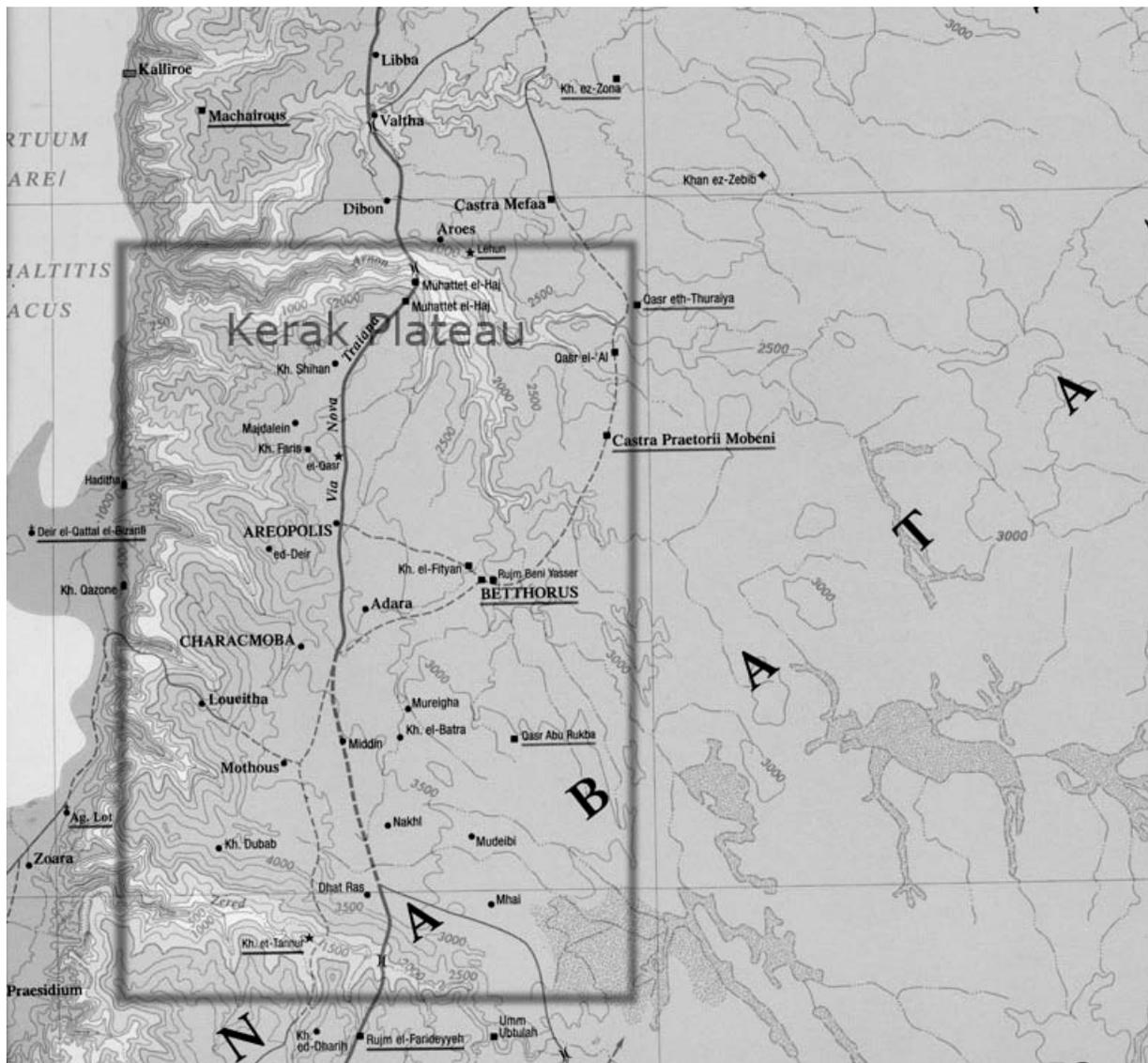


Figure 2. Map of Kerak Plateau in Ancient Times

Geography and Topography

The geography of the Roman province of Arabia is varied. The southwestern side of provincial Arabia bordered the Mediterranean Sea and included the vast empty lands of the Sinai that connected it to Egypt. Although it reached into southern Syria and northwest Saudi Arabia, the majority of the province was located in what is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.¹¹ Arabia had overland access to ports on the Mediterranean and Red Seas as well as in Egypt.¹² The western border of the province extended from the Dead Sea to a high plateau reaching between 2,500 and 5,000 feet above sea level, with numerous *wadis* (dry river beds) and adequate rainfall where most settlement occurred. This area included the largest and most well known cities of Roman Arabia—Gerasa, Philadelphia, and Petra.¹³

The Kerak Plateau, which is located today in Jordan between the Wadi Mujib and Wadi Hasa, covers 875 square kilometers. It is one of the most geographically isolated regions in Arabia because it is surrounded by natural boundaries on all sides. The plateau's elevation ranges between 700 and 1,200 meters above sea level and is dissected by the Wadi Mujib and the Wadi Dabba, creating two regions on the plateau. The west has rich soils for agriculture and the east has grazing land which transitions into the desert.¹⁴ Besides the rolling terrain of the plateau, there are some mountainous regions. Jebel Shihan is the highest peak in the northwest of the plateau, an extinct volcano over 1,000 meters in elevation. Past volcanic activity transformed the vicinity into a flat plain with fertile soil.¹⁵ The southwest corner of the plateau is a mountainous

¹¹ Glen Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1-8.

¹² Glen Bowersock, "A Report on Provincial Arabia," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 5.

¹³ Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 1-5

¹⁴ F. L. Koucky, "The Regional Environment" In *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Roman Frontier* by S.T. Parker (Winona Lake, Indiana: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986), 25.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 25

region with Jebel Zhubab as its highest point—1,305 meters.¹⁶ The southwestern portion of the plateau also has plentiful farming land receiving more than 600 millimeters of annual rain.¹⁷

To the north and south immense canyons border the region, effectively isolating the plateau from surrounding areas. The northern Wadi Mujib (comparable to the Grand Canyon) provides a dramatic boundary (as shown in figure 3). This three to five kilometer-wide canyon plunges to a depth of 800 meters. The southern rim of the plateau drops off into the Wadi Hasa (see figure 3), a 600 meter deep canyon.¹⁸ The Wadi Hasa was used as an administrative boundary when the province of Arabia was partitioned by the Romans in the third century.¹⁹



Wadi Mujib
Figure 3.

Wadi Hasa

A vast desert on the eastern boundary and the Dead Sea to the west create obstacles in accessing the plateau. As the eastern edge of the plateau merges into the desert, the elevation gently slopes downward until it reaches the desert floor.²⁰ The difference is

¹⁶ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 11

¹⁷ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 25

¹⁸ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 16

¹⁹ D. L. Kennedy and Robert Bewley, *Ancient Jordan from the Air* (London; Oxford: Council for British Research in the Levant; Oxbow Books distributor, 2004), 20.

²⁰ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 11

visibly reflected by a sudden change in flora and fauna. To the west, the plateau forms a cliff steeply descending to²¹ the Dead Sea, which sinks to 1,400 meters below the plateau and 400 meters below sea level.

Water Resources

In contrast to the desert to the east, the plateau has several sources of water. The Wadi Mujib is a perennial river fed by springs or aquifers and winter rainfall. Springs are found mostly in the wadis but also on the plateau. Shallow wells are often dug in the wadis that contain water longer during the dry season than other areas.²² The drainage system on the plateau is unique. Instead of surface waters draining southward into the Wadi Hasa or in the rift valley to the west, they drain mostly into the Wadi Mujib before making their way to the Dead Sea.²³

Climate

Rain falls on the plateau primarily between January and March, averaging between 200-400 millimeters. However the rainfall varies from year to year. For example, the city of Kerak over a 37-year period (from 1937-1974) averaged 360 millimeters a year, but in some years had only 102 millimeters; in others had as much as 661 millimeters. Furthermore, the rainfall occurs at different times in the winter. If it comes in late winter, it is too late for crops planted in the late fall. To compound the matter, often the rain falls all at once, in just a few storms, so that it drains quickly into the wadis. To the east of the plateau, the rainfall decreases as it nears the desert areas.²⁴ The plateau sustains modest amounts of rainfall—up to 600 millimeters per year—while across the

²¹ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 25

²² Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 13

²³ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 30

²⁴ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 12

eastern border the desert receives no more than 100 millimeters of annual rainfall,²⁵ half the amount needed to grow crops without irrigation.²⁶ The region is still susceptible to unexpected droughts if rainfall is low or poorly distributed. The coldest month is January, and the hottest month is August. However, because the humidity is so low on the plateau, even though the summer days are hot, it cools off rapidly after sunset, making winter nights even colder.

Around the time of the equinoxes, April to May or September to October, monsoon winds carry loess soils from the Sinai and the Sahara. The loess deposits fill protected areas and depressions which turn into important grassy areas for grazing when given enough rainfall.²⁷

Flora and Fauna

Jordan hosts at least 2,500 species of wild plants.²⁸ Plants of the Kerak Plateau fall into two plant zones—the Irano-Turanian and Mediterranean non-forest zones. Typical vegetation of the Irano-Turanian zone includes dwarf shrubs, various grasses, and brush, with a sparse amount of trees. The few remaining oak and pine trees of the Mediterranean non-forest zone are remnants of forests that once characterized this region, eventually replaced with agricultural and grazing land.²⁹ The twentieth century has changed the faunal landscape. Larger animals no longer roam the plateau except the occasional gazelle; however jackals, foxes, and wolves can still be seen. Rabbits, hare,

²⁵ H. Frank, ed., *Atlas of the Bible Lands*, Revised ed. Hammond World Atlas Corporation, 1977), 6

²⁶ Kennedy and Bewley, *Ancient Jordan from the Air*, 33

²⁷ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 16

²⁸ Dr Saeed Damhooriya, "Of the Areas of Haranah, Amra, Azraq Wetland Reserve and Shumari Reserve," <http://www.ju.edu.jo/faculties/science/Ecology0334471/sample%20reports.htm> (accessed February 12, 2007, 2007).

²⁹ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 16

and hyrax as well as many rodent species are also prevalent in the region. Jordan has many bird species including vultures, eagles, and partridge. The Wadi Mujib has pools of fish and currently in the 212 square kilometer Wadi Mujib reserve; Nubian Ibexes (once present in antiquity) are being bred in captivity.³⁰

Earthquakes

Excavations at el-Lejjun revealed evidence of three earthquakes striking the plateau in A.D. 363, 502, and 551 Major destructive earthquakes occur generally every 100 years.³¹ Three occurred in this area during a period of 250 years during ancient occupation. The last major earthquake in the area occurred in 1927, though smaller quakes occur on a regular basis.³²

Human Populations in the Region

Nomads throughout the history of the region have moved northwards into settled areas from the Arabian Peninsula.³³ Trimingham sums up the nomad versus settled panorama: "the perpetual movement that went outward from the steppe and desert regions into settled areas has to be borne in mind, a movement that profited alike cultivators and nomads and yet held within it menace."³⁴ Due to demographic pressures, tribes had been moving from the Arabian Peninsula and North Arabian Desert towards Jordan for centuries. As the tribes moved in and settled, more nomadic tribes followed,

³⁰ Damhooriya, *Of the Areas of Haranah, Amra, Azraq Wetland Reserve and Shumari Reserve*

³¹ Koucky, "The Regional Environment," 40.

³² *ibid.*, 35

³³ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London; New York: Longman, 1979), 3.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 4

thus a never ending cycle. Parker notes that “Arab nomadic pressure on the borders of the Fertile Crescent including Transjordan is also well attested in the Iron Age period.”³⁵ The Amorites in the Bronze Age and the Aramaeans in the Iron Age are perfect examples. The Amorites moved into Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C. The Aramaeans followed at the end of the Bronze Age. Nomadic Arabs were attested in the area by the ninth century B.C., and eventually by the fourth century B.C. the Nabataeans arrived. The nomads later pressing in on the Nabataeans were the Thamudic and Safaitic tribes.³⁶ Throughout the fringes of the Arabian frontier, Safaitic inscriptions have been found. A few possibly refer to confrontations with the Romans and Nabataeans.³⁷ Climatic change should be mentioned as a possible cause for these migrations. A letter dating to A.D. 363 from the bishop of the city of Nisibis in Mesopotamia details how the area had been raided and devastated by Arab tribes moving in from the south in response to a drought—carrying off men, beasts, and plunder.³⁸

Sedentary Population

Kerak (Charachmoba) and er-Rabba (Areopolis) were the two main cities on the plateau as listed by Ptolemy in the early second century. The *Babatha* archives from the late first and early second century A.D. refer to Rabathmoba (er-Rabba/Areopolis) as a

³⁵ S. Thomas Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, Vol. 6 (Philadelphia, PA.; Winona Lake, IN: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986), 115.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 115

³⁷ Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 119.

³⁸ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 540

polis and imply that the city was on the judicial circuit of the Roman governor.³⁹ The sixth century Madaba mosaic map depicts Charachmoba. Rabathmoba and Charachmoba (modern Kerak) were the only cities on the plateau which briefly minted their own coinage during Roman rule.⁴⁰ Eusebius mentions not only these cities but also several villages on the plateau in his fourth century *Onomasticon*. Among these are:

Arnon (, a certain rock that stood up on the boundary of the Amorites between Moab [I] and the Amorites. Moab [I] indeed is the city of Arabia which is now called Areopolis. The inhabitants of that region now show the place as horrible and frightening: a steep sunken valley which even up to the present is called Arnonas by many people. It extends to the north of Areopolis. Here garrisons of soldiers drawn from every part threaten violence and are fearsome. Once it belonged to the Moabites, and later Seon, King of the Amorites, obtained it by right of conquest. The land of the children of Israel also stretches across the Jordan from Arnon as far as Mounts Aeron and Libanus.[10:17-24]⁴¹

Arina (Isa.15:9): Also Ariel A, S: the lion of God. This is said to be Areopolis because from that time even up to the present those who live in Areopolis call their idol Ariel, from the worship of Ares [1] after whom they named the city. [36:30]⁴²

Aronieim (Isa. 15:5): A road. Isaiah. A:Oroniam; S: Aranneim. In the vision against the Moabites. [36:22-24]⁴³

Agelleim (Isa. 15:8) Isaiah in the vision against the Moabites. Now it is the village of Aigalleim eight milestones south of Areopolis. [36: 25-27]⁴⁴

Aileim (Isa. 15:8): A well of Deimmon. Isaiah in the vision of the Moabites. [36:28]⁴⁵

Moab (II) (Gen 3:35): From Moab, the son of Lot, a city of Arabia now [called] Areopolis. As above, the country is also called Moab [I] and the city Rabath Moab. [124:15-17]⁴⁶

³⁹ *ibid.*, 528

⁴⁰ J. Maxwell Miller, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 12-13.

⁴¹ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor (Jerusalem: Carta, 2003).15

⁴² Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor, 28

⁴³ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor ,28

⁴⁴ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor ,27-28

⁴⁵ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor ,28

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor ,70

Madiam (I): A city of one of the children of Abraham and Chettoura called Madiam [1]. It lies beyond Arabia to the south - the desert of the Saracens, east of the Red Sea There is another city there of the same name [Madiam II] near the Arnon and Areopolis which is pointed out as deserted. [124:6]⁴⁷

Miller says that Eusebius does not mention Charachmoba; however Joan Taylor associates *Deseth* [80:5] (which is simply listed and not described) with Charachmoba.

In both the archaeological survey of the Kerak Plateau by Miller and the regional survey by Parker, several settlements are attested including Neolithic, Early Bronze Age, Nabataean, and Umayyad sites—to name a few. Several towns such as Adir were visited by both surveys; most of these towns were protected by walls or lay on an elevation such as the Early Bronze Age site near el-Lejjun.⁴⁸ Other than the two cities, which would be small by ancient standards, the sedentary population on the plateau would have lived mostly in small agricultural villages.

Military Population

Nabataea had a large army. In A.D. 67, the Nabataeans added 6,000 troops to Vespasian's army. Parker estimates that by the first century A.D., the Nabataean army numbered as many as 10,000. There are numerous Nabataean forts, especially at the entrances to the wadis. The forts were either built by the Nabataeans or were reused Iron Age structures.⁴⁹ After the Roman annexation, the Romans maintained 10,000 to 12,000 troops in the region. In as early as A.D. 107, the *legio III Cyrenaica* was stationed in the new province. A military presence is

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, ed. Joan E. Taylor, 70

⁴⁸ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 540

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 540

evident from typical inscriptions dealing with construction and road building such as the *via nova Traiana*, built by Trajan on a previous caravan route, which cuts north-south across the plateau. Roman roads were built for ease of military movement, but were also useful for trade. Other milestones refer to additional roads that also attest to a military presence.⁵⁰ On the plateau in the northeast is the Roman legionary fortress of el-Lejjun, or ancient *Beththorus*, for *legio IV Martia*.⁵¹ The fortress was probably built during Diocletian's reign ca. 300 as part of his military buildup in the region. While the fortress is not as large as earlier Roman legionary fortresses, it is the normal size (ca. 4.6 ha.) for Diocletian's smaller legions.

Pre-Classical History of the Region

The earliest written sources referring to the Kerak Plateau are Egyptian, dating as far back as the nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.⁵² A stylistically Egyptian stele picturing a king and two deities was found on the plateau at ruins in Khirbet el-Balu in 1930. The stele's date is not certain, however scholars argue for a Late Bronze or Iron IIC date. The language inscribed on it is unidentifiable, but it does seem to show Egyptian influence on the plateau.

The Hebrew Bible mentions the ancient Moabites, however most of the places cited

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 531,546

⁵¹ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 12-13

⁵² *ibid.*, 8

in the text are north of the Wadi Mujib (northern Moab). There is a description of the plateau in Numbers describing the migration of the Hebrews after the Exodus:

And they journeyed from Oboth, and pitched at Ije-abarim, in the wilderness which is in front of Moab, toward the sun rising. From thence they journeyed, and pitched in the valley of Zered. From thence they journeyed, and pitched on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness, that cometh out of the border of the Amorites. For Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.⁵³

From other passages in the Hebrew Bible it is clear that the Israelites and Moabites interacted with each other in both war and peace.

The Mesha inscription, a text from the ninth century B.C. recovered from Dhiban just north of the Kerak Plateau, mentions a kingdom at least partially located in Moab. This inscription records the Moabite King Mesha's achievements, including his liberation of northern Moab from the Israelites. Assyrian texts from the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. mention Moab, namely because it was under Assyria's power at the time. Tributes, wars, crushed revolts, trade, and four Moabite kings are mentioned.⁵⁴ After the Assyrian empire fell at the end of the seventh century, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, conquered Moab in 582/81 B.C.⁵⁵

Hellenistic Intrusions: Ptolemies and Seleucids

Archaeological and literary evidence for the Kerak Plateau is sparse until the Hellenistic period (332-63 B.C.).⁵⁶ After Alexander's death in 323 B.C.,

⁵³ Numbers 21:10-30

⁵⁴ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 8-11

⁵⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, X 1181-82

⁵⁶ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 526

Transjordan (at least nominally) became part of the Ptolemaic Empire and after ca. 200 B.C. fell under Seleucid rule. However, there is no evidence to suggest whether either empire actually administered the Kerak Plateau.⁵⁷

Nabataeans

The Nabataeans were Arabs who appeared in southern Jordan by the late fourth century B.C. and in southern Syria as early as 259 B.C. Scholars debate the exact origin of the Nabataeans. If they were nomadic pastoralists, then the lack of archaeological evidence for them before the first century B.C is not surprising. At any rate, their language, names, tribal organizations, and their customs reflect an Arab origin.⁵⁸

The Nabataeans controlled rich trade routes between south Arabia via Petra to Gaza on the Mediterranean coast. They traded in frankincense, myrrh, and spices, as well as products from India and farther east.⁵⁹ Parker describes the importance of the Nabataean trade routes: “their rapid rise to prominence was fueled primarily by their control of important commercial routes between the Empire and Southern Arabia, India, and East Africa. Various luxury products were carried by caravan through Nabataea.”⁶⁰ As an example of their extensive trade, Graf points to the famous Nabataean fine ware which has been found along the coast of the Arabian Peninsula near Bahrain, Oman, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, and along the incense route leading north to Petra.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 526-527

⁵⁸ Trimmingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, 18

⁵⁹ Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 14-19

⁶⁰ Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, 116

⁶¹ David Graf, "Classical Text Sources in the Levant" In *Near Eastern Archaeology Reader*, ed. Suzanne Richards (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 434.

Nabataeans eventually settled and became skilled farmers, using irrigation and water-saving methods that allowed even marginal land to be utilized.⁶² Strabo describes the Nabataeans in the early first century A.D. in his *Geography*:

Σώφρονες δ' εἰσιν οἱ Ναβαταῖοι καὶ κτητικοί, ὥστε καὶ δημοσίᾳ τῶ μὲν μειώσαντι τὴν οὐσίαν ζημίᾳ κέεται, τῶ δ' αὐξήσαντι τιμαί. Ολιγόδουλοι δ' ὄντες ὑπὸ τῶν συγγενῶν διακονοῦνται τὸ πλεον ἢ ὑπ' ἀλλήλων ἢ αὐτοδιάκονοι, ὥστε καὶ μεχρὶ τῶν Βασιλέων διατείνειν τὸ ἔθος. . . . οἰκνήσεις δὲ διὰ λίθου πολυτελεῖς, αἱ δὲ πόλεις ἀτείξιστοι δι εἰρήνην; εὐάρπος ἢ πολλή πλὴν ἐλαίου, χρῶνται δὲ σησαμίνω. πρόβατα λευκότριχα, βόες μεγάλοι, ἵππων ἄφορος ἢ χῶρα.⁶³

The Nabataeans are prudent and fond of accumulating property. The community fines a person who has diminished his substance and confers honors on him who has increased it. They have few slaves, and are served by the most part their relations, or by one another. . . . the houses are sumptuous and of stone. The cities are without walls on account of the peace. A great part of the country is fertile, and produces everything except olives, the oil of sesame is used. The sheep have white fleeces, the oxen are large, but the country produces no horses. Camels are the substitute for horses and perform labor. They [the Nabataeans] wear no tunics but have a girdle about the loins, and walk abroad in sandals.”⁶⁴

Originally nomadic merchants, the Nabataeans may have turned more to agriculture due to a change in the trade routes.⁶⁵ Strabo claims that the bulk of the trade had shifted from the Arabian Peninsula (and thus through Nabataea) to the Red Sea Egyptian port of Myos Hormos, overland to the Nile, and thence to Alexandria, diverting trade from the Nabataeans. Nabataea was a prosperous, widely settled land. Parker briefly describes its geographical extent, noting that the Kerak Plateau fell within its western border. Remains of hundreds of

⁶² Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times*, 35

⁶³ Strabo, *Geography*, 16.4.26

⁶⁴ Strabo, *Geography*, trans. H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, Vol. I-III (London: George Bell and Sons, 1881), 16.4.26.

⁶⁵ Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 64

Nabataean sites show up in archaeological surveys of Jordan.⁶⁶ Parker points out that "the sheer number and density of Nabataean sites, including many far removed from these major routes, imply that a thriving agricultural base was at the heart of the local economy."⁶⁷

The settlement pattern was different in Nabataea than in other parts of the agricultural areas of the Roman Near East. In Palestine and Syria there were villages and small cities connected with a few large urban centers. In Transjordan these villages, cities and urban centers are fewer in number (on the Kerak Plateau there are only two urban centers – Areopolis and Charachmoba). Recent archaeological scholarship suggests that instead the area included a combination of hamlets, individual farms and caravanserais. Sanctuaries located off main trade routes served as regional centers, and even had small settlements surrounding them.⁶⁸ Even though they focused more on agriculture, the Nabataeans still carried on profitable trade even after eventual Roman annexation.⁶⁹ With such riches in trade and agriculture, it is not surprising that Rome coveted the golden apple of Nabataea, whether as a client state or province.

Nabataeans as a Client Kingdom and Early Provincia Arabia

In 63 B.C., the Roman general Pompey made Nabataea a client kingdom of Rome. Nabataea became a loyal and valuable client supplying military forces for several Roman

⁶⁶ Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, 123

⁶⁷ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 539

⁶⁸ Francois Villeneuve and Zeidoun Al-Muheisen, "Dharrah and Tannur: Sanctuaries of Central Nabataea" In *Petra Rediscovered: Lost City of the Nabataeans*, ed. Glen Markoe (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Cincinnati Art Museum, 2003), 83.

⁶⁹ Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, 121

campaigns.⁷⁰ The last king was Rabbel II (A.D. 70-106), who promoted agriculture and trade in Nabataea.⁷¹ Nabataea was annexed and converted into the Roman province of Arabia in A.D. 106. It is commonly believed that the annexation was generally peaceful. Trajan did not add the title of a conquered Arabia - "Arabicus" to his name. Further, Trajan did not use the term *Arabia Capta* on his coinage; instead he used the term *Arabia Adquisita*. Nabataea protected Rome's southeastern frontier for about 170 years prior to A.D. 106 Other than for reasons of expansion and trade, Trajan may have annexed Nabataea due to the threat of nomadic invasions.⁷²

Parker describes this threat as a "security problem that had plagued previous rulers of Palestine and Transjordan."⁷³ After annexation Trajan built the *via nova Traiana*, reaching from Syria to the Red Sea through the newly created province of Arabia. Trajan also stationed a legion, *legio III Cyrenaica*, at Bosra among perhaps 10,000 troops (including auxilia) based throughout the province, including a garrison in Areopolis.⁷⁴

Roman Military Buildup in Region Under Diocletian 284-305

When Diocletian came to power in the late third century, he had numerous empire-wide problems to solve. He reorganized the structure of both the empire's administration and its military. He reorganized the East, transferring southern Transjordan, the Negev, and the Sinai from the province of Arabia to the province of Palestine. By the fourth century the

⁷⁰ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 538

⁷¹ Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 51

⁷² David Graf, "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier," *BASOR* 229 (1978), 19.

⁷³ Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, 115

⁷⁴ S. T. Parker, "The Defense of Palestine and Transjordan from Diocletian to Heraclius" In *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond*, ed. Lawrence Stager (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 369.

region of southern Jordan and Palestine was known as *Palaestina Salutaris* and then *Palaestina Tertia*.⁷⁵ Diocletian increased military forces along the eastern frontier, including Arabia, Syria, and Palestine. He constructed a strategic military road, the *strata Diocletiana*, cutting through the Syrian Desert to reach the Euphrates. There is much evidence to support this buildup, although scholars still debate Diocletian's motivation. Literary sources such as the Latin *Panegyrics*, Ammianus Marcellinus, Procopius, and Eusebius discuss Roman interaction with the “Saracens”—nomadic Arabs living in the nearby desert regions on the eastern border. Diocletian created *limitanei*--troops stationed on the edges of the eastern empire in a sectors, each commanded by a *dux*. Epigraphic evidence alludes to the buildup as well. There are some inscriptions at forts in Transjordan (specifically on the plateau are Qasr Bashir, and the fortress of el-Lejjun).⁷⁶ Between these numerous border forts, watchtowers were built within visible contact of each other to create an early warning system for protection against Saracen raids. Since the Saracens preferred to enter stealthily through the wadis, watchtowers were often concentrated in these areas.⁷⁷ While there are conflicting views as to exactly why Diocletian initiated this military buildup, it seems most likely that it was in response to the Saracen raids. Nomadic Arab raids are attested as early as the Iron Age and continued beyond the Roman Empire into Medieval Islamic times. The Diocletianic system was still effective at least until the mid-fifth century. The system was only abolished in the sixth century under Justinian. By this point the Saracen raiders were more united under a Lakhmid king and had the backing of Persia. Justinian created his own tribal alliance under the Ghassanids to control the Lakhmids. He purportedly dismantled the *limitanei*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 372

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 372-373

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 374

system, weakening frontier defenses and ultimately opening the way for Muslim conquests in the seventh century.⁷⁸

It is evident from extant sources that the Kerak Plateau and Transjordan had been areas hospitable to agriculture, settlements, and nomadic pastoralists since early times. The plateau has had a history of periodic nomadic migration since the Bronze Age. Because of this nomadic element, the area was a crucible for frequent disturbances continuing into the time of the Nabataeans and the Roman Empire. The area's rich history combined with its moderately affable climate, marginal agricultural lands, nomadic populations, and its uniquely isolated geography make the Kerak Plateau an especially interesting area for study. In addition, the plateau's proximity to major centers of the Christian and Jewish religions makes it an interesting case study to determine the progress of Christianization in the Byzantine Empire.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 374,384

Chapter III Evidence of Religion on the Kerak Plateau before Christianity

Religion on the Kerak Plateau throughout ancient times has been diverse. The area which eventually became part of the Nabataean kingdom was close to the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Land routes through Arabia and Syria cut through the area and, as a result, it had many cultural influences.⁷⁹ The purpose of this chapter is to explore the religious situation on the Kerak Plateau before Christianity. After a brief look at Moabite religion on the plateau, this chapter focuses on Nabataean and Roman religion in the area. Due to the encroachment of modern settlements, many Nabataean religious sites have been disturbed or removed from the modern landscape. However, a few sites give a glimpse into Nabataean religion before and after the Roman annexation in A.D. 106. To understand Nabataean religion, it is also necessary to look at other Nabataean sites in the region which have sanctuaries or inscriptions. Additionally, two cities on the Kerak Plateau minted bronze coins, some of which featured religious themes in the third century.⁸⁰ This gives additional insight into the religious landscape of the plateau before Christianity.

The earliest external religious influence on the plateau may have been Egyptian. As early as the eighteenth century B.C., Egyptian execration texts mention the “Shutu,” possibly referring to peoples of the plateau.⁸¹ The Meggido List from Tuthmosis III’s reign (add date) lists some locations that he visited which may be located on the plateau including Kerak and Wadi el-Mujib. According to a statue inscription in Luxor, Ramses II (add date) campaigned in Moab. The Balu-stele found on the plateau in 1930 depicts a king with a god wearing the

⁷⁹ Nelson Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 64.

⁸⁰ Augustus Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, ed. Michele Piccirillo (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1978), 17.

⁸¹ J. Maxwell Miller, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 6

crown of upper and lower Egypt on the left and an Egyptian goddess on the right.⁸² Egyptian influence in the region is also apparent in Nabataean times as discussed later in this chapter.

The earliest indigenous religion on the Kerak Plateau was that of the Northwest Semitic peoples, such as the Canaanites and Moabites. Their cultic rituals included sacrifice at a holy place or “high place.”⁸³ Sometime between 855 and 830 B.C., King Mesha of the Moabites celebrated retaking some of his land (which encompassed the Kerak Plateau) from the Israelites.⁸⁴ Afterwards he dedicated a stele at Dhiban (just north of the Kerak plateau) to thank Chemosh, the Moabite god he had invoked to help him. The stele shows Chemosh to be a protective and militaristic god. Mesha built a “high place” to him—an activity common to worship in this area throughout Roman times. Chemosh was mentioned in the Bible several times and was later identified with the Roman god “Ares.”⁸⁵ Here is Mesha’s recording of the event and his thanks to Chemosh:

I am Mesha, son of Chemosh [yatti] king of Moab, the Dibonite. My father reigned over Moab thirty years and I reigned after my father. And I built this high place to Chemosh at Qarhoh [. . .] because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries. Omri, king of Israel, humbled Moab many days because Chemosh was angry at his land. And his son succeeded him, and he also said, “I too will humble Moab.” During my days he said this, but I have triumphed over him and over his house and Israel has perished forever. Omri had occupied the whole land of Medeba and he dwelt there in my days. And I built Baal-meon and I made in it a reservoir and I built Qaryaten.⁸⁶

⁸² *ibid.*, 8

⁸³ Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 160-162.

⁸⁴ Bruce Edward Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age: Hegemony, Polity, Archaeology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 237.

⁸⁵ David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, eds., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 232.

⁸⁶ J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 283.

It is apparent from the Mesha's inscription that he thought an effective way to satisfy the god Chemosh was to build a "high place" of worship for him. As we will see, this manner of placating the gods transcended Moabite culture and was a main part of Nabataean worship also.

The Moabites disappear from literary sources after the early sixth century, when they were allegedly conquered by the Neo-Babylonians. The identity and the religion of the indigenous population of the Kerak Plateau between the end of the Moabite kingdom and the emergence of the Nabataeans by the late second century B.C. remain murky. If indeed the Nabataeans were Arab nomads who migrated into the Kerak Plateau, they may have assimilated the remnants of the indigenous Moabite population, perhaps including some elements of their religion.⁸⁷

The Nabataeans, as mentioned previously, were a highly advanced people skilled in agriculture and architecture. Their culture reached its height from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. As mentioned earlier, they began as a nomadic folk and were masters of the spice and incense trade in the ancient Near East, but eventually became sedentary.⁸⁸ Strabo describes Nabataean worship in his *Geography*: "They worship the sun, and construct the altar on top of the house, pouring out libations and burning frankincense upon it every day."⁸⁹ It is a well known Semitic practice to worship a god in an open air sanctuary. There are numerous high places of worship and sacrifice throughout the Nabataean kingdom; at

⁸⁷Parker, *Roman Frontier in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 522-528

⁸⁸ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 3-5

⁸⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, trans. H. C. Hamilton and W. Falconer, Vol. I-III, XVI 4, 26

least 20 are known in Petra alone.⁹⁰ According to Nelson Glueck, caravan stops that were part of the area's booming trade later became settlements, and each of the settlements would have had a Nabataean sanctuary.⁹¹ During his survey of Transjordan and neighboring areas, Glueck discovered hundreds of Nabataean sites.⁹²

The place where a god was worshipped and made sacred by the god's presence was called a "high-place." "High places" were often equipped with an area to perform the sacrifice, a pedestal for the betyl (a block of stone representing the god), and an area for open air dining (biclinia or triclinia) characteristic of ancient cult celebrations. The most well known high place at Petra, "el Madhbah", would have been visited by cult processions.⁹³ The Nabataeans had various types of betyls. Some were free standing and probably used in processions, while others were carved into a niche. Aniconic worship was characteristic of the region; however, the Nabataeans sometimes placed stylized facial features (eyes and a nose) on the betyls. Often the betyls were portrayed in "families" of three, representing the three main deities in the pantheon.⁹⁴

Nabataeans honored their gods in different ways. They practiced animal sacrifice which served the dual purpose of feeding the deity and the worshippers. These cultic meals could also be practiced at tombs to honor the dead. Libations of milk, oil, water, and wine

⁹⁰ Philip C. Hammond, *The Nabataeans — their History, Culture and Archaeology*, Vol. 37 (Gothenburg: P. Åström S. Vägen 61, 1973), 98.

⁹¹ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 64

⁹² *ibid.*, 47

⁹³ John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, Vol. 136 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 48-49.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 155, 156

were also part of Nabataean cultic practice. In addition, Nabataeans burned incense to honor their deities.⁹⁵

In this region of the Near East, the tendency was to have a local male high god, usually associated with the sky, and his female companion associated with fertility. The male god was often referred to by the Semitic word “Ba’al” meaning “lord” or “master.”⁹⁶ As masters of the trading caravans of the East, the Nabataeans came into frequent contact with foreign cults. They brought foreign deities such as Isis and Harpocrates from Egypt. Hellenization also affected the Nabataean pantheon. Deities previously represented by betyls were combined or even replaced with Hellenized depictions.⁹⁷ For example, in Petra there is a depiction of Dushara as a rectangular block and then carved into the stone above it, a depiction of Dionysus,(the Greek god associated with Dushara).⁹⁸

The main Nabataean god, Dushara or “Lord of Shara,” could have been connected with the Shara mountain range east of Petra; however, this is uncertain. Dushara, like many ancient gods, was called by many other names. In some inscriptions he is referred to as “the god of Gaia” (god of the valley)⁹⁹ or referenced as “the god of our lord” referring to his connection with the Nabataean royal family.¹⁰⁰ There are Nabataean references to Dushara

⁹⁵ Hammond, *The Nabataeans — their History, Culture and Archaeology*, 102-103

⁹⁶ James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 64-65.

⁹⁷ Lamia Salem El-Khouri, *The Nabataean Terracotta Figurines*, Vol. 1034 (Oxford, England: Archaeopress, 2002), 42, 43.

⁹⁸ Fawzi Zayadine, "The Nabataean Gods and their Sanctuaries" In *Petra Rediscovered: Lost City of the Nabataeans* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Cincinnati Art Museum, 2003), 60.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 59

¹⁰⁰ Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 86

outside of Nabataea. The tenth century Byzantine compendium of ancient knowledge, *The Suda*, describes a betyl dedicated to Dushara in Petra (Ares was equated with Dushara):

Namely the god [*theos*] Ares, in [Petra](#) in Arabia. The god [Ares](#) is revered amongst them; for this one they especially honor. The statue is a black stone, square in shape, unchiseled, four feet tall, two wide: it is mounted on a plinth of beaten gold. To this [deity] they pour forth the blood of the sacrificial animals on this; and this is their libation. And the whole house is rich in gold, and [contains] many votive offerings.¹⁰¹

Dushara, as the most powerful Nabataean god, was also identified with Zeus. Several inscriptions refer to “Zeus Dushara.”¹⁰² Dushara was associated with Dionysus, and nearby grape production in the Hauran region of Syria proved to make the cult of Dionysus-Dushara popular.¹⁰³ Dushara was also associated with Helios, the sun god. A Greek inscription in the Hauran describes Dushara as “unconquered.” This term was often used for Helios—the unconquered sun.¹⁰⁴ Dushara was linked to the Nabataean kingship when the last Nabataean kings moved their capital from Petra to Bostra in southern Syria and was associated with the Syrian god of Bostra—Ar'a. There is an inscription to Dushara-Ar'a dated to A.D. 148 on a stele in the Hauran.¹⁰⁵ Under the Roman Emperor Philip the Arab's rule (244-249), not only was Dushara depicted on coinage, but the games held to honor the founding of Rome were referred to on coinage as “*Actia Dusaria*.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ "Suda on Line: Byzantine Lexicography," Stoa Consortium, <http://www.stoa.org/sol/> (accessed 02/15, 2008).

¹⁰² Zayadine, "The Nabataean Gods and their Sanctuaries," 59

¹⁰³ Hammond, *The Nabataeans—their History, Culture and Archaeology*, 96

¹⁰⁴ Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 102

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 97,98

¹⁰⁶ Hammond, *The Nabataeans—their History, Culture and Archaeology*, 96

The main triad of Nabataean goddesses consisted of Allat, al-'Uzza, and Manat. Allat's popularity as a main Nabataean goddess is apparent from frequent references in inscriptions throughout northern Arabia and Syria. On coins minted in Bosra, she is depicted as the city Tyche. An inscription from Bosra reads "This is Allat, the goddess who is in Bosra."¹⁰⁷ An inscription from the Hauran in Syria reads "This is the temple which PN (re-)built for Allatt and her betyl."¹⁰⁸ Her common invocation in Safaitic inscriptions and her temple in Palmyra suggest her popularity in the region. Allat was often associated with Athena and is depicted in one relief in Petra dressed as Athena.¹⁰⁹ Hisham ibn-al-Kalbi was a ninth century Muslim scholar who recorded the pagan practices of pre-Islamic Arabia in his book the *Kitab al-Asnam* or "The Book of Idols." His description of polytheistic worship provides insight into the Pre-Islamic religions of the area. It is interesting to note that at least for the area in which ibn-al-Kalbi lived, polytheists were converted directly to Islam.¹¹⁰ Ibn-al-Kalbi describes the ancient worship of Allat:

They then adopted Allat as their goddess . . . she was a cubic rock beside which a certain Jew used to prepare his barley porridge. Her custody was in the hands of the banu-'Attab ibn-Malik of the Thaqif, who had built an edifice over her. The Quraysh, as well as all the Arabs, were wont to venerate Allat. They also used to name their children after her, calling them Zayd-Allat and Taym-Allat. . . . Allat continued to be venerated until the Thaqif embraced Islam, when the Apostle of God dispatched al-Mughirah ibn Shu'bah who destroyed her and burnt her [temple] to the ground.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 110-112

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 109

¹⁰⁹ Zayadine, "The Nabataean Gods and their Sanctuaries," 62

¹¹⁰ Hisham Ibn-al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols; being a Translation from the Arabic of the Kitab Al-Asnam*, trans. Nabih Amin Faris (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), vii-xi.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 14-17

The “cubic rock” to which Ibn-al-Kalbi refers to must have been Allat’s betyl. He also refers to a temple of Allat existing up to the time of Muhammad, suggesting the longevity of polytheism in the area.

Another important Nabataean goddess was al-Uzza—“the mightiest one.”¹¹² Many inscriptions refer to her as the morning star, Venus.¹¹³ Nabataean terracotta figurines often depict al-Uzza as an enthroned goddess.¹¹⁴ She was often associated with Aphrodite and there was a cult dedicated to al-Uzza-Aphrodite in Petra.¹¹⁵ A temple to Aphrodite in Petra was also mentioned in the *Babatha* archive,¹¹⁶ a record of land transactions of a Jewish woman in the late first/ early second century A.D. found at Nahal Hever near the Dead Sea.¹¹⁷ Al-Uzza was also associated with Isis. Terracotta figurines from Petra depict al-Uzza as an enthroned goddess with an “Isis knot.”¹¹⁸ She was also possibly associated with Isis at the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra.¹¹⁹ Ibn-al-Kalbi describes her worship:

They then adopted al-Uzza as their goddess. . . .Her idol was situated in a valley in Anklet al-Sha'miyah called Hurad, alongside al-Ghumayr to the right of the road from Mecca to al-Iraq, above Dhat-Irq and nine miles from al-Bustan. Over her [Zalim] built a house called Buss in which the people used to receive oracular communications . . . Furthermore al-Uzza was the greatest idol among the Quraysh. They used to journey to her, offer gifts unto her, and seek her favors through sacrifice.[19] We have been told that the Apostle of God once mentioned al-Uzza saying 'I have offered a white sheep to al-'Uzza, while I was a follower of the religion of my people.' . . .[20] She also had a high place of sacrifice called al Ghabghab where they offered their oblations. .

¹¹² Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 114

¹¹³ *ibid.*, 117

¹¹⁴ El-Khoury, *The Nabataean Terracotta Figurines*, 42

¹¹⁵ Zayadine, "The Nabataean Gods and their Sanctuaries," 63

¹¹⁶ Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 117

¹¹⁷ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 8-9

¹¹⁸ El-Khoury, *The Nabataean Terracotta Figurines*, 43

¹¹⁹ Scholars disagree on this point. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 119

. . . It was customary to divide the flesh of the sacrifice among those who had offered it and among those present at the ceremony. . . . Al-Uzza continued to be venerated until God sent His Prophet who ridiculed her together with the other idols and forbade her worship.¹²⁰

This passage highlights several elements of ancient cultic practice for al-Uzza. Although the passage does not describe what sort of “idol” al-Uzza had, it is easy to imagine a betyl placed in such a valley for her. Also we find that sacrifices were made to her and shared among those present, and that she had a “high place” dedicated to her. Supplicants sought favors and messages from her oracle as well. Once again, according to Ibn-al-Kalbi, she was worshipped in Arabia up until the time of Muhammad.

Another popular Nabataean goddess was Manat, associated with the Greek *Nemesis*, the goddess of fate/destiny. She is mentioned on several Nabataean tombs as associated with justice and the rights of tomb ownership and usage. She is mentioned repeatedly in inscriptions on Nabataean tombs in Hegra (Saudi Arabia).¹²¹

The Nabataeans also had a deity named al-Kutba associated with scribes. Sometimes al-Kutba was identified with Aphrodite and also Hermes-Mercury. Not surprisingly, scholars debate the gender of this deity. Some inscriptions mentioning al-Kutba refer to a god, and others seem to refer to a goddess. The confusion regarding many aspects of this deity serves as a reminder of just how little is known regarding Nabataean religion. There is a betyl and inscription for al-Kutba in Wadi Rum, Jordan. The betyl was placed beside another betyl

¹²⁰ Ibn-al-Kalbi, *The Book of Idols; being a Translation from the Arabic of the Kitab Al-Asnam*, 17-20

¹²¹ Zayadine, "The Nabataean Gods and their Sanctuaries," 63

dedicated al-Uzza. There are also temples dedicated to al-Kutba in Egypt (Tell ash-Shuqafiya).¹²²

The Nabataeans also had a lesser deity called Shay'al-Qaum who represented their nomadic roots. This god was known for protecting people who traveled with trading caravans and for abstaining from alcohol. He was apparently most popular with nomads and soldiers and is attested in several inscriptions in the Hegra, the Hauran, and Palmyra.¹²³

As a general rule, unlike the Egyptians and later the Romans, the Nabataeans did not generally deify their rulers. The known exception would be King Obodas. Scholars cannot agree which Obodas is referred to as a god. Hammond refers to Obodas II (85-62 BC), and Healey mentions Obodas I or Obodas III.¹²⁴ An inscription of A.D. 20 from Petra suggests that Obodas is a royal ancestor protecting the royal family: "This is the image of Obodat the god."¹²⁵ In any case, though Obodas seems to be an exception in the Nabataean pantheon, ruler worship was common elsewhere in the Hellenized Near East.¹²⁶

The Nabataeans developed a thriving and rich culture. Due to their commerce and proximity to the Roman provinces of Syria, Judaea, and Egypt, they were highly influenced by the Roman Empire well before the annexation in A.D. 106. After annexation Roman influence became even more prevalent, especially in religion. Soon anthropomorphic figures

¹²² Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 120-124, Hammond, *The Nabataeans -- their History, Culture and Archaeology*, 97-98

¹²³ Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 143-147,

¹²⁴ Hammond, *The Nabataeans—their History, Culture and Archaeology*, 103-104, Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 149

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, 148

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, 149

accompanied the aniconic Nabataean *betyls*. Rives sums up this religious acculturation for the Roman world more generally:

The fact remains that on a fundamental level the various religious traditions of the empire had more similarities than differences. As a result, when people from one tradition were confronted with another, they often found much that was familiar and immediately understandable, and tended to treat what was unfamiliar as local peculiarity. In short, the impression we get from the sources is that people thought not so much in terms of “different religions,” as we might today, but simply of varying local customs with regard to the gods.¹²⁷

It is important also to note that for the ancients, religious coexistence was the norm. Religion was not rigid, but rather moldable and depended on the needs of the community. The idea of one particular god or religion accompanied by a specific doctrine, moral code, and ritual worship superseding all of the other deities and rituals was present in Judaism and later Christianity, but not among other Semitic or Graeco-Roman religions.¹²⁸

In Roman religion, observance of cult practices was meshed seamlessly into daily life. Although there were calendars that noted when certain festivals should be observed, anyone could honor a god anywhere and in almost any way they chose. Temples were beautiful buildings that honored the gods, but offerings could be made just as effectively in a private dwelling.¹²⁹ A main focus of Roman religion was to cure the sick. Inscriptions and epithets refer repeatedly to healing. Most gods in the Roman pantheon could heal; however, Asclepius was one of the main deities sought for making the sick well.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 8

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, 5-14

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, 27

¹³⁰ Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 49-50.

Deities and supernatural powers in the Roman world were categorized by certain criteria. First of all, in Greco-Roman religion there could simultaneously be a god of the sea—such as Poseidon, and the sea itself could be a god also. Various occurrences in the physical world like a spring of water or a strong wind could be gods in their own right and duly offered worship, often in the form of votive dedications. Abstract ideas like hope and faith could be personified as deities and thus receive votive offerings and worship in their own right.¹³¹ *Numina*, *genii*, and *daimones* were all different aspects of the divine. A *numen* was considered “divine will” or “impersonal spirit”. A *genius* was originally a person’s guardian spirit, but later could be used to refer to the guardian spirit of a place. *Daimones* were not only the souls of the dead, but could also be the souls of the living or simply a guardian spirit. Offerings were commonly made to the spirits of the dead.¹³²

Emperor worship was another aspect of Roman religion. Augustus ushered in the practice of deifying deceased emperors with his deification of Julius Caesar. After this, it was fairly common to deify an emperor after his death and provide a temple and priest for his *divus*. While living, an emperor’s divine *genius* could also be honored but not his *divus*.¹³³ In the *Babatha* archives, mentioned earlier, Babatha swore to the veracity of her land by invoking the *Tyche* of Caesar.¹³⁴ There were also voluntary associations to honor the spirit of an emperor. Civic cults for the emperors existed all over the empire. These cults would generally have the trappings of any other cults—a shrine, priest, and ceremonies. One common way to honor the emperor was simply offering incense on his birthday. In the

¹³¹ James Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 16-17.

¹³² *ibid.*, 18-19

¹³³ *ibid.*, 150-159

¹³⁴ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 9

provinces, unlike in Rome itself, there was a yearly assembly made up of representatives from each city in the province. Their main focus for meeting was to honor/worship the emperor in his provincial temple.¹³⁵

The nature of religion in the Roman army should also be mentioned. Because the Roman army was stationed across the empire, Roman religious beliefs not only became mobile, but also were influenced by the local culture where an army was stationed. Rives mentions some examples of this:

Yet the army of the imperial period drew its personnel from all over the empire, especially its more remote and urbanized regions, and soldiers often maintained worship of their ancestral deities wherever they were stationed. A small sampling will give some impression of this practice. The god Hercules Magusanus, for example who was worshipped along the lower Rhine, received dedications in Rome from members of the imperial horse guard (ILS 2188) and from a soldier at a wall of Antoninus Pius in present day Scotland (ILS 4628). Jupiter Heliopolitanus, the god of Baalbek, was honored in Rome by a detachment of Ituraeans, a people of Syria (ILS 2546), and in Nemausus, modern Nimes in France by a senior centurion from Berytus in Phoenicia (ILS 4288).¹³⁶

The Roman army not only helped Romanize areas throughout the Empire, but also spread various other religious beliefs across the Empire. This not only has implications for the intermingling of polytheistic religions across the empire, but also shows how the army could have easily served as a conduit to spread Christianity as well. Relevant to the Kerak plateau, is evidence from el-Lejjun legionary fortress that suggested that the soldiers initially

¹³⁵ Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, 149-151

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 138

practiced polytheism but that Christianity arrived eventually arrived much later.¹³⁷ The archaeological evidence for polytheism found at el-Lejjun and elsewhere on the plateau is discussed below.



*Khirbet Tannur ruins –the Kerak Plateau is visible in the background.
Figure 4.*

When Nelson Glueck conducted his detailed surveys of Transjordan early in the twentieth century, he discovered hundreds of Nabataean sites including many on the Kerak Plateau.¹³⁸ Especially important among these is Khirbet Tannur (figures 4,5), a large Nabataean temple just on the southern side of the Wadi Hasa within sight of the plateau. Khirbet Tannur was subsequently excavated in 1937 by Glueck.¹³⁹

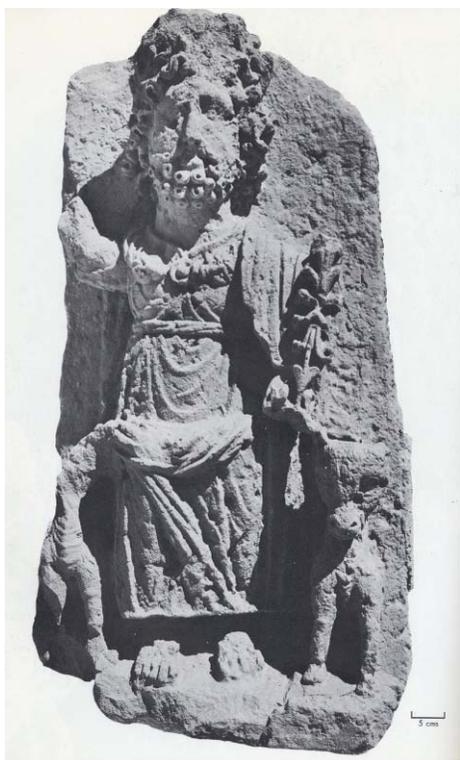
¹³⁷ Vincent Clark A., "The Vicus Temple (Area Q)" In *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan: Final Report on the Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989* by S. Thomas Parker, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2006), 259.

¹³⁸ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 47

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, ix-x

the first century B.C. Glueck dated Phase II of the site to the year 8/7 B.C. according to one of two inscriptions found at the site, neither *in situ*. McKenzie dates Phase II to between A.D. 100 - 150 based on its similarities to architecture and decoration at Khirbet edh Dharih.¹⁴⁰ McKenzie dates Phase III to the mid-third century.

Glueck identified the chief male god at Khirbet Tannur as Zeus-Hadad (figure 6). A statue in three-quarters relief carved in a sandstone block was found at Khirbet Tannur depicting Zeus-Hadad seated on a throne with two bulls.¹⁴¹ Glueck calls the main deity



Zeus-Hadad from Khirbet Tannur
Figure 6.

found at Khirbet Tannur “Zeus-Hadad-Jupiter” because of the merging of Eastern and Western elements depicted in the sculpture. For example, the deity's hair was depicted in a Hellenistic fashion, while his facial features and expression were that of an Eastern deity.¹⁴² McKenzie agrees with Glueck that the sandstone statue of a seated male deity was depicted with the attributes of Hadad. However, because the only deity mentioned in inscription at the site is Qos, it is more likely a representation of Qos-

¹⁴⁰ Judith McKenzie, Sheila Gibson and A. T. Reyes, "Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet Et-Tannur," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 134, no. 1 (2002), 44-83.

¹⁴¹ Nelson Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 195.

¹⁴² *ibid.*, 196

Dushara.¹⁴³ The main sky god worshipped in the ancient Near East was known by different names. Some of his names include Hadad, Baal Gad, Baal Hermon, and Baal Pe'or.¹⁴⁴ The male god Glueck referred to as Zeus-Hadad at Khirbet Tanner can also be referred to as the Edomite god named Qos. Qos was an Edomite god also linked with Hadad.¹⁴⁵ It was easy for the Nabataeans to associate Hadad or Baal with Zeus, especially since Zeus was commonly depicted with a thunderbolt. The Zeus at Khirbet Tannur has a thunderbolt depicted over his left shoulder. The thunderbolt was a common symbol of Baal-Shamin-Hadad, the sky god. The thunderbolt motif is also found to the south at Khirbet Dharih (very close to Tannur) and at Khirbet Brak at Petra. Baal Shamin was worshipped all over the ancient Near East including at cult centers in the cities of Dura-Europos and Baalbek in Syria.¹⁴⁶



A female consort of Zeus-Hadad is also represented at Khirbet Tannur (figure 7). Glueck identified her as the Syrian goddess Atargatis;¹⁴⁷ however, recent scholarship has questioned this. Healey disagreed with the idea that Atargatis was a main goddess worshipped by the Nabataeans.¹⁴⁸ McKenzie casts doubt on the identity of the main goddess of Khirbet Tannur as Atargatis because she was not a Nabataean deity. McKenzie suggests that it is Allat or al-Uzza

*Female deity from
Khirbet Tannur, Figure 7*

¹⁴³ McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes, "Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet Et-Tannur," 48,74-76

¹⁴⁴ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 205

¹⁴⁵ John F. Healey, *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus*, 126-127.

¹⁴⁶ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 204-205

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 289-90

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 140-141

portrayed in a Semitic style. However, she cannot be certain of the identification.¹⁴⁹

Though the statue of the female deity seated beside Zeus-Hadad was smashed during the temple's destruction, it is still possible to see her lion guardians in the sculpture.¹⁵⁰ Also she is depicted on a large main panel which Glueck describes: “[the deity] appears on the elaborate, multisectioned, semicircular panel at the temple of Tannur as the goddess of vegetation, the mother of nature, the matrix of leaves and vines and fruit and flowers.”¹⁵¹ Glueck also identifies two of the 12 busts which decorated the third-century altar at Khirbet Tannur as representing the fish and grain aspects of Atargatis.¹⁵² McKenzie considers it more likely that these are depictions of Pisces and Virgo based on the zodiac symbols held by a Tyche sculpture. Also, McKenzie points to busts at nearby Khirbet Dharieh which have been identified as representing the zodiac.¹⁵³

Several other deities were also represented at Khirbet Tannur, including a limestone bust of Helios-Apollo. The beardless, ringlet-haired god was depicted with a crown of solar rays. Particularly important to this study is the discovery of similar sculptural evidence from the Kerak Plateau itself; i.e., sculptures of Helios-Apollo found in a secondary context at Rabbah (Areopolis) and at a ruined temple at Mahaiy on the southeastern plateau. The Helios figures at Khirbet Tannur each have a distinctive torch representing the morning and evening stars. Three other torches were found which could not be directly associated with a

¹⁴⁹ McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes, "Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet Et-Tannur," 63, 76

¹⁵⁰ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 269

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, 289-90

¹⁵² *ibid.*, 315, McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes, "Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet Et-Tannur," 44-83

¹⁵³ *ibid.*

specific sculpture. Glueck suggests that they could be either from other Helios sculptures or representations of the Moon Goddess or Nike. Helios, Luna, and Mercury were often represented at temples in the ancient Near East, such as at Heliopolis-Baalbek.¹⁵⁴

Hermes-Mercury is also depicted at Khirbet Tannur in a few different guises, in one instance with a lyre, in another as a youth. Saturn-Kronos is depicted with a beard at Khirbet Tannur, holding a harpoon like weapon. McKenzie thought the bust identified by Glueck as Hermes/Mercury could have also been Apollo. Also, McKenzie identifies a more weathered bust found at the site as a possible Zeus-Hadad, not a Hermes/Mercury as identified by Glueck. She agrees with his identification of the busts of Kronos-Saturn and Helios. She also identifies a possible bust of Zeus-Jupiter from the Jordan Archaeological Museum that could have come from a panel at Khirbet Tannur.¹⁵⁵

Khirbet edh-Dharieh, a Nabataean settlement and cultic site on the Trajanic road just south of Khirbet Tannur, has been excavated since 1984. The temple here was decorated with many friezes and reliefs and dates to ca. A.D. 106. The zodiac is represented here also. Excavators uncovered a Gemini frieze of the twins Castor and Pollux, a panel representing Cancer, and a pediment with Libra depicted. A similar bearded male deity to the Zeus at Khirbet Tannur and a Tyche with a cornucopia were uncovered.¹⁵⁶ Because there are so few inscriptions at Khirbet Tannur and none at Dharieh, it is hard to identify the deities depicted with certainty. Current research tends to suggest the main deities are al-Uzza and Dushara,

¹⁵⁴ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 454,464-67

¹⁵⁵ McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes, "Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet Et-Tannur," 44-83

¹⁵⁶ Francois Villeneuve and Zeidoun Al-Muheisen, "Dharieh and Tannur: Sanctuaries of Central Nabataea" In *Petra Rediscovered: Lost City of the Nabataeans*, ed. Glen Markoe (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Cincinnati Art Museum, 2003), 94-97.

but there are no inscriptions to prove this. An inscription at Tannur mentions the Edomite god –Qos, but it is unlikely that he was the main focus of the cult here. The zodiac images are also puzzling; they could point to a specific cult practiced at these sites, or merely symbolize the popularity of these images in the Roman Empire. There is no way to be sure.¹⁵⁷

There is an elevated platform at both Dharih and Khirbet Tannur. The platform at Dharih has holes in the top that would have been used for betyls. Alongside these betyl areas were drains for the blood of sacrifices. Khirbet Tannur and Khirbet edh Dharih are similar in layout and design—a platform with an inner and outer enclosure.¹⁵⁸ The number of *triclinia* at both sites—four at Khirbet Tannur and seven at Khirbet edh Dharih—is too large for isolated sanctuaries and must point to their role as regional centers and caravan stops.¹⁵⁹

Just to the north of the Wadi Hasa on the Kerak Plateau is the Nabataean temple site of Dhat Ras (figure 8). There were once three temples at this site according to Glueck. Regarding the name, “Ras” (“head” or “source” in Arabic) could refer to its location on the



Dhat Ras temple, Figure 8

plateau. However, Glueck says that “Dhat Ras” could refer to a local Nabataean goddess such as Allat. Dushara, one of the main deities of the Nabataean pantheon, was most likely associated with “Jebel Shara,” a mountain range in Southern Jordan. “Dhat” is the feminine form of “Dhu,” hence the notion that this could have been a temple to Dhushara’s feminine counterpart.¹⁶⁰ However, assigning a specific deity to this site would be speculation since there is no evidence to identify the deity. The temple can be loosely dated to the first century A.D. based on its construction and similarity to other Roman and Nabataean buildings. Glueck dated the site to between A.D. 125 and 150, but Eddinger could not find evidence to support such a specific date. Surface pottery revealed Nabataean and Roman pottery dating to the second century A.D.; however, Iron Age and Islamic pottery were also found. The temple itself is well preserved. There are no known inscriptions at the site.¹⁶¹

The two cities on the plateau during Roman times were Rabbathmoab/Areopolis and Charachmoab. Modern settlements built directly over the ancient cities have limited excavation at these sites. Areopolis is about thirty-five kilometers northwest of Dhat Ras. Glueck describes the site: “A modern village has grown up around the ruins of the temple, with the walls of many of its drab houses incorporating beautiful sculptures purloined from it.”¹⁶² The only extant remains to suggest to which god the temple might have been dedicated were incorporated into houses in the area. There was a depiction of a winged Eros; a lion’s head, and a “bust of a defaced Helios-Apollo in high relief, set against a background

¹⁶⁰ Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 55-6

¹⁶¹ Terry W. Eddinger, "A Nabataean/Roman Temple at Dhat Ras, Jordan," *Near Eastern Archaeology*. 67, no. 1 (2004), 23.

¹⁶² Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins; the Story of the Nabataeans*, 56

of radiating sun's rays.”¹⁶³ Also in Areopolis are the remains of a Roman temple (12.60 x 14.30 m.) dated to the early fourth century; however, the deity to which it was dedicated is not known.¹⁶⁴

A Roman temple outside the el-Lejjun legionary fortress was dated by excavation to the early fourth century A.D. The plan is similar to the temple of Artemis in Jerash (figures 9,10). Unfortunately, there was again no evidence as to which god the temple was dedicated. The temple was “typically Roman in terms of its overall plan, symmetry, and a location of the podium on a central axis within a *temenos* or sacred enclosure.”¹⁶⁵ The temple was probably closed during the reign of Constantius II (337-61). Interestingly, a smaller door leading to the temple appears to have remained in use after the temple's closure, which might suggest that the decision to close the temple was not unanimous among the troops stationed

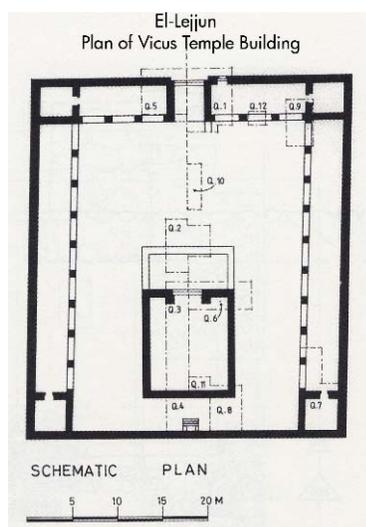


Figure 9

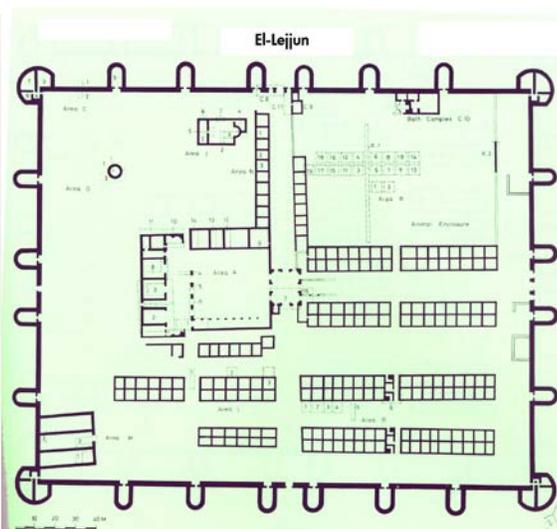


Figure 10

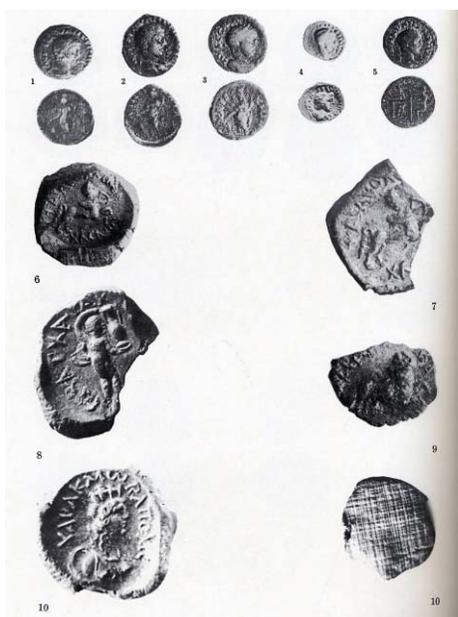
¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 56

¹⁶⁴ Jacqueline Calzini Gysens, "Preliminary Report on the First Survey Campaign at Ancient Ar-Rabba (Rabbathmoab/Areopolis)" In *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, Vol. 46 (Amman, Jordan: Department of Antiquities, 2002), 494-495.

¹⁶⁵ Clark, "The Vicus Temple (Area Q)," 266-67

there.¹⁶⁶ In the late nineteenth century, according to Brünnow and von Domaszewski , there was a Nabataean altar on a hill northwest of the legionary fortress. However, it was no longer extant by 1933 when Glueck surveyed the area.¹⁶⁷

It is apparent from the archaeological evidence available that there was a rich and deep tradition of polytheism on the Kerak Plateau. For the Nabataeans there were countless “high places” or outdoor sanctuaries and temples where they would worship. The large temple complex at Khirbet Tannur just overlooking the plateau is a testament to the religious character of the area. The variety of gods depicted at Khirbet Tannur also indicates the level of synchronism between the local Semitic gods and the intrusive Graeco-Roman deities. The various depictions of gods tucked away in modern houses are telling as to what deities were important to the population of the plateau.



Examples of coins from Charachmoba, Figure 11

Further evidence in this regard comes from the early third century civic coinage minted by Areopolis/Rabathmoba and Charachmoba¹⁶⁸. It was an honor for such cities to receive permission from the imperial authorities to mint small coinage. The images on the coinage were likely chosen by the local urban elite and must have been

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 268

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 259

¹⁶⁸ Augustus Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, 17

popular with their community at the time of minting.

All five civic issues known from Charachmoba (figure 11) are from the reign of Elagabalus (218-222). The reverse side of three of the coins has a standing Tyche (Fortuna personified) holding a cornucopia with a rudder depicted below her. One of the coins shows a bust of Tyche with a turreted crown. The reverse side of the last coin shows a seated figure before a raised platform approached by steps “on which is a tall column between two small betyls.”¹⁶⁹ In this case the coins seem to focus more on all powerful Fortuna, a common theme depicted on ancient coinage. Perhaps Fortuna is depicted on the coinage because she was worshipped at a temple in Charachmoba? The coin that features the two betyls indicates that one of the Near Eastern deities popular at the time was represented and worshipped in betyl form. The coin could also refer to a specific betyl of a local deity with whom local residents would be familiar and could identify. Various seal impressions for Charachmoba found at Mampsis in the Negev dated to the early second century show astrological signs such as Capricorn or Aquarius, and a bust of Arabia personified, or a Tyche. One seal shows a warrior. Since Dushara is represented as a warrior on coins of Rabbathmoab,¹⁷⁰ it is possible that the warrior depicted on the seal could represent him as well. However, no local deities (other than the ubiquitous Tyche) can be identified for certain on the thirteen seals or five coins.¹⁷¹

The coins minted by Rabbathmoab (see figure 13) date to the reigns of Septimius Severus to Elagabalus (193-222). Spijkerman lists 41 such coin types. A majority of the

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 110-115

¹⁷⁰ Augustus Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*, 262

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, 110-15

coins (20) display Ares/Dushara on the reverse side. The next most common figure represented is the city Tyche (a total of 13, both standing and bust versions). Poseidon (standing with trident and at a distyle temple) is represented on the reverse of seven coin types. Finally, Caracalla and Geta are represented on only one of the coins.¹⁷²

Ares/Dushara is depicted on the majority of coins (see figure 12). This reflects the popularity of Dushara in the early third century, some two centuries after the annexation of

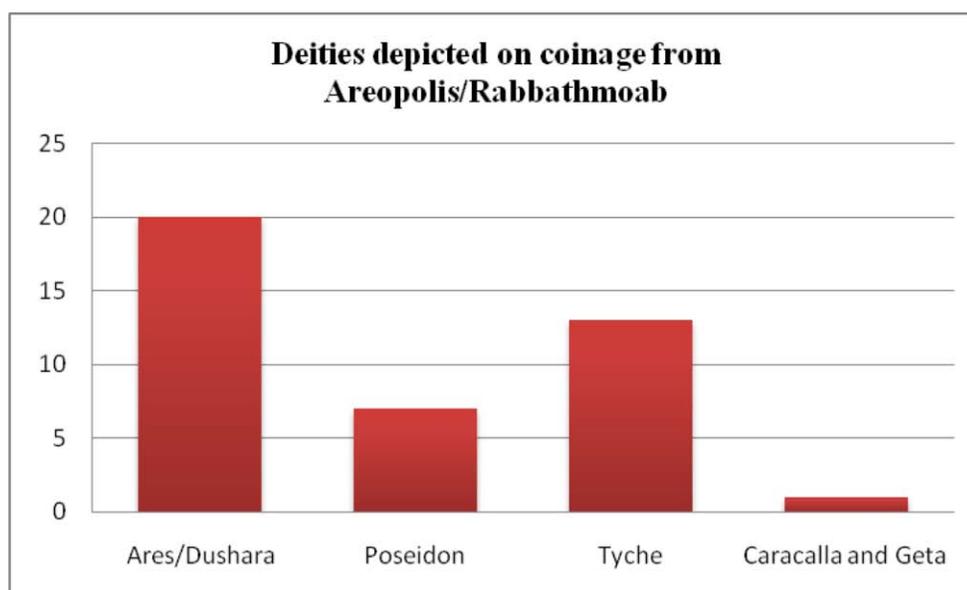


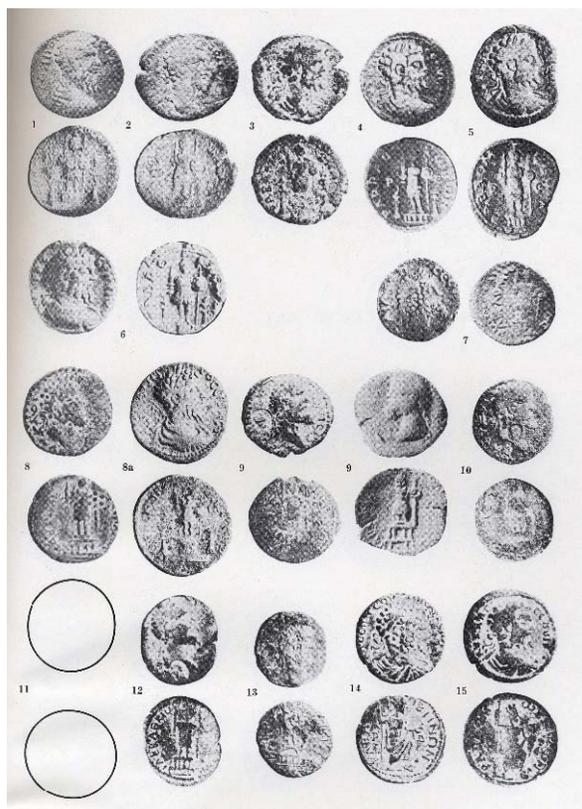
Figure 12

Nabataea. Perhaps he was worshipped in the temple that is still partially standing in Rabbathmoab. His popularity is also reflected throughout the Nabataean religious sites in the region. Spijkerman describes Ares/Dushara from a coin of Septimius Severus dated A.D. 209/210 as: “War-god Ares. Wearing helmet, cuirass and boots, holding in r., sword erect, in l., spear and round shield; standing facing on square basis decorated with pilasters and placed

¹⁷² *ibid.*, 262

on broad plinth; on either side a horned altar.”¹⁷³ The horned altar is another important clue for polytheistic cultic activity in the area. The depiction of Ares/Dushara with the horned altar also shows the importance of offerings to the god.

At first it might seem strange that Poseidon was depicted on several of the coins.



Examples of coins from Rabathmoba, Figure 13

What was the god of the sea doing on coins minted in such a land-locked region? Poseidon was not only the god of the sea, but also the god of earthquakes. Earthquakes in the region were not uncommon, so it makes sense that Poseidon was represented on the coinage. Obviously if Poseidon was strong enough to shake the earth, he was a powerful god. A sanctuary to Poseidon has not been located on the plateau;

however, it was entirely possible to offer cult to a deity without their image or even a sanctuary.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, 265

The coins of Rabathmoba and Charachmoba provide a glimpse of what deities were popular in this area at this time. They also show to some extent how these deities were worshipped (often as betyls). In addition, they provide evidence of acculturation of Eastern Semitic deities with Roman gods.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the peoples of the Kerak Plateau practiced diverse forms of polytheism before Christianity made inroads in the region. Not only was there a wide range of deities represented, but there is also evidence of acculturation of indigenous Semitic gods with Roman and Greek deities. Since polytheism in this eastern region of the empire often utilized rural “high places” for worship used by a single family or an entire clan, it is easy to imagine this practice continuing into the age of Christianity. After all, they did not require an elaborate statue or building. Although temples were used in addition to “high places,” they were not necessary for worship. These rural areas surely would have been harder to police in regards to enforcing Christian laws against sacrifice. Though there are not a lot of temple remains on the plateau, some are extant either as ruins or as elements incorporated into modern dwellings. A major temple (Khirbet Tannur) is located within sight of the plateau. Coinage minted by the two main cities on the plateau further illustrates the breadth and popularity of polytheism in this region.

Chapter IV Christianity, Constantine, and Conversion

After Constantine's conversion to Christianity in A.D. 312, Christianity had legitimacy and, most importantly, government backing and funding.¹⁷⁴ How did this exclusive cult come to prominence in such a huge empire - one groomed on religious tolerance and polytheism? To look at how Christianity spread in the Roman Empire, it is necessary to consider early Christian methods of conversion. McMullen describes Christian conversion to be “the change of belief by which a person accepted the reality and supreme power of God and determined to obey him.”¹⁷⁵ Often pagans who were converted did not fully grasp what conversion meant. Isaac of Antioch complained that after “converting Christians in Syria, the same Christians returned to their polytheistic practices. Isaac complained: “In our day, we prepare tables on the housetops for the goddess ... There are torches lit above the springs, and lanterns around the streams.”¹⁷⁶

MacMullen describes another Syrian as lamenting:

How many are Christians in name but pagans in their acts . . . attending to pagan myths and genealogies and prophecies and astrology and druglore and phylacteries, observant of the day and the year, of auspices and dreams and birds' cries, hanging lamps by springs of water where they wash themselves. . . . and so on through a catalogue of all their heathen behavior, down to their dancing and hand clapping.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 18.

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 5

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 145

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 145

Christianity had some very distinctive features, especially when compared to polytheism. First and foremost, early Christianity was a religion of exclusion, of the “us” vs.” them”.¹⁷⁸ The “us” consisted of a small group who worshipped “one God the Father, and one Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁷⁹ The “them” consisted of everyone else, particularly the polytheists. This dichotomy of pagans and Christians is described in the letter to Ephesians:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together through Christ. . .¹⁸⁰

To further enforce this separation the Christians believed that God had given them (and only them) certain “revelations,” such as the coming apocalypse in which the non-Christians would be punished and the Christians would rise to Heaven.⁴⁹ In his letter to the Corinthians regarding the last judgment, Paul writes:

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw - the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. . .If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.¹⁸¹

Early Christianity also had two central rituals which further served to enhance the idea of separation from the outside world--baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism not only

¹⁷⁸ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 94.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 165

¹⁸⁰ Ephesians 2.2.

¹⁸¹ First Corinthians 3.13

washed away a Christian's sins, but also cleansed him so that he was not dirtied by the outside world. This bath was also like Jesus' death and resurrection—the Christian being buried beneath the waters for a moment, only to rise again, cleansed.¹⁸² Paul describes this in his epistle to the Romans:

Can you be unaware that all who have been baptized into Jesus Christ have been baptized into his death? We have therefore been buried with him through baptism until we died, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father, so we too, may live in the newness of life.¹⁸³

In the Last Supper ritual, the bread that was eaten represented the body of Jesus. The wine drunk represented his blood. The exclusiveness of this sacred dinner lies in the fact that only Christians could partake. Not only were these Christians separate in believing in the “true” god, but they were also burdened with the responsibility to “save” nonbelievers from eternal destruction and the wrath of the Christian god.¹⁸⁴ Even though it was distinct and separate from Roman society, the gospel had to be spread for conversion to take place.¹⁸⁵

Christians by A.D. 200 were an exclusive but widely spread group.¹⁸⁶ Their congregations were filled with members of diverse races and social classes who spoke the diverse languages of the urban Roman world—Latin, Greek, Aramaic, and Arabic. In the first century Christians could most often be found in Hellenized urban centers connected by

¹⁸² Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 96, 142, 152, 153

¹⁸³ William Barclay, *the Letter to the Romans*, Rev. ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 222.

¹⁸⁴ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 159, 169

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 169

¹⁸⁶ Colin Wells, *The Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 239.

roads across the empire.¹⁸⁷ Pliny at the beginning of the second century remarked how Christianity had spread beyond the urban centers. Writing to Trajan, he says, “Neque civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est; quae videtur sisti et corrigi posse.”¹⁸⁸ “It is not only the towns, but villages and rural districts too which are infected through contact with this wretched cult.”¹⁸⁹ One of the main missions of Christians was that one should go forth and evangelize. Tertullian in his *Apology* remarks how widely and quickly Christianity has spread: “Hesterni sumus, et vestra omnia implevimus, urbes, insulas, castella, municipia, conciliabula, castra ipsa, tribus, decurias, palatium, senatum, forum; sola vobis reliquimus templa.”¹⁹⁰ “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled everything of yours—cities, islands, forts, towns, *conciliabula* [council chambers], even the camps, courts, palace, senate, forum. We have left you only the temples.”¹⁹¹

While there is no direct evidence of how Christianity spread in the Kerak Plateau, we can look at how Christianity spread in other regions of the empire and infer that the same mechanisms led to Christian conversion on the Kerak Plateau. We know that Christianity did penetrate the plateau from various sources. There were bishops in its two main cities, Areopolis (by 451) and Charachmoba (by the early sixth century), but these are merely *termini ante quem*. Early Christianity gained believers not as a religion of the countryside

¹⁸⁷ G. W. Clark, "The Origins and Spread of Christianity" In *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed., Vol. 10 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 863.

¹⁸⁸ Pliny, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, letter 96.9

¹⁸⁹ Pliny, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 294-95 letter 96.

¹⁹⁰ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, XXXVII.4

¹⁹¹ Lewis Naphthali and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization Vol II the Empire. Selected Readings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), excerpts from Tertullian's *Apologeticus*, 553.

but as an urban religion that began by converting nonbelievers in the urban centers of the empire. Apostles like Paul travelled to urban centers to make converts among lower class artisans.

Meeks describes the relevance of studying Paul of Tarsus, one of the founders of urban Christianity in the first century. Meeks points out that this is the “best-documented segment of the early Christian movement” because there are actual letters from Paul extant.¹⁹² In his writings the message of Christianity is clear: everyone sins; everyone can be redeemed because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice; and the end of the world is near. When the end comes, Christians would be reunited with Jesus and enjoy an eternal afterlife. Paul was a tent maker from Tarsus and easily made connections in cities. His message was directed towards urban artisans and business people with whom he would have come into contact. Many gentiles were open to Paul's teachings. Paul travelled throughout the East and could possibly have visited Arabia.¹⁹³ Paul as an artisan made contacts in different cities; for example, in the book of Acts:

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together-by trade they were tentmakers.¹⁹⁴

The book of Acts represents Paul as an active public speaker, describing his preaching as “every Sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.”¹⁹⁵ The household was the “basic unit in establishment of early

¹⁹² Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 57

¹⁹³ *ibid.*, 10

¹⁹⁴ Acts 18:1-3

¹⁹⁵ Acts 18:4

Christianity in the city”¹⁹⁶ as well as the meeting place of Christian groups. An urban household was large and consisted of the head of the household, his family, and the slaves.

Christian groups were similar to the Roman *collegia* (private social clubs often organized around religious belief and/or trades and professions). Tertullian describes them as such, stating that they gathered to share “religious feelings” and pray for everything good to happen for the emperor and the world. The groups had leaders of good character, there was no initiation fee or treasurer—just a voluntary offering which went to help the needy.¹⁹⁷

The style of Christian teaching was not unfamiliar in the Hellenized cities. Bowersock describes the Christian teachers and the sophists as an age that “is largely one and the same. The culture from which both groups depended on for power of communication was likewise the same. It was Graeco Roman culture in which pagans and Christians alike could share.”¹⁹⁸ Bowersock also describes three of the most famous Christian teachers, Cyprian (third century), Pionios (third century) and Polycarp (second century) as “the Christian equivalents of the famous teachers and sophists who enlivened and adorned the intellectual and social lives of these two centuries.”¹⁹⁹

Christians considered themselves and their teachers to be students of Jesus Christ.²⁰⁰ Bowersock points out that even when Christian teachers were imprisoned, a crowd of Christians and polytheists would want to hear (and in the case of the pagans) and dispute with this great teacher.²⁰¹ Christianity in essence does not seem too disruptive to the fabric

¹⁹⁶ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians, the Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 29

¹⁹⁷ Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, XXXIX.5

¹⁹⁸ G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 44.

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.*, 44

²⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 45

²⁰¹ *ibid.*, 46

of Hellenized communities of the Roman Empire. However, it was fundamentally different than pagan society.

Missionaries made converts through other methods such as miracles, healing, and exorcisms. The church historian Sozomen describes a sheik, Zokomos, who converted to Christianity after a miracle. Apparently Zokomos had not been successful in fathering a son. When he converted, he had a son and by this miracle his whole tribe converted.²⁰² Usually, if the head of a tribe converted, then the others in the tribe would follow. Jerome in his *Vita Sancti Hilarionis* describes how Hilarion, a monk of Palestine, goes into the Negev and converts Saracens at Elusa:

Quantum autem fuerit in eo studii, ut nullum fratrem quamvis humile, quamvis pauperem praeteriret, vel illud indicio est, quod vadens in desertum Cades ad unum de discipulis suis visendum, cum infinito agmine monachorum pervenit Elusam, eo forte die, quo anniversaria solemnitas omnem oppidi populum in templum Veneris congregaverat. Colunt autem illam ob Luciferum, cuius cultui Saracenorum natione dedita est. Sed et ipsum oppidum ex magna parte semibarbarum est propter loci situm. Igitur audito quod Sanctus Hilarion praeteriret (multos enim Saracenorum arreptos a daemone frequenter curaverat), gregatim ei cum uxoribus et liberis obviam processere, submittentem colla, et voca Syra BARECH, id est, *benedic*, inclamantes. Quos ille blande humiliterque suscipiens, obsecrabat ut Deum magis quam lapides colerent: simulque ubertim flebat, coelum spectans, et pollicens, si Christo crederent, ad eos se crebro esse venturum. Mira Domini gratia, non prius abire passi sunt, quam future Ecclesiae lineam mitteret; et sacerdos eorum, ut erat Coronatus, Christi signo denotaretur.²⁰³

Moreover, the care he took to prevent any brother however humble or poor being passed over is evidenced by the journey which he once took into the desert of Cades to visit one of his disciples. With a great company of monks he reached Elusa, as it happened on the day when the annual festival had brought all the people together to the temple of Venus. This, goddess is worshipped on account of Lucifer to whom the Saracen nation is devoted. The very town too is to a great extent semi-barbarous, owing to its situation. When therefore it was heard that Saint Hilarion was passing through (he had frequently

²⁰² Phillip Mayerson, "Romans and Saracens: Micro-Macro Relationships," *BASOR* 274 (1989), 74.

²⁰³ Jerome, *Vita Sancti Hilarionis*, 25

healed many Saracens possessed by demons), they went to meet him in crowds with their wives and children, bending their heads and crying in the Syriac tongue *Barech*, that is, *Bless*. He received them with courtesy and humility, and prayed that they might worship God rather than stones; at the same time, weeping copiously, he looked up to heaven and promised that if they would believe in Christ he would visit them often. By the marvellous grace of God they did not suffer him to depart before he had drawn the outline of a church, and their priest with his garland upon his head had been signed with the sign of Christ.²⁰⁴

Ramsey MacMullen describes some specific examples of these methods of conversion:

The driving out of spirits that afflicted the mind, the wonderful drafts to drink, poultices and touchings for afflictions of the body, even infertility amended through a dream - such are the causes underlying conversion . . . our sources also record conversions through other kinds of wonders besides cures: a holy man may be able to say where some precious possession has been lost; raises the very dead, at the news of which everyone hastens to him for instant baptism; disperses the demons that cause crop failures, again in return for conversions; overthrows temples by his words of prayer alone . . . or freezes the idolaters in their steps, granting them release, then, only upon their acknowledging the wonder worker's as the one true faith.²⁰⁵

Well beyond A.D. 300 polytheism was a fundamental feature of Roman life. It had not entered into any state of decline and was still practiced by the majority. Even later, when Christianity was Rome's official religion, there were strong protests when the altar of Victory was taken from the Senate building.²⁰⁶ The idea of magic, *numina*, and holy places where the gods dwelt was an active part of daily life. Even more important is the fact that sacrifice and ritual were intricately woven into the fibers of daily life. If a disaster happened, the first recourse was to look for a mistake in the ritual performed. There were set rituals in daily home life and daily civic life. Almost every official act involved some sort of cultic

²⁰⁴ Jerome, Henry Wace and Philip Schaff, *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1968), 25

²⁰⁵ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), 9,10.

²⁰⁶ Wells, *The Roman Empire*, 243-44

activity.²⁰⁷ In fact, it was the ritual itself that was important, not the belief; it was how and when the ritual was performed.²⁰⁸

Polytheists had specific complaints about Christians. First, they thought Christians completely rejected the Roman state religion. The Romans could barely understand the Jews rejecting their way of life, but they found the antiquity of Judaism a bearable excuse.²⁰⁹ While the philosophers spoke against ancient religions, they still participated in the cultic rituals required in Roman society.²¹⁰ This left the “new” Christians alone stubbornly refusing to participate, and for Romans, that affected everyone. They believed that the cultic rituals of daily life provided a fail-safe against major disasters and revenge of the gods. If the gods were offended by the Christians’ lack of participation, they were not likely to pick and choose in their punishment, but to blanket it across the empire. Latin texts often refer directly to this problem, calling the Christians “*deos non colere*” or “not paying cult to the gods.” The Christians upset the “*pax deorum*” (“peace with the gods”), and this made them a threat to society. Not only that, but also Christians went about teaching that the pagan gods, if they existed at all, were just evil spirits, and that no one should honor them with cultic rites, whether they were Christian or not.²¹¹

Polytheists had other reasons to distrust the Christians. Up until at least the middle of the third century; they believed that the secretive Christians were guilty of cannibalism and incest. To the polytheists this was not only real, but utterly abhorrent. When they heard this secret and exclusive society talk about “eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ,”

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 244

²⁰⁸ G. E. M. Sainte Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 3.

²⁰⁹ L. A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome*. (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 280.

²¹⁰ Sainte Croix, “Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?” 26

²¹¹ *ibid.*, 24-25

they took this literally.²¹² When they heard that they were all “brothers and sisters” and that they gathered for a “love feast” (*agape*), this sounded like incest! Eusebius recounts these accusations in a letter from the churches in Gaul saying that they are accused of

"κατεψέσαντο ἡμῶν Θυέστεια δειπνα καὶ Οἶδι ποδείουσι μιξεις καὶ ὅσα μήτε λαλεῖν μήτε νοεῖν θέμις ἡμῖν, ἀλλὰ μηδὲ πιστεῦειν εἴ τι τοιοῦτο πώποτε παρὰ ἀνθρώποις ἐγένετο."²¹³ "Thyestean banquets and Oedipean incest, and things we ought never to speak

about or even believe such things happened among human beings."²¹⁴ Polytheist writer

Minucius Felix describes such an event:

Qui de ultima faecce collectis imperitoribus et mulieribus credulis sexus sui facilitate labentibus plebem profanae coniurationis instituunt, quae nocturnis congregationibus et ieiuniis sollemnibus et inhumanis cibis non sacro quodam, sed piaculo foederatur, latebrosa et lucifuga nation, in publicum muta, in angulis garrula, templa ut busta despiciunt, deos despuunt, rident sacra, miserentur miseri (si fas est) sacerdotum, honores et purpuras despiciunt, ipsi seminudi! . . . Occultis se notis et insignibus noscunt et amant mutuo paene antequam noverint: passim etiam inter eos velut quaedam libidinum religio miscetur, ac se promise appellant fratres et sorores, ut etiam non insolens stuprum intercessionem sacri fiat incestum.²¹⁵

They gather together ignorant persons from the lowliest dregs, and credulous women, easily deceived as their sex is, and organize a rabble of unholy conspirators, leagued together in nocturnal associations and by ritual feasts and barbarous foods, not for the purpose of some sacred rite but for the sake of sacrilege--a secret tribe that shuns the light, silent in public but talkative in secret places. . . . Everywhere a kind of religion of lust is also associated with them and they call themselves promiscuously brothers and sisters, so that ordinary fornication, through the medium of a sacred name becomes incest.²¹⁶

Polytheists had equally little understanding for why the Christians were constantly saying that the world was going to end. Minucius Felix describes this as “Quid quod toto

²¹² Wells, *The Roman Empire*, 243

²¹³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V.1.14

²¹⁴ Eusebius, *History of the Church* (London: Penguin, 1989), 141.

²¹⁵ Minucius Felix, *Octavius VIII 3-IX 2-3*

²¹⁶ Naphthali and Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Vol II the Empire. Selected Readings*, Minucius Felix, *Octavius VIII 3-IX 2-3*, 553-54

orbi et ipsi mundo cum sideribus suis minantur incendium, ruinam moliuntur, quasi aut naturae divinis legibus constitutes aeternus ordo turbetur...”²¹⁷ “furthermore, they threaten the whole world and the universe itself and its stars with fire, and work for its destruction.”²¹⁸

Yet another incomprehensible facet of the Christians was their seeming willingness to needlessly die. It was difficult for pagans to understand why Christians found glory in martyrdom for their religion. Minucius Felix also describes this phenomenon: “spernunt tormenta praesentia, dum incerta metuunt et futura, et dum mori post mortem timent, interim mori non timent: ita illis pavorem fallax spes solicia rediviva blanditur!”²¹⁹ “They despise present tortures yet dread uncertain future ones; while they fear to die after death, they have no fear of it in the meantime; deceptive hope soothes away their terror with the solace of a life to come.”²²⁰ Lucian also thought it was strange that Christians wanted to die. In *The Passing of Peregrinus*, he writes: “the poor wretches have convinced themselves first and foremost that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them.”²²¹

Another reason the polytheists at first had no toleration for Christianity was the very real fact that it adversely affected the economy. The people who were against Paul at Ephesus depended on visitors to the Temple of Artemis for their income. Paul was out preaching against eating sacrificial meat²²²this apparently caused a decrease in sales. Pliny

²¹⁷ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, XI.1

²¹⁸ Naphthali and Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Vol II the Empire. Selected Readings*, Minucius Felix, *Octavius VIII 3-XII 2-3*, 555

²¹⁹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, VIII.53

²²⁰ Naphthali and Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Vol II the Empire. Selected Readings*, Minucius Felix, *Octavius VIII 3-IX 2-3*, 554

²²¹ Lucian of Samosata, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, trans. A. M. Harmon, 15th ed., Vol. V (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 13

²²² I Corinthians 8.1-13

even mentions this in his letter to Trajan regarding the Christians of Bithynia—“Certe satis constat prope iam desolata templa coepisse celebrari, et sacra sollemnia diu intermissa repeti passimque venire victimarum, cuius adhuc rarissimus emptor inveniebatur.”²²³ “The flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere, although until recently hardly anyone could be found to buy it.”²²⁴ Discouraging the sales of sacrificial meats hurt the economy. In Acts, there is another account of how Christians hurt the economy. Paul and his companion came across a slave girl who told people’s fortunes in order to make money for her masters. Paul took away her income potential by commanding the spirit inside her (which gave her this talent) to leave. In response the slave owners drag Paul and his companion to the authorities. Christianity was against making money by supernatural means.²²⁵

The Christians also refused to go to public events. This also affected the economy. Minucius Felix recounts that the Christians do not go to shows, participate in processions, go to public banquets, attend sacred games, or eat sacrificed meat.²²⁶ In Tatian's *Address to the Greeks*, he describes Christian disgust at gladiatorial games, calling them “murders” and calling actors “perverts” among other things.²²⁷

Of course, Christian apologists had responses to these accusations, but few Polytheists likely read the responses. Not only did the pagan populace harbor hostility towards them, but the Jewish population did as well. Christians were thus disliked for various reasons by a large portion of the populace, so they were persecuted. Christians themselves

²²³ Pliny, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, letter 96.10

²²⁴ Pliny, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 294-95 letter 96.

²²⁵ Acts 16. 16-21.

²²⁶ Minucius Felix, *Octavius viii 3-xiii*

²²⁷ Naphthali and Reinhold, *Roman Civilization Vol II the Empire. Selected Readings*, 560-561, Tatian, *Address to the Greeks xxii-xxiii*

believed that they were most often persecuted by Jews as Paul states in Acts.²²⁸ Paul says in Acts after being arrested by Herod: "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hands of Herod *and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.*"²²⁹ Christians were not persecuted on any large scale during this time period, however the persecutions that did take place were publicized by both pagan and Christian writers as noteworthy events. In reality, the few persecutions between 64 and the 200's were localized, sporadic, and brief. In fact, Christians enjoyed extended periods without any major persecutions.²³⁰ It was not until the reign' of Decius (240-251) and Valerian (253-259) that a truly empire-wide persecution of Christians took place.²³¹

Diocletian and his tetrarchy attempted to rein in the economic and military crisis of the third century. In A.D. 303 Diocletian's great persecution began. Similar to persecution under Valerian, Christians were to be stripped of everything—churches, scriptures, rank, and privilege. Those who refused to sacrifice to the gods were killed or put to labor in the mines. After Diocletian retired, Maximian (305-313) continued the persecutions in the East with several edicts banning Christian activities and calling for sacrifice to the gods. However, just before Galerius died in 311, he issued an "Edict of Toleration."²³² The very next year Constantine defeated Maxentius outside Rome. Prior to the battle he had a dream or vision that the Christian god would help him win the battle against Maxentius if he placed a Christian symbol on the shields of his troops. Constantine's victory led to his conversion to

²²⁸ Acts 14.1-6

²²⁹ Acts 12.11

²³⁰ Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 7

²³¹ Sainte Croix, "Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?", 7

²³² Robert McQueen Grant, *Augustus to Constantine: The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 225-234.

Christianity and made him ruler of the West, while Licinius defeated Maximin in 313 and ruled the East. In 313, Constantine and Licinius granted religious freedom to all, especially Christians. By 324, Constantine was the sole ruler of the empire after defeating Licinius. Constantine involved himself more and more in the Christian church, calling synods and building magnificent Christian buildings, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.²³³

After Constantine converted to Christianity, Christian clergy were given economic benefits including relief from compulsory public services such as paying for local games or repairing a road.²³⁴ Bishops were given power to decide legal cases. Christian soldiers were allowed leave to attend church.²³⁵ Conversion methods began to change. Christianity now appeared more favorable since it was embraced by the emperor. Miracles of healing and wonder by monks and holy men continued to gain converts, especially in rural villages. Unlike Paul's preaching for conversion, most preaching was directed to the already converted.²³⁶ . In 392, the emperor Theodosius the Great banned sacrifice, a major element of pagan worship.²³⁷ If enforced, this law would have greatly impaired pagan worship. In the 420's, all citizens were commanded to attend church or have their property seized. By 468, pagans could no longer work in the imperial government or act as teachers or lawyers. By 529, "came the reign of terror in Constantinople in which large numbers of the most

²³³ *ibid.*, 235-246

²³⁴ Diana Bowder, *The Age of Constantine and Julian* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1978), 65-66.

²³⁵ *ibid.*, 93

²³⁶ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, 7-11.

²³⁷ A. D. Lee, *Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity : A Sourcebook* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), 123.

pagan personages were arrested, jailed, interrogated, and tortured.”²³⁸ As these laws might imply, paganism was tenacious, after all, this last event occurred over 200 years after Constantine’s conversion.

²³⁸ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (London: Yale University Press, 1997). 7-11

Chapter V Christianity in Arabia before Constantine

Although the Roman province of Arabia in the second and third centuries reached into Southern Israel, the Sinai of Egypt, Southern Syria, and Northwest Saudi Arabia, the majority of the province was located in what is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Arabia had overland access to ports on the Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea as well as in Egypt.²³⁹ The province profited from a lucrative spice trade and was easily traversed, thanks to *the via nova Traiana* built after the Roman annexation in A.D. 106.²⁴⁰ Although the province was far removed from Italy and the center of the Roman Empire, it was located near the heartland of early Christianity; a religion outlawed by the empire until the Edict of Toleration in 311 and Constantine's conversion the following year. This chapter will determine the extent of Christianity in the region (specifically excluding the Kerak Plateau which is addressed in a subsequent chapter) before Constantine's conversion to Christianity.

Arabia is recorded by ancient authors for its holy sites and for its heresies. As mentioned previously, the early church was a secretive and divergent group, and Arabia was on the fringes of the empire. Together, these two factors made Arabia famous for its heresies. Eusebius records part of a letter written to Stephen, a bishop of Rome from the third century, to church patriarch Dionysius of Alexandria. The letter concerns the controversy of whether or not “ζητήματος οὐ μικροῦτηνικάδε ἄσακινηθέντος, εἰ δέοι τοὺς ἐξ οἷας δ' οὖν αἰπεσεως ἐπιστρέφοντας διὰ λουτροῦ καθαίρειν.”²⁴¹ “it were

²³⁹ Glen Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1-8.

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 12-82

²⁴¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.2.1

necessary to cleanse by means of baptism those who were turning from any heresy

whatsoever.”²⁴² Dionysius refers to the churches of the East, including Arabia. He writes:

ἴσθι δὲ νῦν, ἀδελφέ, ὅτι ἦνωνται πασαι αἱ πρότερον διεσχισμεναι κατὰ τε τὴν ἀνατολὴν ἐκκλησίαι καὶ ἔτι προσωτέρου, καὶ πάντες εἰσὶν ὁμόφρονες οἱ πανταχοῦ προεστῶτες, χαίροντες καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ἐπὶ τῇ παρὰ προσδοκίαν εἰρήνῃ γενομένη τοὺς γὰρ περιφανέστερους μόνους τῶν ἐπισκόπων ὠνόμασα, ἵνα μήτε μήκος τῇ ἐπιστολῇ Συρία ὅλαι καὶ ἡ Ἀραβία, οἷς ἐπαρκεῖτε ἐκάστοτε καὶ οἷς νῦν ἐπεστείλατε, ἢ τε Μεσοποταμία Πόντος τε καὶ Βιθυνία καί, συνελόντι εἰπεῖν, ἀγαλλιώνται πάντες πανταχοῦ τῇ ὁμοσίᾳ καὶ φιλαδελφίᾳ, δοξάζοντες τὸν θεόν.²⁴³

But know now, brother, that all the churches in the East, and still further away, which were formerly divided, have been united. . . . the Syrias as a whole and Arabia, which ye constantly help and to which ye have now written, and Mesopotamia and Pontus and Bithynia, and, in a word, all everywhere rejoice exceedingly in their concord and brotherly love, giving glory to God.²⁴⁴

This suggests a third century Christian presence in the province.

Eusebius also wrote about Origen, an early third-century church scholar who visited and

dealt with heresies in Arabia.²⁴⁵ By A.D. 215, Origen was teaching church doctrine in

Palestine.²⁴⁶ Eusebius describes one event when Origen:

Κατὰ τοῦτον δὲ τὸν χρόνον ἐπ’ Ἀλεξανδρίας αὐτῷ τὰς διατριβὰς ποιουμένῳ ἐπιστάσ τισ τῶν στρατιωτικῶν ἀνεδίδου γράμματα Δεμετρίῳ τε τῷ τῆς παροικίας ἐπισκόπῳ καὶ τῷ τότε τῆς Αἰγύπτου ἐπάρχῳ παρὰ τοῦ τῆς Ἀραβίας ἡγουμένου, ὡς ἂν μετὰ σπουδῆς ἀπάσης τὸν Ὀριγένην πέμπσοιεν κοινωνήσοντα λόγων αὐτῷ. Οὐκ εἰς

²⁴² Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), VII.5.1.

²⁴³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII.5.1.

²⁴⁴ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II VII.5.1.

²⁴⁵ Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall, Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall, “Introduction and Commentary” In *Life of Constantine* by Eusebius of Caesarea., trans. Averil Cameron and Stuart George Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

²⁴⁶ Robert Wayne Smith, “Arabia Haeresium Ferax?” A History of Christianity in the Transjordan to 395 C.E” (Ph.D., Miami University, Dept. of History), 130.

μαξρόν δε τὰ τῆς ἀφίξεως εἰς πέρας ἀγαγών, αὐθις ἐπιτὴν Ἀλεξάνρειαν ἔπανει.²⁴⁷

“was living at Alexandria, one of the military appeared on the scene and delivered letters to Demetrius, the bishop of the community, and to the then governor of the province of Egypt, from the ruler of Arabia. To the intent that he should send Origen with all speed for an interview with him. He duly arrived in Arabia, but soon accomplished the object of his journey thither, and returned again to Alexandria.”²⁴⁸

In another excerpt Eusebius tells us that not only did Origen travel to Arabia, but that when he did, there was a bishop of Arabia at Bostra, the provincial capital:

Βήρυλλος ὁ μικρῶ πρόσθεν δεδηλωμένος Βόστρων τῆς Ἀραβίας ἐπίσκοπος, τὸν ἐκκλησιαστικὸν παρεκτρέπων κανόνα, ξένας τινὰ τῆς πίστεως παρεισφέρειν ἐπειπάτο . . . Ἐπὶ τούτῳ πλείστων ἐπισκόπων ζητήσεις καὶ διαλόγους πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα πεπονημένον, μεθ' ἑτέρων παρακληθεὶς Ὀριγένης κάτεισι μὲν εἰς ὁμίλιαν τὰ πρῶτα τῷ ἀνδρὶ, τίνα νοῦν ἔχει, ἀποπειρώμενος, ὡς δ' ἔγνω ὅτι καὶ λεγιο, εὐθυνας μὴ ὀρθοδοξοῦντα λογισμῶ τε πείσας, τῇ περὶ τοῦ δογματος ἐπίστησιν ἀληθείᾳ ἐπὶ τε τὴν προτέραν ὑγιῆ δοξαν ἀποκαθίστησιν. Καὶ τὰς δι' αὐτὸν γενομένης συνόδου, ὁμοῦ τὰς Ὀριγένους πρὸς αὐτὸν ζητήσεις καὶ τὰς λεχθείσας ἐπὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ παροικίας διαλέχεις ἕκαστά τε τῶν τότε πεπραγμένων περιέχοντα.²⁴⁹

Beryllus, who as we have mentioned a little above, was bishop of Bostra in Arabia, perverting the Church's standard, attempted to introduce things foreign to the faith . . . Whereupon. After a large number of bishops had held questionings and discussions with the man, Origen, being invited along with others, entered in the first place into conversation with the man to discover what were his opinions, and when he knew what it was that he asserted, he corrected what was unorthodox . . . And there are still extant to this very day records in writing both of Beryllus and of the synod that was held on his account, which contain at once the questions Origen put to him and the discussion that took place in his own community, and all that was done on that occasion.²⁵⁰

This is the earliest attestation of a bishop in Arabia and an important clue in determining how active Christianity was in the province pre-Constantine. The next earliest

²⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI.19.15

²⁴⁸ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II, VI.19.15

²⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI.33.1

²⁵⁰ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II, VI.33.1

mention of bishops of Arabia is from the list of bishops attending the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The list includes 12 bishops from Arabia.²⁵¹ Since Origen and several other church fathers met with Beryllus in the third century, one can assume they considered it important to correct the heresy of an Arabian church that was sufficiently large enough to warrant their interest. Furthermore, Eusebius writes that Origen was sent once more into Arabia because of heresies:

Ἄλλοι δ' αὖ πάλιν ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀραβίας κατὰ τὸν δηλούμενον ἐπιφύονται χρόνον δόγματος ἀνθρωπίου τῆς ἀληθείας εἰσηγηται...καὶ δὴ καὶ τότε συγκροτηθείσης οὐ μικρᾶς συνόδου, πάλιν Ὀριγένης παρακληθεὶς καὶ ἐνταῦθα κινήσας τε λόγους ἐπὶ τοῦ κοινουῦ περὶ τοῦ ζητουμένου, οὕτως ἠνέχθη ὡς μετατεθῆσαι τὰς τῶν πρότερον ἐσφαλμένων διάνους.²⁵²

Once more in Arabia at the above mentioned time other persons sprang up, introducing a doctrine foreign to truth. . . .Moreover, when a synod of no small dimensions was then assembled together, Origen was again invited, and there opened a discussion in public on the subject in question²⁵³

This is further evidence for a Christian population in Arabia during the third century. The synod that formed was “οὐ μικρᾶς,” “of no small dimensions” indicating a sizable population large enough to have its own bishop and to receive personal attention from church officials elsewhere in the empire. Incidentally, Eusebius also mentions that the governor of Arabia during Origen’s time had a Christian son, Asyrius, who was active in the church.²⁵⁴ Another attestation of Christianity in pre-Constantine Arabia deals with Christian martyrs who died there during persecutions. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Eusebius discusses their

²⁵¹ Benjamin Harris Cowper, *Syriac Miscellanies; Or, Extracts Relating to the First and Second General Councils, and various Other Quotations, Theological, Historical and Classical*, 27.

²⁵² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VI.37.1

²⁵³ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II, VI, VI.37.1

²⁵⁴ Smith, *Arabia Haeresium Ferax? A History of Christianity in the Transjordan to 395 C.E.*, 155

death: “Τί με χρὴ νῦν ἐπ’ ὀνόματος τῶν λοιπῶν μενιμονεύειν ἢ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἀριθμῆναι ἢ τὰς πολυτρόπους ἀκίας ἀναζωγραφῆν τῶν Θαυμασίων μαρτύρων, τοτὲ μὲν πέλυξιν ἀναιρουμένων, οἷα γέγονεν τοῖς ἐπ’ Ἀραβίας. . . .”²⁵⁵ “why need I now mention the rest by name, or number the multitude of the men, or picture the varied tortures inflicted upon the wonderful martyrs? Sometimes they were slain with the axe, as was the case in Arabia”²⁵⁶ Eusebius also refers to the large number of martyrs sent to the copper mines in Phaino, a major copper producing area in Arabia (discussed in more detail in reference to its archaeological significance later in this chapter). In his *Historia Ecclesiastica* Eusebius reports that: “Τῶν δ’ ἐπι Παλαιστίνης μαρτύρων Ζιλβανός, ἐκίσκοπος τῶν ἀμφὶ τὴν Γαζαν ἐκκλησιῶν, κατὰ τὰ ἐν Φαινοῖ καλκοῦ μέταλλα συν ἑτέροις ἑνὸς δέουσι τὸν ἀριθμὸν τεσσαράκοντα τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποτέμνεται.”²⁵⁷ “Of the martyrs in Palestine, Silvanus, bishop of the churches about Gaza, was beheaded at the copper mines at Phaino, with others in number forty save one.”²⁵⁸

Eusebius wrote an entire work dedicated to the martyrs of this region entitled *On the Martyrs of Palestine*. Whether or not he could have actually witnessed the persecutions he describes is debatable; however, he names several martyrs from Arabia. These Christians were martyred during the reign of Diocletian in the early fourth century. Since Eusebius notes that he only describes the martyrdoms of Christians that he actually knew, this would limit the scope of his records considerably. At least one of the martyrs, “Zacchaeus” was from Gadara (modern day Umm Qais in the north of Jordan). He also lists two martyrs who

²⁵⁵ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII.12.1

²⁵⁶ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II, VIII.12.1

²⁵⁷ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VIII.13.5

²⁵⁸ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J. E. L. Oulton, Loeb Edition ed., Vol. II, VIII.13.5

were from Batanaea, an area located near the Jordan River. The martyrdoms continued until Maximinius was defeated by Licinius in AD 313.²⁵⁹

It is evident that Arabia had an early importance in Christianity. We can turn to the accounts of Byzantine pilgrims to find out more about Christianity in Arabia. According to Eusebius, Melito, a second century bishop of Sardis, went on a pilgrimage to the East. Eusebius explains that Melito wanted to see the sights of the Holy Land and do some research regarding the Old Testament. This is the earliest known pilgrimage to the East. For Mileto to have been prepared to take this journey and be confident of its outcome, it seems that there was probably a pilgrimage route/system already in place.²⁶⁰ Eusebius records another early pilgrimage to the East by Alexander of Cappadocia, a bishop from Cappadocia in the early third century. Eusebius quotes Alexander as saying that he wanted to visit the East for prayer and to see the holy places.²⁶¹ These are the earliest accounts of pilgrimages to the east and suggest that Christians visited the area as early as the second century. However, though these pilgrims visited “the East” it is hard to determine where they visited. From the late fourth-early fifth century account of the pilgrim Egeria, it seems that the pilgrimage route only went into Arabia as far as Mount Nebo. Egeria recorded a visit to the Holy Land sometime between A.D. 381 and A.D. 400. In her description of the journey, Egeria states that this is not her first visit to Arabia:

²⁵⁹ Smith, *Arabia Haeresium Ferax?* "A History of Christianity in the Transjordan to 395 C.E., 174-178

²⁶⁰ Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p xiv

²⁶¹ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IV.26.13, VI.11.2

Item transacto aliquanto tempore et iubente Deo fuit denuo voluntas accedendi usque ad Arabiam, id est ad montem Nabau, in eo loco, in quo iussit Deus ascendere Moysen. . .²⁶²

“Sometime went by. Then, impelled by God, I conceived the desire to go once more into Arabia, on to Mount Nebo. It is the mountain which God told Moses to Climb. . .”²⁶³

Egeria also described her visit to the top of Mount Nebo. Again, from the text it seems that Christians had been making this trip for some time, Egeria writes:

Pervenimus ergo ad summitatem montis illius, ubi est nunc ecclesia non grandis in ipsa summitate montis Nabau. Intra quam ecclesiam in eo loco, ubi pulpitus est, vidi locum modice quasi altiozem tantum hispatii habentem, quantum memoriae solent habere. Tunc ergo interrogavi illos sanctos, quidnam esset hoc; qui responderunt: «hic positus est sanctus Moyses ab angelis, quoniam, sicut scriptum est, sepulturam illius nullus hominum scit, quoniam certum est eum ab angelis fuisse sepultum. Nam memoria illius, ubi positus sit, in hodie non ostenditur; sicut enim nobis a maioribus, qui hic manserunt, ubi ostensum est, ita et nos vobis monstramus: qui et ipsi tamen maiores ita sibi traditum a maioribus suis esse dicebant.»²⁶⁴

On reaching the mountaintop we came to a church, not a very big one, right on the summit of Mount Nebo, and inside, in the position of the pulpit, I saw a slightly raised place about the size of a normal tomb. I asked about it and the holy men replied, ‘Holy Moses was buried here by -by angels. . . .’ Our predecessors pointed this place out to us, and now we point it out to you. They told us that this tradition came from their predecessors.²⁶⁵

Egeria also describes how looking out from Mount Nebo, the group could see Palestine:

Tunc nos gavisi satis statim egressi sumus foras. Nam de [h]ostio ipsius ecclesiae vidimus locum, ubi intrat Iordanis in mare mortuum, qui locus subter nos, quemadmodum stabamus, parebat. Vidimus etiam de contra non solum Libiadam, quae citra Iordanem erat, sed et Iericho, quae trans Iordanem; tantum eminebat excelsus locus, ubi stabamus, id est ante [h]ostium ecclesiae. Maxima etiam pars Palaestinae, quae est terra repromissionis, inde videbatur, nec non et omnis terra Iordanis, in quantum tamen poterat oculis

²⁶² Egeria, *Itinerarium peregrinatio*, 10.1

²⁶³ Egeria and John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1999), 5.10.1.

²⁶⁴ Egeria, *Itinerarium peregrinatio*, 12.1-2

²⁶⁵ Egeria and John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 12.1-2

conspici. In sinistra autem parte vidimus terras Sodomitum omnes nec non et Segor, quae tamen Segor sola de illis quinque in hodie constat.²⁶⁶

This delighted us, and we went straight out. From the church door itself we saw where the Jordan runs into the Dead Sea, and the place was down below where we were standing. Then, facing us, we saw Livias on our side of the Jordan, and Jericho on the far side, since the height in front of the church door, where we were standing, jugged out over the valley. In fact from there you can see most of Palestine, the Promised Land and everything in the area of Jordan as far as the eye can see.²⁶⁷

According to Egeria's travel diary, there were monks living near the Springs of Moses, close to Mount Nebo. She notes the "cells" of the monks as well as seeing a small church. These ascetic monks showed her the memorial to Moses.²⁶⁸

These accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land show that Christians visited Arabia as early as the second century. Egeria's detailed account shows that pilgrims had been visiting Arabia (at least as far as Mount Nebo) in the fourth century and probably before. However, their main interests were not in Arabia, but in the neighboring holy sites in Jerusalem and to the west of the Dead Sea. Although the extent of the Christian presence in Arabia before Constantine is impossible to know due to scarcity of sources and tendency of the church to exaggerate its numbers, it is possible to infer that there was a Christian presence in the region by the third-fourth centuries according to the available literary evidence. There is not enough evidence however to suggest a large presence earlier, before Constantine's conversion.

²⁶⁶ Egeria, *Itinerarium peregrinatio*, 12.4-5,

²⁶⁷ Egeria and John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 12.4-5,

²⁶⁸ Michele Piccirillo, "The Monastic Presence" In *Mount Nebo New Archaeological Excavations* (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1998), 193

The archaeological record also provides some evidence of an early Christian presence in the region. There are several known Christian church remains in the region as well as Christian cemeteries with dated tombstones. This evidence points to a third-fourth century or later date for Christianity in the region.

In Southern Jordan, the Roman Aqaba Project excavated the Roman port of Aila. A bishop is listed from Aila as early as A.D. 325. A probable church dating to the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century was discovered at this site. Some notable artifacts from the site include a glass “cage cup,” possibly used as a container for holy water, and also a sandstone offering table. The church was destroyed in A.D. 363, probably by an earthquake.²⁶⁹ In any case, this would suggest a sizable local Christian presence before Constantine won control of the East in A.D. 324.

Archaeologists have found many monastic complexes in the area of Mount Nebo, none dating before the fourth century.²⁷⁰ The memorial to Moses on Mount Nebo was built mainly in the fifth century, with additions and renovations made through the eighth century. However, the fifth century building rests on walls dated to the fourth century. The excavators note that several construction projects erected on these walls up until the fifth century “*cella trichora*” was built, suggest that the building had been in use for some time.²⁷¹ It is possible that an earlier church existed on the site.

²⁶⁹ S. Thomas Parker, "The Roman Aqaba Project: The 2002 Campaign," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 47 (2003), 325-326.

²⁷⁰ Michele Piccirillo, "The Monastic Presence," 194.

²⁷¹ Eugenio Alliata and Susanna Bianchi, "The Architectural Phasing of the Memorial of Moses" In *Mount Nebo New Archaeological Excavations*, eds. Michele Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1998), 152-153.

There were several churches in Byzantine Petra, the metropolis and capital of Palaestina Tertia. The earliest is The Ridge Church. It is not known when the original building was created; however, after A.D. 363 an apse and two rooms were built onto this original structure. Petra's Christian population grew, and by the fifth century there were several more churches and a bishop of Petra.²⁷²

To the south of the Kerak Plateau is the site of Khirbet Faynan (ancient Phaino), a major copper-mining site of the Roman Empire. Christians were exiled here during the early fourth century as convict labor in the mines. Due to the large number of Christians, a convict named Sylvanus was named the first of several bishops at the site in the early fourth century.²⁷³

A cemetery near Khirbet Faynan was dated by excavation to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period. Prior looting had extensively damaged the site, affecting at least 700 graves. Twelve hundred orthostats/funerary stelae were found at the site, of which more than 180 were inscribed with Christian symbols. The Christian symbols allowed the excavators to date at least that portion of the site to between ca. A.D. 106 and 634. Several large unexcavated churches lie in the surrounding area, including a possible church with an accompanying graveyard northwest of the site. This area yielded surface sherds dating to the Roman/Byzantine period.²⁷⁴ The excavators report that the main period of use for the excavated cemetery was from A.D. 455 through the sixth century.²⁷⁵ However, they also

²⁷² Patricia M. Bikai and Virginia Egan, "Archaeology in Jordan," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101, no. 3 (1997), 271-273.

²⁷³ George Findlater and et al, "The Wadi Faynan Project: The South Cemetery Excavation, Jordan 1996: The Preliminary Report," *Levant*, no. 30 (1998), 71.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 71

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 82

note that many graves lacked datable artifacts, hampering exact dating of the site. The sheer number of Christian tombstones found in Khirbet Faynan, as well as the evidence from literary sources about condemned Christians sent here during the Great Persecution and the presence of early fourth century bishops, all suggest the presence of a sizable Christian population in this period.

Also to the south of the plateau near ancient Zoora is Deir 'Ain 'Abata, a Byzantine monastery associated with Lot, who according to biblical tradition fled with his daughters to a nearby cave.²⁷⁶ The site was discovered by Burton MacDonald in 1986 excavated by D. Politis from 1988 to 1996. This site was occupied from the Early Bronze Age to Abbasid period. A basilica church with a triple apse was built at the site which early Christians believed to be the cave where Lot. There is also a pilgrim's hostel, hermits' caves and a burial site and reservoir. The church has mosaics with inscriptions dating to A.D. 605 and to A.D. 691. Artifacts from Lot's sanctuary date from the 5th to 7th centuries A.D.²⁷⁷

South of the Wadi al-Hasa (north of Khirbet Faynan) a Byzantine cemetery containing over 400 funerary stelae was discovered at Ghor es-Safi (ancient Zoora) in the late 1990s. Most of the tombstones are inscribed in Greek and are Christian. Their dates range from the fourth through sixth centuries.²⁷⁸ The earliest funerary stele from Ghor es-Safi commemorates a certain Makrinos, who died at age 33 in AD 309. While there is no apparent Christian iconography on the stela, it is important to note the term “μνημειον”

²⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 4

²⁷⁷ Avraham Negev and Shimon Gibson, *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, Rev. and updated. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 138.

²⁷⁸ Yiannis Meimaris and Kalliope Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou, *Inscriptions from Palestina Tertia Vol. 1a. the Greek Inscriptions from Ghor Es-Safi (Byzantine Zoora)* (Athens: The National Hellenic Research Foundation, 2005), 6.

("monument") on the stele. Although the term appears on both Christian and pagan inscriptions, the survey of neighboring areas by Canova cites six stelae that use this term--all Christian. This could attest to a Christian presence here as early as A.D. 309, before Constantine's conversion.²⁷⁹ This would also attest to a Christian presence in the region during the Great Persecution which lasted until 311 and was revived by Maximian until 313.²⁸⁰

A tombstone of A.D. 323/324 for an 18-year-old son, "Paulus," was also found at the site. Though again there is no Christian symbolism, "Paulus" is a common Christian name, and one could infer that he was also a Christian.²⁸¹ Also, we must consider that if this is a Christian burial, then the young man's parents could have been Christian as well.

There are several other fourth century Christian tombstones at Ghor es Safi. A tombstone with a cross inscribed for "Olefos" dates to A.D. 345.²⁸² A tombstone of A.D. 349 for a 16-year-old, Prosdokios, includes the phrase "*oudis athanatos, O Theos athanatos*" ("no one is immortal, only God is immortal"), a common phrase in Christian funerary inscriptions. Also, the child's mother is named "Prosdokia," attested at other sites as a Christian name.²⁸³ Another of the early tombstones mentions a man who died at the age of 45 in A.D. 359. Red crosses are painted above the inscription.²⁸⁴ Especially interesting is the monument for Samakon, who died at age 40 during the earthquake of 363. While there are

²⁷⁹ Yiannis Meimaris and Kalliope Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou, *Inscriptions from Palestina Tertia Vol. 1a. the Greek Inscriptions from Ghor Es-Safi*, 91

²⁸⁰ Andrew Louth, "Introduction" In *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine by Eusebius*(London; New York: Penguin Books, 1989), xviii.

²⁸¹ Yiannis Meimaris and Kalliope Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou, *Inscriptions from Palestina Tertia Vol. 1a. the Greek Inscriptions from Ghor Es-Safi*, 95

²⁸² *ibid.*, 98

²⁸³ *ibid.*, 103-104

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 113

no discernable crosses on the tombstone, it includes his title of “*archidiakonou*” or “archdeacon.” This was an important position in the church, with only one archdeacon per bishopric. Samakon was presumably the archdeacon of Zoora.²⁸⁵ Again this epigraphic evidence implies a Christian presence in the region in the fourth century, but not earlier.

The evidence discussed above suggests a Christian presence in Roman Arabia in fourth century, not until after Constantine had converted to Christianity. Though Christian heresies were so common in the province during the third century that Origen had to visit Christians in the area repeatedly to address their doctrine and Eusebius mentions a third century bishop in the provincial capital of Bostra, there is little other evidence for an earlier Christian presence in the region. Eusebius also lists an early fourth century bishop at the copper mines of Phaino. Though the area was rich in holy sites (mentioned in the Bible) and was known and visited by pilgrims as early as the second century, most existing evidence points to the fourth century or later for a strong Christian presence. By the late fourth century, the pilgrim Egeria had visited the region more than once and mentions Christians in the area. While the archaeological evidence is not as easily dated as the literary evidence, it too points to an active Christian population in the region during the fourth century. Literary evidence combined with the archaeological evidence attests to communities of Christians in the region for the most part after Constantine’s famous conversion to Christianity.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 120-121

Chapter VI: Christianity on the Kerak Plateau after Constantine

This chapter attempts to understand when and by what means Christianity penetrated the Kerak Plateau by examining the documentary and archaeological evidence from the plateau itself. By investigating Episcopal lists from church councils, a corpus of dated Christian tombstones, and both unexcavated and excavated churches in the region, dates for Christianity's presence in the region emerge.

Since Christianity was originally an urban religion, one would expect more evidence of Christianity in the cities than in rural areas. The list of bishops for the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. names 12 bishops from the province of Arabia, but none from the Kerak Plateau. The Council of Constantinople in A.D. 429 lists five bishops from Arabia--none from the Kerak Plateau. The earliest bishop in the Episcopal lists from the Kerak Plateau. is a certain Anastasius from Areopolis at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 449. The Synod of Jerusalem held in A.D. 536 included two bishops from the Kerak Plateau—Elias from Areopolis and Demetrius from Charachmoba. An inscription citing a bishop named John dates to A.D. 597/598 in Areopolis. Thus, the earliest bishop from the Kerak Plateau dates to the mid-fifth century, and the majority dates from the sixth century. The absence of bishops from the plateau at earlier councils, such as Nicea in A.D. 325 may be significant.

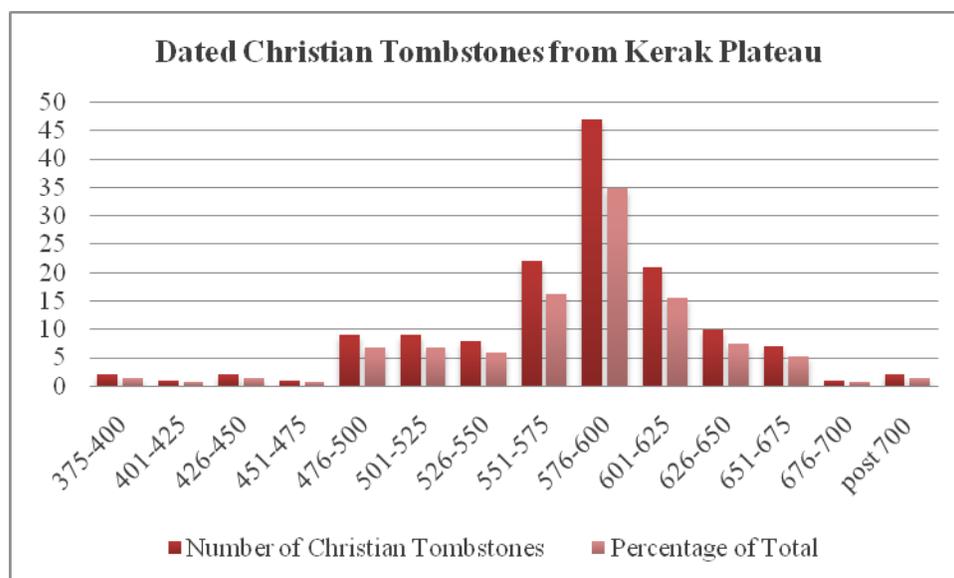


Figure 14

The lack of bishops from the plateau until A.D. 449 corresponds to other evidence of Christianity's late infiltration of the plateau, namely datable Christian tombstones (see figure 14). The darker red column indicates the actual number of Christian tombstone inscriptions found. The lighter shade of red indicates the percentage of total Christian tombstone inscriptions found. An analysis of a collection of 135 dated Christian tombstones from various sites (including several villages) on the plateau reveals that few date before the sixth century and that most (74%) date from the mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries.²⁸⁶ Only three date to the first century after Constantine's conversion.²⁸⁷ The geographic distribution of the tombstones shows that all the tombstones lie on or near the *via Nova Traiana*, mostly near the urban and Christian center of Charachmoba and none

²⁸⁶ Reginetta Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab*. (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1954).

²⁸⁷ S. T. Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989* (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005), Table 24.1.

north of Areopolis. This suggests that by the sixth century Christianity had spread to at least some rural villages on the plateau.

The map below (figure 15) shows the location of both tombstones and known or possible churches on the plateau mentioned in this paper. It is not surprising to note that the areas with the greatest concentrations of tombstones also contain a possible Christian church.

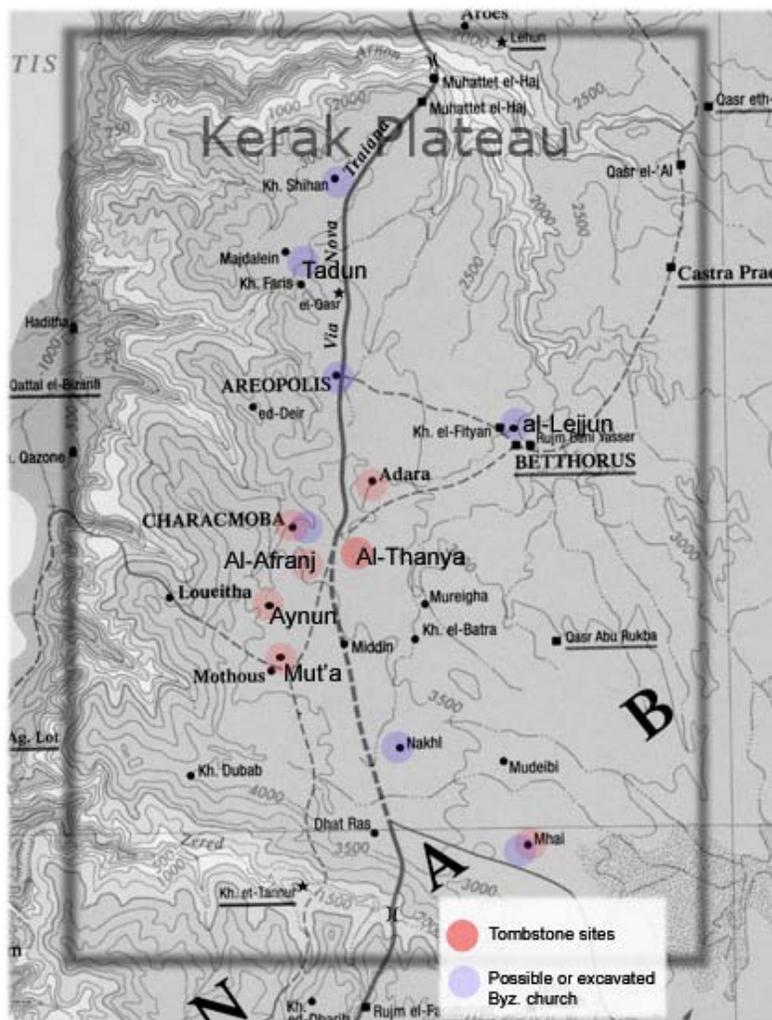


Figure 15. *Tombstone and Church Sites on Kerak Plateau*

For instance, the village of Mhai (where Canova noted two Byzantine cemeteries) contains the largest number of dated Christian tombstones of all the known sites on the plateau—seventy percent of the 68 inscribed Christian tombstones are dated. Out of these 48, fifty-eight percent date to the seventh century and thirty-nine percent to the sixth century (none before A.D. 505).

There have been no excavations at the site, but both Schick and Miller note the presence of

the Byzantine church.²⁸⁸ Miller describes it as a “Nabataean-Roman temple [that] may have been reused as a church during the Byzantine period. The apse is of irregular and roughly laid blocks and only partially visible.”²⁸⁹ It seems unlikely that a church would have been built before the earliest dated Christian tombstones in the area.



Figure 16: Portion of Madaba Map featuring Charachmoba
(the churches are marked in red on the right)

The next highest concentration of dated Christian tombstones is from the city of Charachmoba. Forty-three (43) of the 197 Christian tombstones could be dated (with two of the earliest dates being uncertain). Of these 43, nine percent are fifth century; sixty-five percent are sixth century; and twenty percent are seventh century.²⁹⁰ Two tombstones date

²⁸⁸ Schick, unpublished, 66

²⁸⁹ J. Maxwell Miller, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 166.

²⁹⁰ Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab.*, 30-173

from the mid-fourth century, but are not definitely Christian.²⁹¹ Medieval and modern buildings have covered most of Charachmoba, and no Byzantine church is known.

However, Canova noted several Christian architectural elements as well as a baptismal font and mosaic fragments.²⁹² Charachmoba appears in the sixth century Madaba map mosaic and the eighth century mosaic at Umm er-Rasas.²⁹³ In the Madaba map a large and small church are depicted in the image of Charachmoba (figure 16). Zayadine states that “the two churches confirm that Kerak was a Bishopric in the Byzantine period.”²⁹⁴ Charachmoba had a bishop at the sixth century Council of Jerusalem.²⁹⁵ A fourteenth century writer, Al-Umari, mentions a pre-Crusader monastery at Charachmoba, and two churches from the Crusader period can be identified.²⁹⁶ Since Charachmoba was demonstrably a Christian center of Byzantine Jordan, it is interesting that a Christian presence cannot be attested before the fifth century. Notably, the majority of dated tombstones coincide with the sixth century date of Charachmoba’s first attested bishop. Again, from available evidence, it seems that there were few Christians in Charachmoba until the sixth century, at least too few to warrant a bishop.

The town of Mu’ta to the south of Charachmoba boasts the next highest number of dated Christian tombstones: 16 of 21 inscribed Christian tombstones. Of these, thirty percent

²⁹¹ Schick, unpublished, 46

²⁹² Anne Michel, *Les Eglises d'Epoque Byzantine Et Umayyade De Jordanie (Provinces d'Arabie Et De Palestine) Ve-VIIIe Siecle : Typologie Architecturale Et Amenagements Liturgiques (Avec Catalogue Des Monuments)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 420.

²⁹³ Schick, unpublished, 46

²⁹⁴ Fawzi Zayadine, "The Kerak District" In *The Madaba Map Centenary, 1897-1997 : Travelling through the Byzantine Umayyad Period*, eds. Michele Piccirillo and Eugenio Alliata, Vol. 40 (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 1999), 229-230.

²⁹⁵ Schick, unpublished, 46

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46

are from the fifth century; fifty percent are sixth century; and twelve percent are seventh century. Only one tombstone dates to the early fifth century.²⁹⁷ There is a paucity of other Christian evidence for Mu'ta. Miller noted that the modern town covers most of the ancient town. However, Miller also noted that “many tesserae and sherds were found along a small wadi there.”²⁹⁸ Schick notes that mosaic *tesserae* found at sites on the Kerak Plateau typically denote a church, whereas in Northern Jordan this is less often the case.²⁹⁹ While there is not definitive evidence for a church at Mu'ta, it does seem likely. There is evidence that the Christian presence was most significant in the late fifth and sixth centuries, which is in line with evidence cited above.

Canova located 34 tombstones in the village of Aynun, south of Charachmoba. Of the seven that could be dated: two date to the late fifth century (the earliest to A.D. 477-478) and five to the sixth and seventh centuries. While neither Miller nor Canova could discern a church at the site, Miller collected pottery suggesting occupation from the Early Byzantine through modern periods.³⁰⁰ Canova found Christian artifacts including bronze crosses and part of a reliquary.³⁰¹ In the village of al-Thaniya, just two kilometers southeast of Kerak,³⁰² Canova found six inscribed Christian tombstones. All three datable tombstones are sixth century, the earliest dating to 515-516 A.D.³⁰³ Miller notes that the town is near “an

²⁹⁷ Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab.*, 287-303

²⁹⁸ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 119-120

²⁹⁹ Schick, personal correspondence

³⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 110

³⁰¹ Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab.*, 229-234

³⁰² *ibid.*, 88

³⁰³ Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab.*, 222-228

important spring ca. 1.5 km southwest of Kerak.”³⁰⁴ Just like Aynun, the majority of dated Christian tombstones are from the sixth century.

Not far from Aynun at Adir more Christian tombstones were recorded by Canova. Six out of 15 of the inscribed tombstones are dated: four date to the mid- to late sixth century (earliest to A.D. 542) and two to the seventh century.³⁰⁵ Canova also found a Christian cross inscribed on a capital.³⁰⁶ The majority of sherds found by Miller are early Byzantine. W.F. Albright and M.G. Kyle led an expedition here in 1924. The most striking find at the site were several menhirs, one still standing upright. They identified extensive Bronze Age remains and Bronze and Iron age pottery. They also discovered the remains of an ancient temple that could not be identified. They did, however, identify other building remains at the site as Byzantine.³⁰⁷ In 1933 a small expedition made soundings in the area. They were able to date the city wall to pre-Byzantine times and they also uncovered a third century Roman tomb. A Roman/Byzantine tower was located on the site as well. However, the ancient temple remains were almost completely destroyed by modern construction and they were unable to date it or excavate any significant portion of it. They reported no evidence of a Christian church at the site.³⁰⁸ Based on tombstone inscriptions there is no evidence for a Christian presence until the sixth century.

The Christian tombstones that Canova found on the Kerak Plateau date mainly to the sixth century. Many sites coincide with probable or possible churches, though none of

³⁰⁴ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 88

³⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 179-191

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 174-179

³⁰⁷ Ray L. Cleveland, "The Excavation of the Conway High Place (Petra) and Soundings at Khirbet Ader" In *The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, v.34-35 for 1954-1956. (New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1960), 80-82.

³⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 84-87

these possible churches have been excavated or otherwise dated. Considering the likelihood that dated tombstones would be contemporary with the church, these unexcavated churches may also date to the sixth century. All of the sites with Christian tombstones are either on the *via nova Traiana* or a connecting road, suggesting the spread of Christianity through the rural villages connected to the Roman road system. There is a distinct lack of Christian tombstones in the northern plateau. Is this because modern settlement has obliterated traces of these tombstones or because there were fewer Christians north of Charachmoba?

The church remains on the plateau raise as many questions as the tombstone evidence. Unfortunately, most churches on the plateau are unexcavated and undated. However, though I have already discussed those that are associated with dated tombstone, the extant remains of the churches, both dated and undated, offer more insight into the spread of Christianity in the area.

Most of the unexcavated sites yielded Byzantine surface artifacts. Little architecture remains visible except for the occasional curved wall indicating an apse. Plotting these sites



Church ruins at el-Lejjun, Figure 17 –photo courtesy Robert Schick

on a map of the plateau reveals that all of the churches are near main travel routes. Almost all are within a short distance of the *via nova Traiana*, either on the western plateau between the *via nova Traiana* and the Dead Sea or to the south along the *via nova Traiana*. There are remarkably few churches in the eastern plateau except for the Roman fortress of el-Lejjun.

The earliest dated church on the plateau is at el-Lejjun (figure 17), dated ca. 500.³⁰⁹ The church measures 24 x 13 meters. The entrance is a small vestibule, and at the opposite end is an east-facing apse. Parker believes that by the end of the fifth century most of the garrison at el-Lejjun were Christianized. Christian artifacts such as lamps inscribed with Christian symbols were found not only in the church but also in the northwest tower. The church was apparently destroyed in a mid-sixth century earthquake. Parker finds the question of Christianity on the plateau problematic as well. Though there was a Christian church in the fort, he cites evidence that the cult of the legionary standards was still active in the early sixth century.³¹⁰ While the date of the church does not exactly coincide with the tombstone evidence previously discussed, it still supports the idea of Christianity's late arrival in the region.

³⁰⁹ Robert Schick, "The Church (Area J)" In *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan: Interim Report on the Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1985*, Vol. 340, i-ii (Oxford, England: B.A.R., 1987), 353.

³¹⁰ Parker, *Roman Frontiers in Central Jordan, Final Report on Limes Arabicus Project, 1980-1989*, 569



Ruins at Jadet al Jabur, Figure 18 -photo courtesy Robert Schick

Additionally the church of Jadet al Jabur (figure 18), excavated in 1993, dates to the late sixth century. The church is a small basilica with an east facing apse. Despite the landowner's use of a bulldozer at the site to collect illicit artifacts, Schick thought that there were enough undisturbed areas to date the site stratigraphically. The mosaic remnants found in the church are similar to a late sixth century church in Jerash. Schick found Byzantine pottery sherds and sherds as late as the Early Islamic period.³¹¹ Unfortunately, not much additional information is known or has been published and the available evidence again supports the view that Christianity did not make serious inroads on the plateau until the sixth century.

³¹¹ Robert Schick, "Shihan," *Ricerca Storico-Archeologia in Girodania XIV* (1994), 636-638

Another church excavated on the plateau is at ancient Areopolis (figure 19), 12 kilometers to the northeast of Charachmoba. Areopolis was described by Eusebius as a center for pagan worship. He writes in the *Onomasticon*: “those who live in Areopolis call



Church ruins at Areopolis, Figure 19

their idol Ariel from Ares after whom they named the city.”³¹² In A.D. 385 the inhabitants rioted upon government action to close their temples. Sozomen reports that “there were still pagans in many cities who contended zealously in behalf of their temples as for instance, the inhabitants of Petra and of Areopolis, in Arabia . . .”³¹³ The Byzantine church was originally located by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities in 1963. Unfortunately, the Jordanian

³¹² Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, 28

³¹³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers VII Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886).7.15

authorities cleared the area without any surviving records.³¹⁴ More recently, a 1999 survey by Jacqueline Gysens as part of the Rabbathmoab Regional Project revealed a mono-apsidal church 16 by 5 meters (even smaller than the church at el-Lejjun.)³¹⁵ Two Christian inscriptions believed to originate from the same area of town as the church dated to the late sixth and seventh centuries. Again this falls particularly in line with the tombstone evidence discussed earlier, especially in light of Areopolis' known preference for polytheism.



Church ruins at Khirbet Nakhl, Figure 20, photo courtesy Robert Schick

Limited excavations at Khirbet Nakhl 16 kilometers southeast of Kerak revealed a small church (figure 20). Canova mentioned the church,³¹⁶ and Miller described it as a “Nabataean/Roman building with a Byzantine church inside.”³¹⁷ In 1993, the first (and only)

³¹⁴ Schick, unpublished, 91

³¹⁵ Jacqueline Calzini Gysens, "Preliminary Report on the First Survey Campaign at Ancient Ar-Rabba (Rabbathmoab/Areopolis)" In *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, Vol. 46 (Amman, Jordan: Department of Antiquities, 2002), 495.

³¹⁶ Canova, *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani Del Paese Di Moab.*, 325-327

³¹⁷ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 156

season of excavation, a triple apsed basilica with flagstone pavement was found.³¹⁸

Unfortunately, the excavations did not reach foundations, so the date for construction of the church is not known. Once again there is evidence of a Christian presence in this area; however, the evidence has not been dated.

As mentioned previously, there are numerous unexcavated but possibly Byzantine Christian sites on the plateau. However, some details regarding the unexcavated sites add to an understanding of the spread of Christianity in this region. For instance, on the northern plateau a large church was described at Tedun (figure 21), by an early nineteenth century explorer, Louis DeSaulcy. He describes the site as:

A structure, built of fine hewn stone, stands on the northern front of the large enclosure; and to this we immediately direct our steps. The first object that strikes us is a huge block of stone, in which have been excavated the mouth and the trough of a well. . . . Fifteen yards in front of the southern face there is a small circular hillock, on the summit of which stands a portion of a stone column, rounded on three sides only, and surmounted by a plain parallelepiped, twenty inches in length, eighteen in breadth, and ten in thickness. A few yards from this mound is another fragment of a column, rather more than twelve inches in diameter. I have here given an accurate description of this ancient structure, apparently intended for religious purposes. From a Pagan temple it had most likely been converted into a Christian church; and again, at the period of the Mussulman conquest, transformed into a mosque for the followers of Mohammed. Why I think a Christian church existed there, under the Byzantine monarchy, is founded on the presence, at the foot of the northern wall, of a square capital grooved or fluted on all its faces, and twined with knots.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ Schick, unpublished, 75

³¹⁹ Saulcy, Louis Felicien Joseph Caignart de and Edouard de Warren, *Narrative of a Journey Round the Dead Sea, and in the Bible Lands, in 1850 and 1851*. (London: R. Bentley, 1854), 351-353.

A later survey by Saller and Baghetti in 1949 also noted the existence of a church.³²⁰ Miller agrees with DeSaulcy and describes the church site as:

The mound is ca. 200m to the SSE of the building ruins and covers an area of ca. 3,800 sq. m. On it we found predominantly Byzantine pottery, numerous tesserae, and two roofing tiles, which seem to support de Saulcy's view that the mound represents the remains of a Byzantine church.³²¹

Schick also agrees that this could be a Byzantine church ruin stating that “a number of small fragments of worked shale can be found, which could have come from chancel screen panels.”³²² Unfortunately, there is no dating evidence for the structure or proof that it is a



Ruins at Tedun, Figure 21, photo courtesy Robert Schick

³²⁰ Michel, *Les Eglises d'Epoque Byzantine Et Umayyade De Jordanie (Provinces d'Arabie Et De Palestine) Ve-VIIIe Siecle : Typologie Architecturale Et Amenagements Liturgiques (Avec Catalogue Des Monuments)*, 422

³²¹ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 51

³²² Schick, unpublished, 105

church. Miller collected surface pottery dating from the Middle Bronze Age to Early Islamic, of which the Iron Age and Late Byzantine periods (sixth to early seventh centuries) were best represented.³²³ The large number of Late Byzantine sherds perhaps suggests a higher level of occupation at this time. Canova did not report finding any tombstones for this area.

Another intriguing site is Shihan, north of Areopolis (figure 22). Miller visited the site but could not find evidence of a church. Miller describes it as:

The main Jebel Shihan ruin consists of a large building complex on the southeast side of the summit with wall lines extending westward to form enclosures or courtyards. . . The ancient wall lines can be traced only partially today because of modern building activities on the site. Specifically the western and southern walls of the building measure 44m and 52.7m respectively; the eastern and northern walls are ca.47 and 45 respectively. (These are approximations since the northeast corner is not clearly defined). The north and south walls are parallel; but the east and west walls not entirely so. . . There are some column fragments but none *in situ*. A room in the northeast quadrant of the building measures ca. 7 x 20m, and one in the southeast quadrant ca. 8x8m. We observed nothing that could be taken for an ‘apse of a small church’ (reported by Bliss), unless the projection which we interpreted as an entrance structure could have been an apse.³²⁴

The author visited the site in 2006 with Dr. Robert Schick who thought that the structure at Khirbet Shihan, combined with the loose *tesserae* at the site, could suggest a Byzantine church. Again though, the site has been neither excavated nor dated



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³²⁴ ij

stratigraphically. Miller did identify pottery sherds dated from the Iron Age to as late as the Ottoman period, which would suggest that the site witnessed almost continuous occupation.³²⁵

A site near Tedun and Jebel Shihan called “al den wa-al-Baradan” is also a possible church (figure 23).³²⁶ In 1994, due to rampant robbing of the site, the Jordanian Department



Ruins at al den wa-al-Baradan, Figure 23
photo courtesy Robert Schick

of Antiquities conducted a four-day salvage operation which confirmed evidence of a Byzantine church. Unfortunately, nothing has been published regarding the date of the church. Miller collected surface sherds dating from Nabataean times to the modern era, including Late Byzantine, and eight tesserae.³²⁷ Miller describes the church ruins: “On the east side and partially covered by the recent structure is a long room with an apsidal east end. The apsidal shape, along

with tesserae collected in this area, suggests the remains of a monastery or church.”³²⁸ In this instance, though the site has been excavated, it remains unpublished, so once again the dating

³²⁵ *ibid.*, 31

³²⁶ Michel, *Les Eglises d'Epoque Byzantine Et Umayyade De Jordanie (Provinces d'Arabie Et De Palestine) Ve-VIIIe Siecle : Typologie Architecturale Et Amenagements Liturgiques (Avec Catalogue Des Monuments)*, 139

³²⁷ Miller, *Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau*, 43

³²⁸ *ibid.*, 44

of this site can only be guessed at. However, just as with Shihan, and Tedun, many surface artifacts dated to the Late Byzantine era.

This evidence, combined with the lack of bishops on the plateau until the mid-fifth century and analysis of dated Christian tombstones from various sites on the plateau, suggests that Christianity did not make any significant inroads on the Kerak Plateau until the sixth century.

Chapter VII Conclusion

Christianity was slow to make significant inroads to the Kerak Plateau until the sixth century for many reasons. Its geographical isolation and thriving polytheistic community acted as a deterrent for Christianity. Archaeological and literary sources provide several lines of evidence for this, including a lack of churches before the sixth century and a lack of bishops before the fifth century. Out of a corpus of 135 dated Christian tombstones from the Kerak Plateau, seventy-four percent are dated from the mid-sixth to mid-seventh centuries, which fall in line with dated churches in the area. In addition there is both literary and archaeological evidence for polytheistic practices being tenacious. In the fourth century Areopolis, a main city on the plateau, rioted at the closure of its temples. Eusebius lists the city in his *Onomasticon* as a specifically pagan area. At the legionary fortress of el-Lejjun, there is evidence that cultic practice involving the legionary standards continued until the sixth century. In addition to this evidence, there is also proof that though the Roman government had switched its support to Christianity, it could not enforce its laws against polytheism. Two hundred years after Constantine converted to Christianity, emperors were still issuing edicts against polytheism. Would these edicts have been effectively enforced on an isolated plateau if they were not being enforced in major cities of the empire?

Christianity was present in the fourth century in Arabia in areas surrounding the plateau, yet hardly any evidence points to a strong presence on the plateau until the sixth century. Why? Geographically, the plateau is unique and isolated. Large canyons guard the north and south borders. To the west, a rugged landscape drops unexpectedly to the Dead

Sea, and to the east the desert provides a stark barrier. Ease of travel was important when spreading ideas in the ancient world. Major trade routes in the East no longer involved the plateau. This geographic phenomenon would have provided a deterrent to Christians accessing the plateau when they could merely go around. The sanctuary of Lot and the ancient city of Zoora, which attest to an earlier Christian presence, are just off of the Wadi Hasa. The Wadi Hasa was a deterrent for ease of travel. Furthermore, pilgrimage routes such as through Egeria skirted around the Dead Sea and only went into Arabia as far as Mount Nebo. Geographically, most of the holy sites were to the west of the Dead Sea and to the north. There simply was not enough impetus to travel across the huge canyons of the Wadi Mujib or Wadi Hasa. In addition the eastern desert and the western Dead Sea escarpment flanking the plateau were all but impassable. It appears that for the Kerak Plateau, location is indeed everything.

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