Village churches and donors at the end of Antiquity

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In this article, I will review the last sizeable corpus of epigraphy from Antiquity, the mosaic inscriptions of churches in the provinces of Arabia and the three Palestines. When elsewhere in the Byzantine Empire, the inscriptional habit was in serious decline,[1] it remained remarkably strong here. I will look at the nature of the society that produced these inscriptions and the identity of the people responsible for their creation. Although there is a great deal of continuity with previous centuries, there are some interesting changes as well. They are noticeable in the content of the inscriptions themselves, including the titles and ranks of donors,[2] but become all the more apparent when the larger context of these inscriptions is taken into account. Most notably, by the end of Antiquity, rural contexts produced by far the largest number of inscriptions and, in addition, not only members of the rich landowning elite still made use of 'official' forms of epigraphy, merchants, traders, wealthy farmers and soldiers had adopted the custom as well. I would argue that this is part of a broader phenomenon that started already in the fourth century, in which settlements are the results of active interventions of broader levels within society, one that is noticeable over larger areas of the Eastern Mediterranean, and has not only an epigraphic but also an architectural expression.[3] It comes to its full conclusion only over the course of the sixth century and is then cut short in most provinces, but continues under islamic rule in the provinces of Arabia and the three Palestines. Consequently, this talk is about regions that from the middle of the seventh century onwards fell outside of the borders of the Byzantine Empire, yet this does not

[1] Toth in this volume.

[2] The content of dedicatory inscriptions in these provinces has not been given proper attention either.

[3] For another aspect of this evolution see Jacobs forthcoming

mean that the epigraphy we find here is no longer Byzantine. As John Haldon phrased it: "where does one 'society' end and another begin? … There is a tendency to assume that political divisions also represent social divisions ... As long as they remained Christian, were north Syrian peasants in the 7th and 8th c. not, in one sense, part of the same society as their (Byzantine) Anatolian neighbours?".[4]

The Church at Kissufim

In 1977 the ruins of a church were discovered in a field near the village of Khirbet Kissufim, about 15 km south of Gaza. The eastern section of this moderately sized basilica, including the apse and its mosaics were completely destroyed by a building of the early twentieth century.[5] Its other walls had been robbed away, but the mosaics in the northern aisle and the smaller panels in between the northern row of columns were preserved, together with a 90 cm strip along the entrance, containing the largest dedicatory inscription (Fig. 1).

A panel depicting two women is by far the most famous of the remaining mosaic carpet. It regularly turns up in publications on mosaics in the Near East, though often without any contextualisation (Fig. 2).[6] Both women are depicted frontally, in a frozen pose. They are elegantly attired and richly embellished with jewellery, including earrings, bracelets, a diadem and a necklace. The younger woman is strewing coins, in an exceptionally prominent gesture reminiscent of the *liberalitas* shown on consular diptychs. The second woman, who sometimes is neglected in discussion of this mosaic panel, is of a more advanced age. She is

[4] Haldon, Social Transformation 611-12.

[5] Cohen, Kissufim 254-56 for a report of the original discovery; Cohen 1993.

[6] E.g., Israeli and Mevorah, *Cradle of Christianity* 86-87, described as 'Part of the mosaic pavement from the church at Kissufim, depicting 'Calliora' and 'The Lady of Silthous' donating sixteen gold coins and a chicken'.

holding a platter in both hands with on it an unidentified creature, probably a bird of some kind. A Greek inscription, ΚΑΛΗ WPA Η ΚΥΡΑ CΙΛΘΟΥC, is added to the light background above the two figures. There has been quite some discussion about the exact meaning of the inscription, with two camps, one interpreting 'Kali Ora' as a nominative form and a name; the other as a dative form that must be translated as meaning a greeting, that is, 'in good time'.[7] So the inscription would be 'In good time (or on this happy occasion), the Lady Silthous'. The second woman might be a servant or a family member – her identity remains unclear.

This panel is one of three carrying epigraphic vignettes. The second one is located in the intercolumniation to the east, showing a man leading a camel laden with Gaza amphorae and baskets and accompanied by the word *Orbikon*. The exact meaning of this label again is contested, but, based on other parallel depictions, it is very likely a personal name.[8] The third vignette accompanies the hunting scene of a horseman subduing a leopard, in the elongated mosaic carpet in the northern aisle. This short text, *ergon Alexandrou*, has been interpreted in three different ways.[9] It has been suggested that this was a scene depicting Alexander the Great, that the rider was intended as a portrait of a benefactor of the church at leisure, or, that this simply was the artist's signature.[10] The two dedicatory inscriptions of the church can be

[7] E.g., Cohen (1979, 22; 1993, 279), Israeli and Mevorah (2000, 86-87) and Habas (2009a, 83) consider Kaliora to be a name – though note that Habas confuses her with Silthous; Ovadiah and Mucznik (1983, 275-276) argue for the second option.

[8] Ovadiah and Mucznik (1983, 276. This is contested by Di Segni 2004, 48, note 30.

[9] Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, 273-75.

[10] Cohen 1977 proposes that the rider depicts Alexander the Great. The mosaic is cited as a late example of Alexander depictions in Foerster 1985, 133 and Cohen 2010, 94 as well. Ovadiah and Mucznik (1983, 274) argue that it was an artist's signature and offer a range of parallels. For further mosaicists' inscriptions, see Hunt 1994, 121-23; Habas 2009a, 78; Hachlili 2009, 244-49.

found near the entrance and in the final space to the west of the nave. The first relates that the mosaic was composed at the time of the bishop Misael and the monk Theodorus, followed by the date, that is, 4 August 576. Also mentioned is Saint Elias, after whom the church is named. The second one states that the excellent work was completed in the days of the monk and deacon Father Theodorus on 4 July 578, two years later.[11] Finally, in the northern aisle a tomb was exposed, which was accompanied by a mosaic inscription now partially destroyed. One can infer from it that here was buried the priest Zonainos, and also, perhaps, a woman named Maris.[12]

Continuity and change

The iconographic representations of the Lady Silthous and her companion as donors as well as the identifying labels are building on a tradition that became popular in the region in the second quarter of the sixth century and that would continue into the Umayyad period.[13] An early example can be found in the Church of Saints Cosmas and Damianus at Gerasa, dated to 533. In the centre of the panel an inscription in a *tabula ansata* clarifies the dedication of the church to the martyrs Cosmas and Damianus and refers to Bishop Paul and the founder Theodore. On both sides of the inscription a pair of cypress (?) trees frame a frontally depicted and named donor. Theodore the *paramonarius* or sacristan, holding a smoking censer, is present on the left. On the right is his wife, Georgia, in *orans* pose.[14] Likewise, the inhabited vine scrolls on the early seventh-century mosaics in the presbytery of the church of

[11] Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, 273.

[12] Cohen 1993, 281.

[13] Habas 2009a for an overview; Hachlili 2009, 238-240.

[14] Habas 2009a, 77, fig. 4; Hachlili 2009, 239.

Elias, Maria and Soreg at Gerasa include three frontal portraits of donors.[15] In some cases, donors are not accompanied by explicit name labels, but they can still be distinguished from genre scenes based on their frontal stance, clothing and individual features.

Similarly, the form and content of the longer dedicatory inscriptions undergo few changes. Until the end of the tradition in the eight century, the text refers to the overseers and donors (both lay and clerical) responsible for the building and decoration of the church, the date, and a blessing or memorial dedication to the dead.[16] The preferred location for these longer dedicatory inscriptions, generally placed within a *tabula ansata*, was a special panel just in front of the liturgical space. In the centre of the nave, in between pillars or near a door shorter additional texts could be found.[17] The example of a double-church at Khilda in the region of Philadelphia-Amman confirms this nicely. The architecture of the seventh-century complex is quite unusual, consisting of two parallel halls separated by a row of pillars and preceded by an atrium. The mosaic floor of the north hall featured two inscriptions (Fig. 3).[18] The most important dedicatory inscription, commemorating the completion of the mosaic in a tabula ansata dated to the year 750 of the Pompeian era, or AD 687 was located just in front of the apse.[19] The second, votive inscription, was part of a mosaic panel just behind the

[15] Habas 2009a, 76; Hachlili 2009, 239, fig. VI-16.

[16] Baumann 1999, 292-302.

[17] Baumann 1999, 289-91; Haensch 2006, 50; Habas 2009a, 74. For the tabula ansata, see Leatherbury forthcoming.

[18] Najjir and Sa'id 1994.

[19] (cross) *At the time of the most pious and most holy Bishop George, was renovated and terminated the whole work of the holy place by care of George (son) of John, and of the priest John and of all (the members of) their families, in the year 750* (cross). Najjir and Sa'id 1994, 547.

entrance into the hall.[20] The mosaics of the south hall are badly preserved, but also here a medallion with a votive inscription was present, this time in the centre of the space.[21]

It is only when we look at the wider context of the buildings in which these inscriptions appear, that differences with earlier centuries become apparent. The region of Gaza, in which Kisssifum was located, is known to have flourished in the sixth century AD. The Madaba map for instance, on which the region is represented by a group of small settlements, confirms that the region between Gaza and Beersheba was densely inhabited. Kissufim was not an urban site though. It was a village, as there were so many in the provinces of Arabia and the three Palestines. At the end of the Byzantine period, the countryside of these provinces flourished like never before. Church remains are plentiful,[22] and although churches were founded continuously between the fourth and the eighth century, construction reached a peak only in the second half of the sixth century and continued into the Umayyad period. In 1999, Leah Di Segni calculated how many buildings were constructed per year from the reign of Constantine onwards. High rates of construction ('Annual Index') were reached during the reign of Justinian, with a dip under Justin II and Tiberius. Maurice again rated a healthy Annual Index and a new peak, even higher than that under Justinian, was reached under Phocas. The amount of construction during the disrupted reign of Heraclius was already a lot smaller and diminished further under Umayyad rule.[23] Not only was there

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[20] (cross) *For the pardon of the sins of John the priest* (cross); (cross) *O Lord God of saint Varus have mercy of Stephan and of Samuel […]. Amen* (cross). Najjir and Sa'id 1994, 552.

[21] (cross) *O Lord God of Saint Varus remember your servant John the priest and George son of John and all (the members) of his house*. Najjir and Sa'id 1994, 553.

[22] Cohen 1977, 256 for the region immediately around Kissufim. For churches built in the broader region, see Michel 2001.

[23] Di Segni 1999, 158-78. The construction rates between the reign of Anastasius and the Abbasids is presented in graph form in Walmsley 2005, 517 fig. 5; 2007a, 338 fig. 14.

thus an increase in building activity under Maurice, Phocas and Heraclius, but also much of this growth was happening in rural contexts, in settlements designated as 'villages' and monasteries. A shift from urban to rural sites already in the second half of the sixth century but certainly by the end of the sixth and in the seventh century is visible from north to south in the provinces of Arabia and the three Palestines.[24] The increase in churches in villages of the Hauran and Negev for instance seems to attest to a parallel growth of the entire settlement, as the buildings are evenly spread on the settlement plan.[25] These churches sometimes had a very rich epigraphic record. In the North Church at Sobota, for instance, a building inscription dated the addition of a chapel to the south to the year 607.[26] The church also contained 14 epitaphs, commemorating 18 deceased between 505 and 679, 9 of which post-dated the Arab conquest, 2 building inscriptions and some further fragments.[27] The village's south church preserved an inscription commemorating a new paving of the church under Bishop George and the Archdeacon and *economus* Peter in the year 640.[28]

Not only the number of village churches was increasing rapidly, also monasteries expanded around the second half of the sixth century and continued to profit from generous patronage during the seventh century and beyond.[29] They were built in the environs of major centres, or, more often, in proximity of large and medium sized rural settlements.[30] In

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[24] Di Segni 1999, 165; Hirschfeld 1999; Hamarneh 2003, 55-62; Walmsley 2005, 517; 2007a, 337-339; Hamarneh 2010 with examples.

[25] Walmsley 2005, 517 for Khirbet el-Samra. A similar even spread is noticeable in almost every village.

[26] Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982, 97-98.

[27] Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982, 93-96.

[28] Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982, 103.

[29] There is no evidence whatsoever that the prosperity of the countryside was negatively impacted by the Islamic conquest (Walmsley 2005, 511).

[30] Hamarneh 2012, 285-86; 2014, 124.

Hamarneh's list of monastic structures in Arabia and the three Palestine provinces published in 2012, there are fifty-three monasteries that were either newly built or that underwent an extension that was attested by a new inscription.[31] One of these could not be assigned a date, one has been dated to the fifth century, thirty-two are assigned to the sixth and another nineteen to the seventh. Three inscriptions testify to re-buildings and renovation as late as the eight century.

Together with the growing size of villages and the amount of village churches, the ecclesiastical positions in the countryside gained importance. Many of the inscriptions in the regions under discussion, in urban churches, village churches and monasteries, refer to the bishop of the urban diocese the church was located in. This suggests that building policy was if not guided then at least sanctioned by the bishop. In the sixth century there is little evidence for initiatives unconnected to the urban centre or initiatives of sole monastic communities.[32] However, in the seventh century, more reference is being made to the *ufficium* of chore bishop and *periodeutes*. There are already several references to both functionaries in the Petra papyri, and they start appearing in dated inscriptions from around the year 600 onwards.[33] Moreover, the fact that some of the larger villages were given baptisteries in the seventh century, and especially after 635, suggests that they were becoming more religiously autonomous.[34]

Although archaeological research of the last ten years had revealed more evidence to support continuity and prosperity in the urban centres of the provinces of Arabia and the three Palaestines as well, by the late sixth century most of the cities seem to have been

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[31] Hamarneh 2012, 291-93.

[32] Hamarneh 1996: 60-62; 2012, 277.

[33] Hamarneh 2010, 65.

[34] Hamarneh 2010, 65 lists baptisteries at Umm ar-Rasas, Hayyan al-Mushayrif, Rihab, Khirbat al-MaqatI', Dhiban, Ma'm, ad-Dayr and Khirbat Hujayjah.

contracting.[35] This is not the place to discuss the causes for this shift.[36] Suffice to say that in urban contexts, building activity generally had reached its peak already in the first half of the sixth century, with a few exceptions. Urban inscriptions datable to later decades are limited to the following (from north to south): the dedicatory inscription of the Church of Genesius in Gerasa, dated to 611; three texts at Madaba, where an inscription in the cathedral could be dated to 603, one in the Church of the Prophet Elijah to 607/608 and that in the Church of Mary probably to 662; a text remembering the restoration of a church by Modestus at Jerusalem in c. 630 and the restoration of churches at Dominus Flevit around 675, and, finally, the Church of Artemisios in Gaza, dated to 606.[37] All other building inscriptions in Di Segni's list were discovered in non-urban contexts. The urban-rural divide in the seventh century therefore is striking. Apparently the villages of this period had inhabitants that still saw a need to use epigraphy in a way that city-dwellers no longer did.

Donors and their social status

The 'Lady Silthous' has been called an aristocratic lady.[38] This characterisation assumingly is based on the combination of the title *kyra*, the action of distributing coins, and, her wealthy attire. Based on her action of strewing coins, it has even been suggested that she donated the finances for the entire mosaic pavement of the church.[39] Likewise, it has been suggested that

[35] Walmsley 2007a; 2007b, 34-40; Avni 2014, Chapter 2 presents four case-studies in detail.

[36] Walmsley 2005, 518-20.

[37] Di Segni 1999, 176-178. In addition, the Church of the Theotokos which was erected in Madaba in AD 767.

[38] For instance, Di Segni 2004, 47-48 note 30 calls her 'a gentlewoman' and refers to her as belonging to an 'aristocratic family'.

[39] Ovadiah and Mucznik 1983, 275.

the Alexander mentioned in the north aisle was a nobleman, since he was depicted hunting.[40] More generally, it is indeed widely assumed that the churches in Arabia and the three Palestines were the results of the patronage of wealthy landowners, commonly referred to as 'members of the elite' or 'aristocrats'. The interference of such landowners in the villages of the eastern Mediterranean is supported by literary evidence and, in the regions under discussion, on the papyri from Petra that recorded how a landowning family living in Petra and Gaza leased out its land assets in numerous villages on a contractual basis.[41] Some epigraphic texts confirm that members of the rich landowning elite were responsible for part of the rural churches and contributed to their decoration.[42] However, I would like to stress that, in addition to the 'aristocratic' landowning elite, also well-off farmers and traders contributed in more or less extensive ways, leading them as well to be eternalised in mosaic portraits and inscriptions.[43]

The donor portraits themselves, when scrutinised further, are less informative than some authors would like them to be. First of all, the mounted hunter at Kissifum is one of several hunting scenes appearing on sixth-century mosaic pavements in the wider region.[44] Another panel in the north aisle of the Elias church in fact shows another hunter, this time on foot, battling a brown bear. This hunter does not have an accompanying inscription. As

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[40] Di Segni 2004, 47-48, note 30 refers to the hunter as 'Lord Alexander'.

[41] Gatier 2005, 113. For Petra, see Fiema 2002, 226. Papyrological evidence from Egypt likewise suggests increased interaction between city and village, for instance with villagers leasing land from urban residents who owned land in the village and with villagers supplying the cities with agricultural products through local markets and obtaining short-term financing (Bagnall 2005, 556). Hamarneh 2010, 62 with further pertinent literary passages and references.

[42] Hamarneh 2010; 62; forthcoming.

[43] Hirschfeld 1999, 64 comes to a similar conclusion. Pp. 64-67 discusses the villagers' autonomy.

[44] Hachlili 2009, 162-66, Table VII.3.

mentioned, the vignette added above the scene of the mounted hunter may very likely be the mosaicist's signature. Second, the female donors appearing in the mosaics of the Roman Near East typically look their best,[45] but equating jewellery with elite status may not be very sound. It is worth pointing out that on the mosaics of North-Africa peasants and servants are wearing tailored, colourful clothes and are depicted with jewellery from the fourth century onwards. Based on this kind of iconographic and also archaeological evidence, Leslie Dossey has argued for a 'late antique consumer revolution', stressing that a diverse variety of goods became available to well-off farmers as well.[46]

The assumption that donors of mosaics had to be very rich furthermore appears to have been based on another, equally untenable assumption that they donated large stretches of mosaic. This, however, often was not the case. There is certainly no reason to assume that Silthous paid for the entire mosaic of the St. Elias Church at Kissufim. Her panel was only a small part of the entire mosaic carpet, occupying less than 5 percent of the total floor space. In addition, it was located in a rather inconvenient position in between piers, not in front of the presbytery. The adjoining panel depicting Orbikon and his camel is of equal size and so must have been many other panels now lost. Based on the time difference in the two dedicatory inscriptions preserved in the St. Elias Church, these panels belonged to the later additions to the building. Moreover, they were unconnected to the pavement in the north aisle, where there is a tomb with decoration and inscription, again seemingly unconnected to anything else in the mosaic.

It may be useful to stop to think how much a donor would have actually spent on a mosaic pavement. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to establish direct links between the size and elaboration of mosaic panels and monetary donations though, since the panel that

[45] Further examples in Hunt 1994, 120; Habas 2009a; Hachlili 2009, 238-39.

[46] Dossey 2010, Chapter 3.

mentions a name may or may not represent their actual extent.[47] Suffice to say that, if the Lady Silthous and/or her companion had donated only the amount needed to create their own panel, they would not have spent an enormous amount of money. According to the information gathered by Baumann in his *Spätantike Stifter im Heiligen Land*, a smaller surface of mosaic would have costed between 0,25 and three solidi.[48] It would therefore seem that such mosaic panels, and probably also commemoration in the form of a depiction, accompanied by name, and short text, was within the reach of broader layers of society, not just 'aristocrats'.

This is confirmed by a different category of church donations on which one could be commemorated for all eternity: that of church silver. The items belonging to the treasure of Kaper Koraon were donated to the village on the plain of Chalcis, to its Church of St. Sergios, between 540 and 640 or somewhat later.[49] As calculated by Marlia Mango, most items in the reconstructed Kaper Karaon treasure, though impressive to look at, had only a low monetary value as the silver was worked very thin.[50] The most expensive object, the Antioch cross revetment, weighed eighteen pounds, good for seventy-two solidi (no. 35). However, Mango also calculated prices of only ca. half a solidus for a silver spoon (no. 19) to ca. four solidi for a chalice (no. 57-59),[51] more or less comparable to the estimated costs of a smaller mosaic panel.

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[47] Baumann 1999, 303-307; Haensch 2006, 56. Donceel-Voûte (1988, 471-472) has a more optimistic opinion on the matter.

[48] Baumann 1999, 303-07.

[49] The treasure is presented and discussed in Mundell Mango 1986.

[50] Mundell Mango 1986, 11. Mundell Mango 1992 on the monetary value of silver objects and furnishing from the entire Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire.

[51] Mundell Mango 1986, 11-13.

The labels accompanying portraits in mosaic, when they are present, do not clarify the social position of donors, as they are mostly limited to the donor's name, or to rather uninformative salutations such as *kyra*. In addition, it should also be mentioned that, by the later sixth century, the addition of ranks to names should be treated carefully, as ranks that had once been reserved for the higher echelons had become applicable to much broader levels of society. Thus an Egyptian baker upon his retirement was granted the rank of *clarissimus*.[52]

Since most of the items of the Kaper Koraon treasure were inscribed, about 50 individuals making at least one donation of silver are known, only four of which had a title added to their name.[53] As opposed to the slightly earlier Sion treasure, more than a third of which was donated to an important and upcoming pilgrimage centre by a bishop Eutychianos, bishops play a minor role in donations in the village of Kaper Karaon.[54] Only one donor was an archbishop. The *cursus honorum* of a certain Megas can be followed on several of the objects of the treasure (with titles as 'most glorious ex-consul' and 'patrician'). A third donor with titles was a tribune and *argyroprates*. The fourth was probably a *magistrianos*, working under the Master of Office as an *agens in rebus*. All other donors did not carry titles. As they did have their family relationships mentioned in the texts on the objects, it has been possible to reconstruct that most of them came from four or five families, who each for some three

[52] Ševčenko 1992, 47, discussing the *clarissimus* rank of a donor of a silver chalice in the Sion treasure (Ševčenko 1992, inscr. no. 3). Haensch 2006, 52 as well comments on the devaluation of the rank.

[53] Mundell Mango 1986, 8-11.

[54] Bishop Eutychianos donated about one third of the treasure. Among the other donors, there were two and possibly three more bishops, one priest, two deacons and one readers as well as secular members of the society, one of which bore the title of *lamprotata*. A second lay donor may have been a *clarissimus*. See Boyd 1992, 8-14 and Appendix 1; Ševčenko 1992, 46-49, Appendix for the donors of the Sion treasure.

generations donated to the church. They may very well have been middle class merchants or artisans.[55]

The longer dedicatory inscriptions in church naves do not always incorporate titles and when they do, they refer to individuals of all kinds and ranks. In addition, there are a few references to communal donations of local communities, including in the Church of St. Theodore of Suf in the second half of the sixth century and the Church of Kaloa in 622-23.[56] The inscription in front of the presbytery of the church of St. George at Khirbat al-Samra was a prayer for the souls and safety of the entire village 'from the little one to the big one from now forever'.[57] Several such attestations to communal (urban) and village enterprises exist.[58] In addition, there is one very explicit reference to a merchant in an inscription from the region, dating to the year 776. In a side room to the south of the basilica in the monastic complex of Mar Liyas in the diocese of Pella, the text mentioned Esion, priest and abbot, as well as the benefaction of John the pulse merchant and his family. However, another indication of merchants contributing their share is provided by the panel next to the Lady Silthous. Orbikon can be taken as a representative of a very lucrative profession in the sixth and seventh century, that of the owner of a camel caravan, or, more specifically, wine trader. The presence of wealthy wine merchants in Kissufum would not have been surprising,

[55] Mundell Mango 1986, 10. Similarly, Fourlas in a forthcoming article discusses a silver hoard currently at Karlsruhe, possibly discovered in the Biqā valley in Lebanon, that included a censer and a spoon donated to an unknown sanctuary by Frankish soldiers in the Roman East.

[56] Hamarneh 2010, 64 with further references. Haensch 2006, 53-54, Di Segni 2006, 579-80; Hamarneh 2012, 280 discuss the phenomenon of communal donations more in general.

[57] Habas 2009a, 74.

[58] Di Segni 1995; Baumann 1999, 296, 301.

considering that the village was located only five kilometre off the road that connected the wine-producing centres of Elousa and Birsama to the export port at Gaza.[59]

Eight examples of such pavements with camel drivers are known, all of them individual and realistic, wearing contemporary clothes and mostly accompanied by identification labels.[60] One dates to the fifth century, six to the sixth, with most of them assigned to the second half of the century, and one large mosaic panel from the Church of St. George at Deir el-'Adas in Syria is as late as 722 (Fig. 4).[61] The mosaic is remarkable as it is positioned at the east end of the nave in front of the bema, in an extremely prominent position where we would normally expect the main dedicatory inscription. It depicts the camel caravan leader Mouchasos, who is identified by the inscription, and his caravan of four camels, laden with goods and jars. Such mosaic panels were linked with real-life caravan camels transporting goods and people in the desert margin, and therefore different from genre scenes appearing in mosaic pavements that were derived from pattern books.[62] The reason for the appearance of individual camel drivers in mosaics is therefore in all likelihood because they were donors to the church.[63]

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[59] McCormick 2012, pp.

[60] Habas 2009b; Hachlili 2009, 172-73.

[61] For the mosaic in the Church of St. George, see Balty 1977, 148-49; Donceel-Voûte 1988, 48, 53-54, Figs. 20-23, 451; Dunbabin 1999,184-185, Fig. 199.

[62] Habas 2009b for a description of all examples and a discussion of camel caravans in contemporary society and economy.

[63] Baumann (1999, 226-32), Donceel-Voûte (1988, 54), Dunbabin (1999, 184-85) and Habas (2009a, 86; 2009b, 59) have all argued that the traders/camel-owners were perceived as wealthy men of high status, potential donors to the church.

Finally, the individuals paying for the mosaic pavements wanted the associated inscriptions to be read and their deed to be recognised by others.[64] This is already suggested by the fact that lay and ecclesiastical patrons are often represented on floor mosaics in early Christian urban and village churches, where they would be read by members of the congregation on a regular basis, but the benefactors of monasteries are rarely mentioned.[65] Furthermore, it can be assumed that the people who sponsored these establishments also intended to make use of them, hence that they either lived permanently in the settlement or that they had a special tie to the settlement and visited more or less regularly. If we assume that the cities were contracting by the later sixth century, it would certainly not be inconceivable that members of the rich landowning elite had taken up permanent residence in the countryside. However, recognising their permanent or temporary rural residences has so far proved impossible.[66] There is very little evidence for the presence of an aristocracy in the villages of the Roman Near East, or for any other profession besides farmer for that matter. Most of the houses were used for lodging a family and as the centre of agricultural exploitation. Other functions that we know of from texts or papyri - and even in these sources the array of professions is limited -,[67] cannot be recognized in the architecture of the

[64] Baumann 1999, 291.

[65] Brenk 2004, 453. That is, until the seventh century, when they seem to become more numerous.

[66] Recognising elite housing in the second half of the sixth century overall is very difficult (Uytterhoeven in preparation)

[67] Bagnall's analysis of village occupation mentioned in Egyptian papyri of the sixth and seventh centuries even led to rather disappointing results, with no more than the expected array of agriculturists, builders, a baker and so on (Bagnall 2005).

settlement.[68] That is not to say that the houses attested were not well built or comfortable, at the moment it is simply impossible to recognise a social stratigraphy in their architecture.

Conclusions

The usage of dedicatory inscriptions is considered to have been an urban phenomenon. In Roman and Late Roman times, the quantity of inscriptions discovered in the countryside is much smaller than that in cities. Considering that the number of inscriptions in cities decreases drastically by the end of the sixth century, including in the cities of Arabia and the three Palestines, their increase in rural villages and monasteries is remarkable. Though an easy explanation for the phenomenon would be that the elite responsible for these texts in previous centuries had shifted to the countryside, their presence is very difficult to attest at the moment. Moreover, as has been argued above, the people responsible for the flourishing of these settlements as well as for the continued investments in church decoration and epigraphy cannot simply be equated with an upper class. It would seem that at least part of the donations

[68] At Chorazin in Galilee, the larger houses of the settlement surrounded the synagogue, with more modest houses a bit further away. They were constructed in the fourth century, but continued in use until the eighth (Hirschfeld 1999, 42). Most village settlements mentioned by Hirschfeld were composed of similar residences. At Sobota in the Negev the high-quality architecture of the c. 170 houses identified generally suggest equality, with houses being around 360 square meters, housing some 12 to 13 individuals. Only one house, designated as House 2, stands out as it covered a ground surface of 770 square meters, with 14 rooms surrounding the spacious courtyard, because it was physically connected to building no. 1 which seemed to have served some communal function and possibly to the nearby wine-press as well. As at Chorazin, it was located in the immediate vicinity of a cult building, in this case the North Church (Hirschfeld 2003, 403-7). Similarly, the stone-built sixth-century houses in the villages in North Syria all were of more or less the same dimensions and quality (Tate 1992, 95-96; Gatier 2005, 111).

towards affluent church construction and decoration can be connected to well-off merchants, traders, farmers and soldiers and their families, making use of the same means of expressions as their rich elite predecessors in urban contexts of the sixth century. They had their names and faces immortalised in mosaic cubes in similar fashions. By the time we arrive in the eight century, a pulse merchant has his profession added to the text commemorating his donation, whereas a camel driver was able to have his name, portrait and occupation eternalised in the most prominent location in a church building.

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