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The Byzantine Veneration Place "Rock of Etham" in the Context of other Cave Churches

Erasmus Gaß / Boaz Zissu

Abstract: A few years ago an interesting structure located at the imposing cliff of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* in the Soreq Valley (east of modern Beth-Shemesh) was explored. The complex consists of a large karstic cave with remains of a church inside and vestiges of buildings, stairways, paths and cisterns in the surroundings of the cave. As proved by the extant textual sources, the complex at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* can be identified with the Sampso-Monastery mentioned by Johannes Moschos in his "Pratum Spirituale". Most likely, this cave was venerated during the Byzantine period as the hiding place of Samson at Etham, according to Judg 15:8–13. At the very least, this complex can be interpreted as a hermitage for some monks. In light of its layout, however, it may also be compared to monasteries of the "cliff coenobium" type, though this type was formerly thought to have been limited to the Judean Desert. In order to properly understand the complex in *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*, therefore, the parallels to other cave monasteries must be discussed.

1. The Biblical "Rock of Etham" at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*

The biblical "Rock of Etham" (*Selaʿ ʿĒṭām*) appears only in the Samson narrative and has nothing in common with either the Judean Etham south of Jerusalem which, according to 2 Chr 11:6, was fortified by Rehoboam,[1] or with a Simeonite Etham which, according to 1 Chr 4:32, was located at the edge of the northern Negev. The idiomatic expression "Rock of Etham" in Judg 15:8,11 most probably refers to a certain rock formation at a place called Etham. Therefore, the toponym "Rock of Etham" should be distinguished from other places with the name "Etham".

In Judg 15:8,11, there is a peculiar construct chain, which reads: *sᵉʿīp selaʿ ʿĒṭām*. The word *sᵉʿīp* is difficult to explain.[2] According to the preposition *bᵉ*, in Judg 15:8, the word *sᵉʿīp* might describe a room which is connected to a cliff. In Isa 2:21, the plural expression *sᵉʿīpê hasselāʿīm* stands in parallelism to *niqrōt haṣṣūrīm* ("cliffy recess"). Similarly, *sᵉʿīpê hasselāʿīm* could refer to rooms in the cliff. However, the word *sᵉʿīp* could also be connected etymologically with Arabian *šaʿaba* ("split"),[3] so that *sᵉʿīp* could also denote a cleft. All things considered,

[1] The Judean Etham is usually identified with *Ḫirbet el-Ḫōḥ* (1670.1214) near *ʿĒnʿAṭān*, a well that most probably has preserved the biblical name. Cf. to this identification AḤITUV 1995, 381; NELSON 1997, 287; VOS 2003, 453; GASS 2005, 374f.; NA'AMAN 2012, 438.

[2] See the only occurrences in Judg 15:8,11; Isa 2:21; 57:5.

[3] Cf. especially SCHWARZENBACH 1954, 48f.

the mysterious lexeme *s^{e}ʿīp* might be either a "room in a cliff" or a "cleft in a cliff".

According to Judg 15:8–11, Samson and the Judeans descended to the "Rock of Etham", expressed with the verb *YRD*. This phraseology might indicate that one has to step down a countersunk cleft from a higher position. Indeed, Samson first went up the eastern mountains, into which he escaped from the pursuing Philistines, though this ascent is not mentioned in the narrative.[4] Afterwards he descended to the "Rock of Etham". Since the story does not necessarily require a fortified settlement for the hiding place of Samson, a craggy environment would fit the biblical description.[5]

Near the northern Judean Shephelah – which is the stage for the Samson narrative – there is only one distinctive place with cliffs (Figs. 1, 2). This craggy formation is situated at the lower part of the valley of *Nahal Soreq*, near its exit from the Judean Mountains to the Shephelah: *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* (1527.1302) – a vertical rock face in *Wādi Ismaʿīn*, a tributary of *Wādi eṣ-Ṣarār*. The Arabic name *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* cannot be etymologically linked with Samson. According to local tradition, the cave at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is regarded as *Maqām* of the famous *Šēḫ Ismaʿīn*, who once lived there.[6]

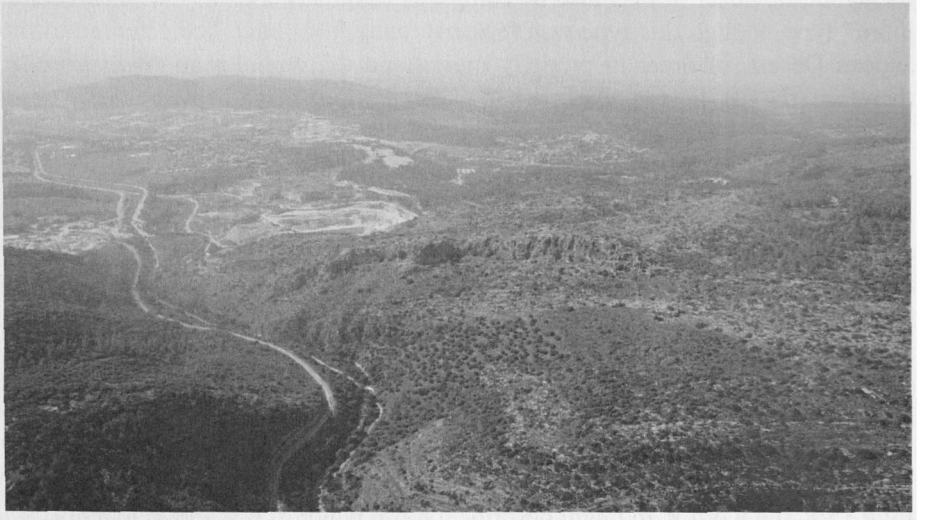

Fig. 1: *Nahal Soreq* with *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*

When looking for the rock of Etham in Samson's home country, *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* would be the best candidate for identification, since it perfectly suits the literary description:

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[4] See NIEMANN 1985, 180f.

[5] See BIRCH 1881, 324.

[6] See CLERMONT-GANNEAU 1896, 220. Maybe the toponym *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* could be linked with the name of the Hasmonean Simon.

1. *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* lies above a steep cliff near a famous torrent and suits the requirements of Euseb's description who mentions a toponym called Etham in his Onomastikon: "*There dwelt Samson »in the Rock of Etham »near the torrent«*"[7]. Obviously the "Rock of Etham" of the Samson narrative has to be looked for near a famous torrent like the *Wādi Ismaʿīn*. The only cliff formations in the region of Samson's activities can be found in the area east of Ierimouth/*Ḫirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304). The large natural (*karstic*) cave at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is the most prominent one in the only cliff above the *Nahal Soreq*. It is especially suited for an identification with the cleft of the "Rock of Etham".
2. The huge natural cave of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* could be entered from above. Thus, one has to descend to the cave of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* like Samson and the Judeans did.
3. This cave could have been used for refuge purposes in antiquity.[8] *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is situated not far from Zorah, so that Samson's own family could have supplied him with food during his stay in the hardly accessible refuge.
4. *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*, which means "birds of prey," suits the requirements of the name Etham perfectly, since there used to be aeries of birds there.[9]
5. At the time of the composition of the Samson narrative – most likely the 7th century BCE[10] – the Shephelah was contested territory between the Philistines and the Judeans. Therefore, the appearance of men from Judah in the story is not surprising.[11]
6. Most activities of Samson are set in the Shephelah near Beth Shemesh.[12] Even Judg 16:3 does not mean that Samson actually climbed the Judean ills. The "hill that is על־פני Hebron" does not indicate a proximity to Hebron since the term על־פני could mean "in front of", "next to" or "in direction to". In the last case, this hill could be near Gaza and not necessarily next to Hebron.[13]
7. The Byzantine identification of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* with the "Rock of Etham" most probably led to the veneration of the cave as the hiding place of Samson and to the building of a monastic complex in and around the cave.
8. *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is called *Meʿārōt Šimšōn* in modern times. This Hebrew name is based on popular belief without scientific explanation. Most

[7] Euseb, *Onom.* 96:5: ἔνθα κατῴκει Σαμψὼν ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ Ἠτὰμ παρὰ τῷ χειμάρρῳ.

[8] See already SCHICK 1887, 144.

[9] See SCHICK 1887, 145.

[10] See GASS 2007, 394–396.

[11] Contrary to NA'AMAN 2012, 438f. who obviously argues on the basis that the Samson narrative should be understood on a pre-monarchic setting. In that case, he is definitively right. No Judeans have been in the Shephelah before the 9th century BCE, see SERGI 2013, 239–241.

[12] See GASS 2005, 383f.

[13] Contrary to NA'AMAN 2012, 438. For the problem see GASS 2005, 23.

probably this is due to the proximity of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* to the main area of Samson's activities. Nevertheless, the modern name supports the identification with the biblical "Rock of Etham" in a similar way.

In sum, the "Rock of Etham" was viewed – at least in Byzantine times – as having been located in the cliffs of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*. Of course, there is no clear evidence that Samson actually fled to this place, since providing historical and geographical data is not the primary purpose of the Samson narrative.

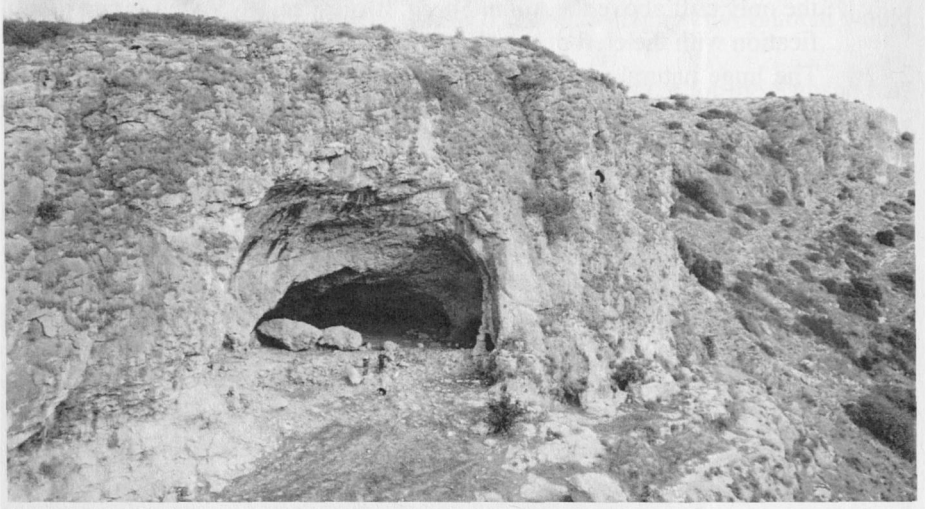

Fig. 2: Cave of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*

2. The Byzantine Monastery Sampso

John Moschos mentions a certain monastery called "Sampso" in his book, "Pratum Spirituale".[14] Unfortunately, the exact distance which could assist in the location of this monastery is missing in the Greek original. Only the Latin translations have some indications for locating the monastery: „*Distabat ab Jerosolymis fere viginti passuum millibus*". Thus, the monastery of Sampso is to be situated in a distance "about" 20 Roman miles away from Jerusalem. However, no direction is given.

As a result of this lacunae, different identifications for the monastery of Sampso have been proposed. But the former suggestions cannot be sustained. Thus, Sampso cannot be identified with the place Sappho/Sampho mentioned by Flavius Josephus.[15] The double transmission of this toponym as Sappho/Sampho can be traced back to phonetic reasons (shift of πφ to μφ) whereas the shift of φ

[14] John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale* CLXX 1–2. See especially PG 87/3 3035; ROUËT DE JOURNEL 1946, 223; WORTLEY 1992, 139; DÉROCHE/BOUCHET 2006, 176f.

[15] Josephus, *Bell.* 2:70; Josephus, *Ant.* 17:290. For this place see especially AVI-YONAH 1976, 92; MÖLLER/SCHMITT 1976, 166f.

to ψ – necessary for an equation with Sampso – cannot be explained.[16] Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that the name Sampso is a mere scribal error for Sapsas, a short form of Sapsaphas,[17] since the monastery Sapsas is mentioned by John Moschos as well.[18] It is a debatable point why one place should be called Sapsas and Sampso by the same author. Moreover, the location of the monastery of Sapsaphas is not in accordance with the above given distance mentioned in the Latin translation. Following this, a new identification will be suggested.

The biblical name Samson is translated Σαμψων by the Septuagint. This optimaly complies with the spelling Sampso of John Moschos. In this respect, the monastery Sampso might be a Samson monastery commemorating the deeds of Samson. The tradition of Samson is closely tied to the northern part of the Shephelah, especially to the environs of Zorah and the nearby *Nahal Soreq*. Therefore, the monastery Sampso might be looked for in exactly this area. Thus, the distance „about 20 Roman miles" given by John Moschos might be applied to the west of Jerusalem. This distance especially suits *Tell er-Rumēle* (1476.1286) – the Biblical Beth Shemesh.[19] Beth Shemesh lies 10 Roman miles away from Eleutheropolis/*Bēt Ǧibrīn* (1402.1128) according to Euseb's Onomastikon,[20] whereas the distance from Eleutheropolis to Jerusalem amounts to 30 Roman miles.[21] One approaches Beth Shemesh via a side road, which is off the main road from Jerusalem to Eleutheropolis. This side road branches off to the northwest at the 11th mile stone[22] and reaches Beth Shemesh after about 8 Roman miles via *Bēt ʿItāb* and *Dēr Abān*. Accordingly, Beth Shemesh perfectly suits the indications given by John Moschos. In 1911, Mackenzie excavated a structure in the south-east part of *Tell er-Rumēle* on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund. The excavator suggested that this structure should be regarded as the temporary abode of the arc of the covenant in Beth Shemesh.[23] In contrast, Abel identified this building with the monastery of Sampso mentioned by John Moschos.[24] Since then, this structure has been interpreted as a Byzantine monastery. However, the entire complex should be interpreted as a fortified Byzantine site, consisting of rows of rooms

[16] ABEL 1936, 539.

[17] ABEL 1932, 251 n.1. But see ROUËT DE JOURNEL 1946, 223 n.1.

[18] *Pratum Spirituale* I.II. See especially PG 87/3 2853; ROUËT DE JOURNEL 1946, 47f.; WORTLEY 1992, 4f.; DÉROCHE/BOUCHET 2006, 27. Cf. already ABEL 1932, 251 n.1.

[19] ABEL 1936, 538–542; WILKINSON 1977, 153.172.

[20] Beth Shemesh is located 10 miles east of Eleutheropolis on the way to Nikopolis according to Euseb, *Onom.* 54:11–13.

[21] See ABEL 1936, 540. Sokchō/Sukkot lies 9 miles away from Eleutheropolis according to Euseb, *Onom.* 156:18, whereas the distance from Sukkot to Jerusalem accounts for 20 miles according to John Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale* 180. Cf. ROUËT DE JOURNEL 1946, 236; WORTLEY 1992, 149; DÉROCHE/BOUCHET 2006, 189.

[22] See THOMSEN 1917, 80.

[23] Cf. MACKENZIE 1911, 141.

[24] Cf. ABEL 1936, 538–542.

arranged around an inner courtyard with an adjacent tower. It was used either as a road-station, a fortified estate, a *villa rustica*, a guard-post, or in some other function. Its exact use remains unclear. Since clear evidence for a religious function is missing,[25] its identification with the monastery of Sampso cannot be sustained.

Admittedly, Beth Shemesh is not the only site in the northern Shephela located about 20 miles distant from Jerusalem. According to Euseb's Onomastikon, there are several sites at a distance of 10 miles away from Eleutheropolis in the environs of Beth Shemesh, including Esthaol and Saraa, both of which are 10 miles north of Eleutheropolis, on the way to Nikopolis.[26] Euseb seems to have applied the distance of 10 Roman miles north of Eleutheropolis to several sites in the area of Beth Shemesh. Given that the indication in the Latin translation is not an exact value but only an estimated one, nearly every site in this region is more or less suited for identification with the monastery of Samson.

By way of another plausible combination of several Byzantine distances, one can make a convincing argument that the place of the sought-after monastery of Sampso should actually be sought in the cliffs above the *Nahal Soreq*, east of *Tell er-Rumēle*. The distance of Kariathiareim/*Dēr el-ʿĀzhar* (1599.1353) to Jerusalem accounts for 9–10 Roman miles according to Euseb's Onomastikon. Kariathiareim is located on the road down to Diospolis/*Ludd* (1405.1515) via Nikopolis/*ʿImwās* (1493.1387).[27] After Kariathiareim one has to leave the Roman road to arrive at Ierimouth/*Ḫirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304). No Roman side road is documented for this rocky region so far. Due to the ardous ascents and descents, the distance from Kariathiareim to Ierimouth must be about 10 further miles, even though both sites are 7 miles apart from each other, in terms of direct distance. Since the monastery of Sampso seems to be situated far away from the usual traffic routes, and identifying its precise location is rather difficult, it is no wonder that the Latin translation of the work of John Moschos only gives an approximate location for the site.[28]

The pilgrim of Bordeaux locates Nikopolis/*ʿImwās* (1493.1387) at about 22 Roman miles from Jerusalem.[29] The place Aialon/*Yālo* (1523.1388) lies at the 2nd mile stone from Nikopolis to Jerusalem,[30] so that even this site suits the distance

[25] See GASS/ZISSU 2005, 174–176.

[26] Euseb, *Onom.* 88:12–14; 156:15. See especially TSAFRIR/DI SEGNI/GREEN 1994, 86.123.263.

[27] Euseb, *Onom.* 48:24 (10 miles); 114:23–25 (9 miles). See especially THOMSEN 1907, 78.

[28] According to DORSEY 1991, 154f.186–188, there have been more roads in this region during the Iron Age. See especially DORSEY 1991, 186f.: "While the Roman road continued westward from Kirjath-jearim to Emmaus, evidence suggests that the Iron Age road turned southwest toward Beth-shemesh, roughly along the course followed by the Turkish period road".

[29] *Itinerarium Burdigalense* 20. See especially DONNER 1979, 63.

[30] TSAFRIR/DI SEGNI/GREEN 1994, 59.

given by Johannes Moschos. Drawing a circle around Jerusalem, with a radius that reaches from Jerusalem to Aialon, also provides for the distance from Jerusalem to Ierimouth/*Ḫirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304) (Fig. 3). All in all, an identification of the nearby *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* (1527.1302) with the Byzantine monastery Sampso is fully in accordance with the various distances given in the sources.[31]

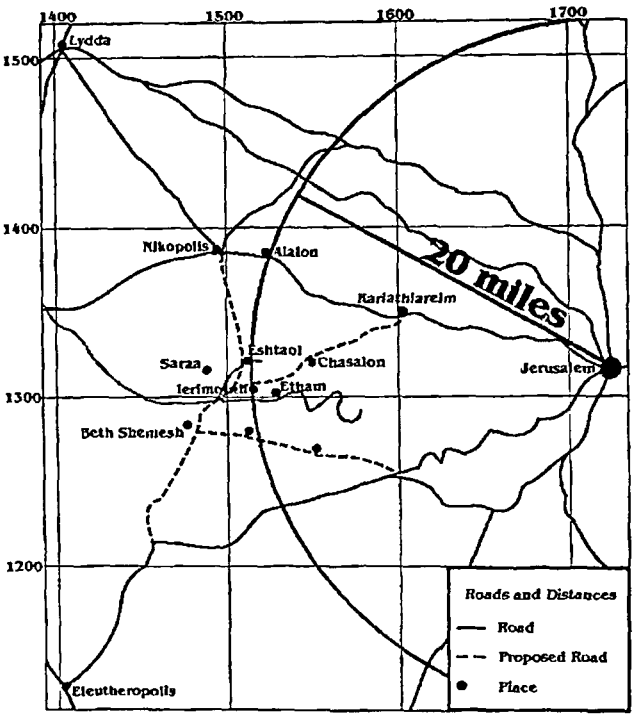

Fig. 3: Location Map

3. Sampso Monastery at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*

The ancient site at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is located in a prominent cliff, situated on the northern slope of *Wādi Ismaʿīn*. This section of the slope is very steep. Its middle

[31] TAXEL 2008, 61f. recently challenged this interpretation and identified the monastery of Sampso with *Ḫirbet eṣ-Ṣuyyāġ* (1502.1285) (ibid. 63). First, the complex at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* has similar features like other pilgrimage centres (see below). Second, the "Rock of Etham" memorial site must – by nature – lie distant from the major trade routes. Thus, it is not surprising that this site is hard to access. Third, the cliff coenobium type monastery is also attested in *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* as will be shown below. This type is not endemic for the Judean desert. But possibilities for this type outside this region are limited. Fourth, *Ḫirbet eṣ-Ṣuyyāġ* is accessible by a local road but not by a major Roman road and should be identified with Biblical Lehi, since the greek word Σιαγών, the translation of Lehi, might be preserved in the modern Arabic name *Ḫirbet eṣ-Ṣuyyāġ*. Moreover, *Ḫirbet eṣ-Ṣuyyāġ* fits well the biblical description of Lehi.

part, named *'Irāq Isma'īn*, forms an impressive cliff which is 15–20 meters high. The topographical character of this section of the valley is outstanding, since it is the steepest place in the western Jerusalem Mountains and the only place with massive natural cliffs.

The compound consists of a huge natural cave with a cave church therein, well-built rooms, rock-cut stairways, paths and water cisterns. All these elements are located along a long and narrow shelf at the foot of the cliff. Judging from the character of the site, its conspicuous topography and its location, it seems very likely that this compound could be identified with the monastery mentioned by John Moschos. The archaeological evidence supports this assumption, as will be demonstrated below.

The site was surveyed in 1991–1993 by the "Survey of Jerusalem Mountains Team," which consisted of Dani Weiss, Gideon Solimany and Boaz Zissu, and visited again in 2004 and 2005 by the present authors. The research was supported by the Calgary Institute for the Humanities at the University of Calgary and the Koschitzky Foundation at Bar Ilan University. The following description of the archaeological remains is based on the above mentioned surveys. This interesting site awaits proper excavation and detailed study.[32]

Three paths lead to the site. One path approaches the site from the east, following the bottom of the cliff. The other path turns north-west and descends the cliff, entering the architectural complex through a rock-cut staircase. The third path reaches the site from the south, after a steep climb from the bottom of *Nahal Soreq*.

The main entrance to this compound was from the east. The last 15 meters of the ancient path are well preserved. Furthermore, the terrace built in order to support the path is still clearly visible. The point where the path enters the site was marked by a 4 × 3 m rock-cut area flanked by a 3 × 2.5 m wide and 4 m deep cistern. This cistern seems to have been roofed over by a ceiling, since some graffiti – covered over with a patina – was found above the cistern that could only have been written by someone standing high above, on such a conjectured ceiling. The function of the cistern was most probably to provide for the needs of visitors who were waiting outside the complex until they were granted permission to enter.

The main gate is assumed to have stood next to the rock-cut area and the cistern. From the gate, a 20 m long passage was cut in the rock. This 3.6 m broad passage is bounded by sections of walls to the south that belong to the foundations of two parallel rows of rooms that measure 4.4 × 8 m each, apparently the remains of a rectangular building. These walls were built of well-drafted ashlars. Walls are still preserved up to a height of three courses in some places. After the monastery went out of use, some letters were inscribed in Arabic characters on one of these ashlars. Additional foundations west of this building, and in the same orientation, suggest that additional rooms stood there.

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[32] The first description of this site was proposed by SCHICK 1887, 143f. He mentioned the staircase, a platform in front of the cave's opening, two cisterns, and inside the cave: a mosaic, remnants of walls and a vaulted room, maybe a hermit's chapel.

The long passageway is flanked on the north by the natural cliff, which was hewn in order to create a rock-cut vertical wall that was initially covered with masonry, as evidenced by rock-cut foundations and traces of masonry. Some remains of the original masonry are still *in situ*, about 6 m above the floor level of the entranceway, and belong to a structure at least two stories high, maybe a bell-tower.

Broad steps were carved in the floor of the passageway, which gently descends to a flat terraced courtyard that seems to be flanked on its southern side by further structures. Unfortunately, the poor state of preservation of the remains does not allow a proper reconstruction of the units above the slope, which descends steeply to the bottom of *Nahal Soreq*.

To the north of this central courtyard is a remarkably huge cave in the cliff that housed a church. It is 25 m wide and up to 10 m high at its opening and about 37 m deep at the most. A retaining wall must have been built at the opening of the cave in order to create a flat area on the slanted bedrock, on which the buildings inside the cave could be erected.

Well-drafted stones were used to build the church. One of these stones has a rounded profile, thus indicating its former use in a vault or as part of an apse. Some coloured mosaic cubes (*tesserae*) and fragments of tiles point to the shape of the roof and floors of the cave church and the adjacent buildings. The upper parts and ceiling of the cave contain large traces of plaster made of mud and straw, laid in two layers. Many ribbed sherds of Byzantine storage jars were imbedded in the plaster. In some places, a "fish-bone" pattern was incised in it.

The eastern wall of the cave was adorned by a rounded small apse that was mostly rock-cut, plastered and paved with mosaics and had a 1.8 m opening in its northern wall. The mosaics were systematically destroyed, but a single row of *tesserae* survived, imbedded in the plaster that covered the walls.

Two rounded and plastered depressions north of the small apse can be seen in the upper part of the eastern side of the cave. These depressions may be the remains of two other apses, although this is debatable. Only by excavating the floor of the cave might it be possible to show that these depressions were part of a three-apsidal church. Alternatively, it may be that these depressions were used as prayer rooms, and that the cave church was actually monoapsidal.[33] In any case, it is highly likely that the depressions, together with other cavities, were shown to visitors interested in Samson's hiding cave. After the Byzantine period, the cave church was heavily damaged.

At the western edge of the cave, opposite the apse, some foundation walls made of small stones and mortar were found. The remains of a plastered vault are visible, but it is difficult to determine whether they formed part of a water installation or some other kind of building. Some additional niches were also located in this section of the cave.

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[33] For a more optimistic view see GASS/ZISSU 2009, 40*.

Remains of an impressive large oval cistern, c. 11 m long, c. 10 m wide, and c. 5 m deep, were found west of the cave. Its northern side was carved out of the cliff, and its southern side was built of stone. While the lower part of this wall was made of large fieldstones and mortar, its upper part was built of well-drafted ashlars with prominent bosses. The curved line of the upper part suggests that the roof had been a half dome, which leaned against the cliff. The inner face of the reservoir and its ceiling were covered with hydraulic plaster. Its capacity has been estimated at about 450 m³. Therefore, the compound at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* must have been of some importance. A small hermitage with only a few monks would not have needed such a huge water reservoir, so it may have served the needs of pilgrims, as well as the monks. Another element found south of the cistern is a strong retaining wall. Additional walls were found outside the compound attesting to the existence of buildings on the slope.

The westernmost point of the compound is marked by a 0.7 m wide and almost vertical flight of steps cut in the rock. This staircase connects the compound to the path arriving on the ridge from north-west and leading to nearby Ierimouth.

To sum up, the remains that are still visible show that, during the time of its existence, the complex at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* (Figs. 4, 5) had a gate with an external cistern, a huge rectangular building flanking the passageway (probably a bell-tower), a cave church with at least one eastern apse and a huge prayer room, additional buildings in the western part of the cave (probably a *diakonikon*), a large water reservoir, and a flight of steps that connected this compound to the path on the ridge. The complex of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*, therefore, is not only "a hermitage of a small group of monks, which were most probably related to a nearby mother monastery"[34]. The mere presence of a huge water cistern runs counter such a minimalistic interpretation of the visible remains. It is unlikely that a small group of monks would have expended such efforts if they lived alone at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*, in total seclusion from the outside world.

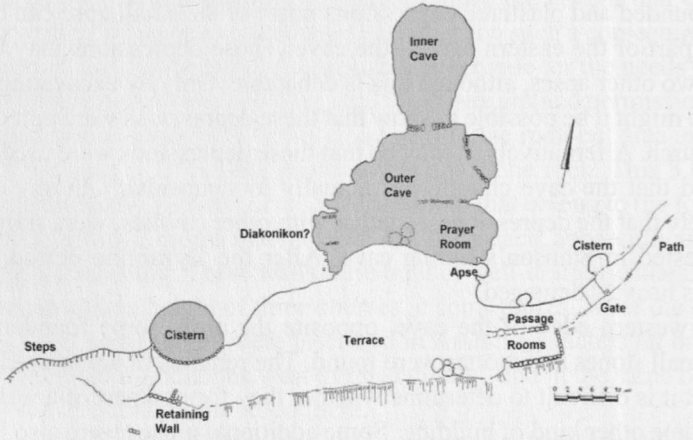

Fig. 4: Plan of Samson's Cave

[34] TAXEL 2008, 62.

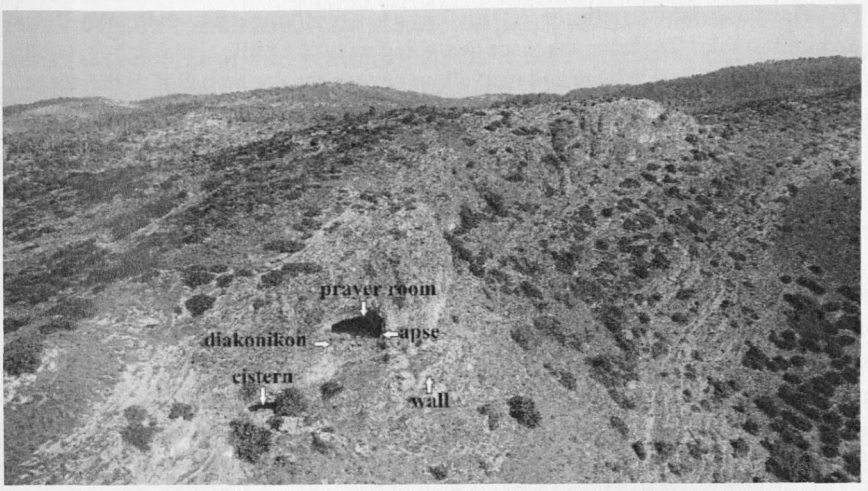

Fig. 5: Samson's Cave at *Nahal Soreq*

4. Other Monasteries with Cave Churches[35]

According to Byzantine sources, some caves in Israel were regarded as holy places. The early hermits considered these caves to have been created by God and, thus, especially suited for monastic purposes. The discovery of these caves were thought to have been the result of divine guidance.[36] This line of interpretation is obvious in Kyrillos' description of Sabas finding a cave on the ravine of the Kidron that was soon used as a church. This church at *Dēr Mār Sābā* was later called the Theoktistos-Church:

> "Persevering in prayer at this spot till daybreak, he rose in fear and great joy to see the spot where the pillar of fire had appeared, and found a large and marvellous cave that had the shape of a church of God. On the eastern side there is an apse made by God, while he found on the north side a large chamber with the lay-out of a sacristy and to the south a wide entrance that admitted sufficient illumination from the rays of the sun."[37]

This description is in remarkable accordance with the layout of the cave church at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*: the entrance of the cave faces south, the eastern hollow in the rock resembles an apse made by God, and the western part of the cave could be used for the clergy. Similarly, the monks Euthymios and Theoctistus found a large cave that they immediately sanctified with their prayers, which enabled them to use it as a church:

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[35] The following cannot be a full treatment of this issue. Thus, only a few examples for cave churches are given. However, this selection can be considered representative.

[36] See GOLDFUS 1990, 241.

[37] Kyrillos, *Vita Sabae* 18 [PRICE 1991, 110f.].

> "As they passed through the desert they came to a terrifying gorge, extremely steep and impassable. On seeing the place and going round the cliffs above it they found, as if guided by God, a huge and marvellous cave in the northern cliff of the gorge. Not without danger they made the steep ascent and just managed to climb up to it. Overjoyed as if the cave had been prepared for them by God, they made it their home, feeding on the plants that happened to grow there. The cave had earlier been a lair of wild animals; but tamed by the holy hymns and ceaseless prayers of these pious men, it was sanctified by becoming a church of God".[38]

Holy places like these are usually oriented west–east, so that the necessary direction for prayer is provided. In that case, these caves could be converted into a church without a problem. It is entirely possible that other caves were found and used in the same way by monks wandering around.[39] The monks could take advantage of natural caves and rock shelters. At times, the monks used previously existing structures and added some more dwellings and smaller chapels for praying.

In the following, some cave churches are described and compared with the remains of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*. All of them are located in rock shelters above deep ravines like *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*. They are either of the Laura or Coenobium type. In a Laura, most monks lived in solitude and gathered only on the weekend for communal prayer and for getting their provisions for the following days. Lauras had a core with a church and service buildings, as well as separate cells for living. The abbot and other monks lived in the core and cared for everything, whereas the cell-dwellers were scattered around.[40] Lauras usually occupy a large area and are enclosed by the topographical conditions, e.g. by cliffs or wadis.[41] In a coenobium, monks lived a communal life. Therefore, they participated in common work, meals and prayer. These coenobia were self-contained communities that provided everything for the monks. There were cliff-type and level-type coenobia, depending on the existing topography.[42]

4.1 *Dēr Mukellik* (1859.1318) – Coenobium of Theoctistus

The coenobium of *Dēr Mukellik*, established in 411 CE by Theoctistus and Euthymius, is situated on the northern side of the gorge of *Wādi Mukellik*, 9 m above ground level.[43] The nucleus of this monastery was a huge cave with the following

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[38] Kyrillos, *Vita Euthymii* 8 [PRICE 1991, 11].

[39] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 162.

[40] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 18.

[41] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 31.

[42] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 33.

[43] For the history and identification of *Dēr Mukellik* see FAST 1913, 28 n.1; CHITTY 1928, 134–139; MEINARDUS 1965, 246–248; HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 12; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 34. For the archaeology of *Dēr Mukellik* see TYRWHITT DRAKE 1874, 72f.; CHITTY 1928, 139–152; MEINARDUS 1965, 248–250; HIRSCHFELD 1989, 99f.; HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 12f.; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 34–36; GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 247–280.

features (Fig. 6): a church, several rooms, passages, and a window entrance. The communal buildings of the monastery are built below the cave church, where a retaining wall created a broad area of 2.2 dunam. The monastery could be entered from the west by an outer and inner gate. North of the interior courtyard is another cave used as stable (Fig. 7).[44]

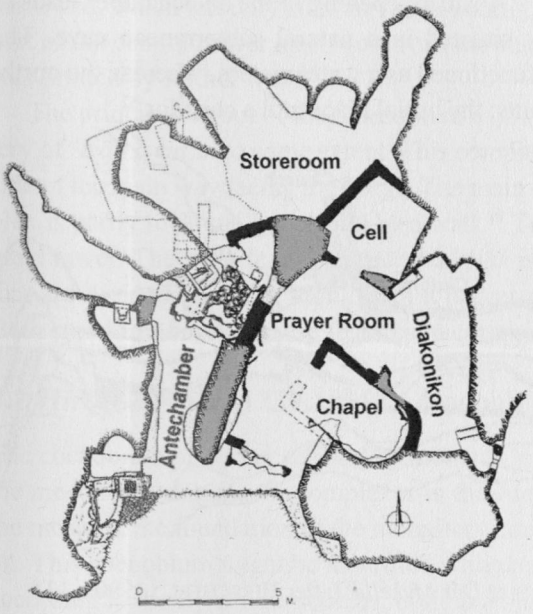

Fig. 6: Cave Church at *Dēr Mukellik* (after GOLDFUS / ARUBAS / ALLIATA 1995, 250)

The cave church has two main phases of construction: the 5th–7th century and the 7th–8th century CE.[45] After natural and human disasters, the monastery was resettled in the early Muslim period.[46] The cave church has different units. Since the cave is difficult to enter, the monks constructed a tower-like structure and stairways to the opening of the cave complex.[47] This masonry construction was erected to the south face of the cave, in order to make it more easily accessible. It seems likely that an impressive masonry construction of six stories was built in front of the cliff, but little of it has survived.[48] The antechamber was separated from the central prayer room to the west by rock walls. On both sides of the southern part of the antechamber are plastered benches. In the northern part of the antechamber, there is an entrance to the central prayer room[49] and a mosaic depicting birds and

[44] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 35f.

[45] According to GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 249.274 some of the wall paintings may belong to a third phase of construction which took place in the second half of the 11th century CE.

[46] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 273.

[47] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 119.

[48] See the reconstruction of GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 255.

[49] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 258.

baskets.[50] In a second phase, the size of the entrance to the central prayer room was reduced by the construction of a masonry wall on top of the threshold. The northwestern unit of the cave was most probably utilized for storage purposes. This part of the cave, about one third of the entire cave, was separated from the antechamber by a wall with a doorway. This unit was hardly used for dwelling since it is dark and ill-ventilated.[51] A square opening in the antechamber leads to the underground burial complex situated in a natural subterranean cave. The southern part of that burial cave functioned as a water cistern, whereas the northern part consists of two components: the burial place and a corridor.[52]

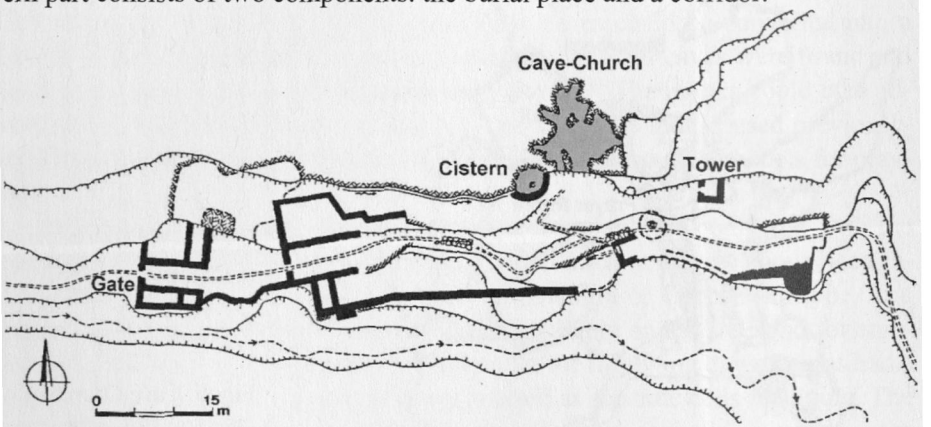

Fig. 7: Coenobium of Theoctistus at *Dēr Mukellik* (after HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 13)

The central prayer room and adjacent rooms form the kernel of the church complex. The central prayer hall, decorated with frescoes and mosaics[53], is a broad room measuring about 9 × 17 m.[54] Its main entrance was in the west leading to the antechamber. The northern wall of the 4.5 m deep rock-cut apse consists of a rock pillar, masonry and plaster. The masonry does not extend to the ceiling of the cave, which allowed the apse to get light from the east. The apse, located opposite the main entrance, could be used as an interior chapel within the central prayer hall. The church complex is approximately 3.8 m high.[55] Northeast of the central prayer hall behind the apse is a chamber leading to a window entrance to the cave. This room might be the *diakonikon* of the cave church, since there are grooves to support wooden shelves for storing liturgical items.[56] The floor of the supposed *diakonikon* was also decorated by mosaics. Another rock-cut room to

[50] See BLOMME/NODET 1979, 462–464.
[51] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 276.
[52] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 277.
[53] For a detailed description see CHITTY 1928, 139–152.
[54] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 262.
[55] See OVADIAH 1970, 48.
[56] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 268.

the north of the central prayer hall can be entered by a low doorway. This chamber might be the cell and burial place of Theoctistus.[57] An upper chamber (2 × 4.5 m) was constructed in the northern part of the central prayer hall, maybe a chamber for Theoctistus keeping him secluded from the other monks.[58] In a second building phase, the eastern window of the apse was closed and the main entrance was narrowed, which left only a 0.8 m wide opening. A wall was built in the southern part of the central prayer hall. Moreover, the chapel within the central prayer hall was limited by further walls.[59]

The principal layout of the Coenobium of *Dēr Mukellik* resembles the monastery of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* to some extent. This complex has living quarters on the other side of the main way facing the gorge. The main cistern underneath the cave complex is partly rock-cut and closed by a wall.[60] To the east of the cave church is a great tower. The main feature of *Dēr Mukellik* is a huge cave with several rooms that are divided by walls, along with a prayer room with an apse and mosaics. Both structures have all these features in common.

4.2 *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* (1739.1038) – Coenobium of Severianus

The coenobium of *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*, located in a small ravine, is regarded as one of the most isolated monastic complexes in the Judean Desert.[61] Due to the style of the mosaics, the foundation of the monastery could be dated to the late 5th century CE. This coenobium might be identified with the monastery of Severianus which, according to the Byzantine sources, is situated near Caparbaricha.[62] If this is correct, *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* was established some time before 515 CE.[63] It was abandoned a short time after the Arab conquest of Palestine, in the 7th century CE, after part of the ceiling of the cave church had collapsed.[64] Thus, *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* had a lifetime of about 150 years.

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[57] HIRSCHFELD 1992, 121, however, thinks that this room was the *diakonikon*.

[58] See GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 269f.

[59] For the second phase of construction see GOLDFUS/ARUBAS/ALLIATA 1995, 271–275. This second phase is described by OVADIAH 1970, 48. The reduced chapel measuring only 4.6 × 2.5 m had an entrance in its western wall and maybe also in the south.

[60] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 13 Fig. 13.

[61] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 64. HIRSCHFELD 1993, 335f. refers to the refectory as decisive evidece for considering *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* a coenobium.

[62] Kyrillos, *Vita Sabae* 16 [PRICE 1991, 108]. According to HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 43f. the monastery of Severianus should be better identified with *el-Qaṣrēn* (1676.1030). However, later HIRSCHFELD 1999, 156f. changed his mind. The site of the monastery of Severianus was associated with the tradition of Abraham and the three angels looking upon the ruined Sodom, see PATRICH 1995, 162.

[63] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 153.

[64] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 153–155. This collapse could be related to an earthquake that took place in 659/660 CE.

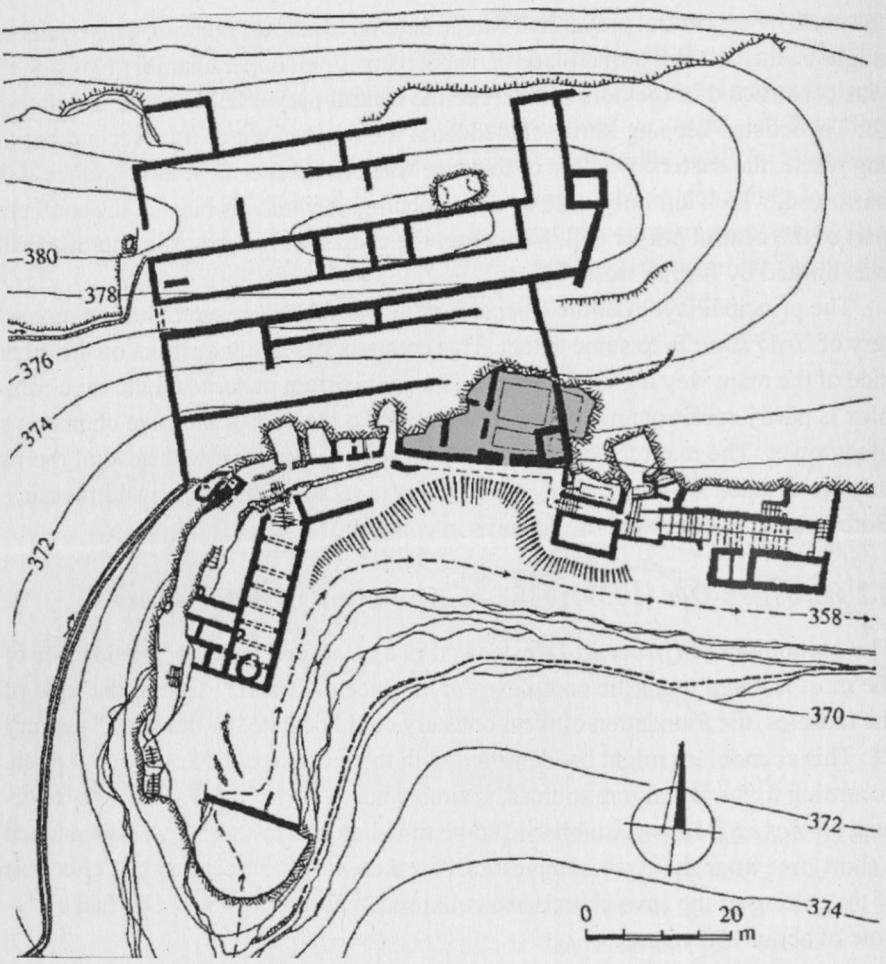

Fig. 8: Coenobium of Severianus at *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* (after HIRSCHFELD 1992, 40)

This monastery is built partly on the ridge and partly in the cliffs (Fig. 8). The residential quarters were located on the ridge, whereas the communal structures are set in the gorge below.[65] The lower part consists of a large cave church, a refectory, storerooms, towers and an elaborate water system.

The cave measures about 26 × 5–11 m and is nearly 5 m high.[66] The church complex was divided by walls into a prayer hall and three additional rooms. The size of the prayer hall is about 10 × 11 m. Two phases of the church complex were identified during excavations. After a collapse of the ceiling, the appearance of the church complex was changed.[67] Our discussion, below, only presents data related to its original phase.

[65] See HIRSCHFELD 1993, 334.
[66] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 36.
[67] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 37.

The opening of the cave was closed by a façade wall that has an entryway in the centre. Most probably, a row of windows lightened the interior. The rock walls were levelled by a varying thick layer of plaster. The ceiling of the prayer hall, 3.8 m above floor level, was plastered as well. The church was oriented to the east and has a 5 × 7 m *bema* within a huge natural square apse, where the altar stood. The floor of the prayer hall was paved with colourful mosaics. In front of the *bema*, there is a Greek inscription of Ps 105:4–5 inside a *tabula ansata*.[68] The *bema* was separated from the prayer hall by chancel screens. The eastern wall contained a niche and a shelf for liturgical purposes. A large rock-cut niche, 1.1 m in diameter, was located on its south side, which probably housed a reliquary. Three additional rooms to the west served the needs of the clergy. The western rooms were separated from the prayer hall by a north–south partition wall. The largest central room seems to be the *diakonikon*.[69] The small room in the west might be a monk's cell, perhaps of the monk who was responsible for the church complex.

Outside the cave church and to the southeast, there is a structure with a cistern (about 35 m^2) and a basin. Due to the proximity to the church, this installation could be interpreted as a baptistery.[70] This structure paved with mosaics was built against the cliff north of the corridor of the inner gate. The upper floor of the outer gate-house seems to have been the hospice of the coenobium since, according to Byzantine sources, the gatekeeper was responsible for a hospice.[71]

The monastic complex of *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* has many parallels to *'Irāq Isma'īn*: The cave church of *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* has a central prayer room with a natural, nearly square apse, plastered ceiling and mosaic pavement, a second southern part with a round apse, additional rooms in the west, and an elaborate water system within the monastic compound and structures at the gate that might be used as a hospice for pilgrims. Thus, the principal layout of *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* resembles the compound at *'Irāq Isma'īn* as well.

4.3 *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* (1807.1444) – Unidentified Laura

The laura at *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* extends over a long spur descending to the ravines of *Wādi Makkūk*. The complex at *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* features public buildings, seclusion cells, agricultural plots, rock-cut steps and paths on two levels. An elaborate water system with many water cisterns and channels guarantees provision with water. [72]

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[68] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 40.

[69] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 44. The *diakonikon* is a "room in which the deacons received the offerings of the congregation, wrote the names of the donors, and kept vestments and cult vessels" (ibid. 164).

[70] For the possible baptistery see HIRSCHFELD 1999, 32–35. The basin could be a baptismal font (ibid. 164). In the baptistery the monks baptized local villagers and nomads. For baptism of adolescents at a venerated site, see HIRSCHFELD 1992, 113f.

[71] See HIRSCHFELD 1999, 17–24.168.

[72] See GOLDFUS 1990, 229–231.

As proved by pottery finds at this site, the monastery was established in the 4th century CE and flourished in the 5th to 6th centuries CE.[73] Outside the main area on the northern part of the spur and on the southern bank of the wadi, there are agricultural terraces, water cisterns and further dwelling caves, probably related to the laura. The cave was separated from the outside by an outer enclosure wall. This area could be entered by a gate house at the southeast corner. Due to specific plastering, the cistern in the western part predates the use of *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* as a laura.[74]

The cave church is located on the lower level in a long east–west oriented rock shelter with an opening to the south (Fig. 9). The church has a central prayer hall bordered by an apse in the east. Excavations in the prayer hall showed remains of mosaics at eight sections. Most probably the whole floor of the hall was covered with mosaics.[75] The cave's inner walls were coated with plaster giving the cave a distinguished appearance.[76] Three large niches, at times enlarged by rock-cutting, were discovered in the north wall of the cave. The eastern niche (5.6 × 2 m), 0.33 m lower than the main prayer hall, was possibly a small chapel or *diakonikon*. It can be entered by a plastered step. Remains of a partition wall suggest that the chapel was separated from the central prayer hall. The 4 m deep apse used a natural curving of the northern wall. The typical round form was achieved by rock cutting. The natural roof of the apse declines gradually from 5.7 to 1.84 m. The floor level is 0.2 m above the level of the prayer hall. Moreover, the apse seems to be separated from the prayer hall by a wooden chancel. In the southeastern part of the church complex is probably a baptistery.[77] A square rock-cut hollow south of the apse could be a baptismal font. The baptistry is accessible from the apse by a rock-cut corridor.

The laura at *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* has some parallels to the monastery of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*: It has a huge central prayer hall with additional rooms for liturgical purposes and a huge apse in the east. The main cistern is inside the rock shelter due to topographic reasons. A gatehouse gives access to the church area, which is separated by an enclosure wall. This rock shelter, which is of nearly equal size to that of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*, is open to the south.

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[73] See GOLDFUS 1990, 242.

[74] For the archaeology of *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* see GOLDFUS 1990, 228–242.

[75] See GOLDFUS 1990, 232.

[76] See GOLDFUS 1990, 233.

[77] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 58f.

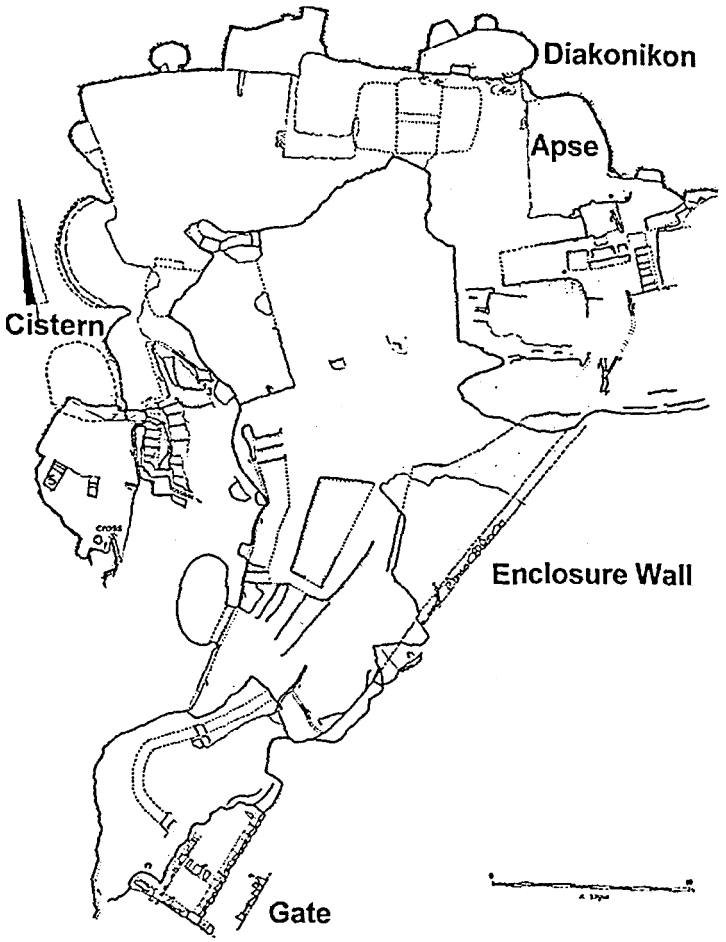

Fig. 9: Laura at *Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye* (after GOLDFUS 1990, 234)

4.4 *Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra* (1787.1379) – Laura of Pharan

Founded near the spring of *ʿĒn Fāra* in approximately 330 CE by Chariton, the laura of Pharan, covering about 30 dunam, was named after the nearby village of Pharan. The ancient name of this laura is preserved in *Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra* (1796.1380), whereas the Byzantine village of Pharan shifted to *Ḫirbet Abū Musarraḥ* (1773.1373), with remains from the Byzantine period.[78] The cliffs of *Wādi Fāra*, with their many caves, were particularly well-suited for use as dwellings. Moreover, the spring of *ʿĒn Fāra* provided for the needs of the monks (Fig. 10).[79]

[78] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 6; HIRSCHFELD 1990b, 426f. n.3. For the identification of Pharan see MARTI 1880, 6–11. For the name preservation of Pharan in *Wādi Fāra* see LECLERCQ 1929, 1968.

[79] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 21.

Fig. 10: Laura of Pharan from above (photo by Abraham Graicer)

The nucleus of the laura of Pharan consists of the cave church[80], located 12 m above ground level. The cave was already hollowed out in the Second Temple period so that the monks could use previously existing structures.[81] The cave church could be entered by a combination of three flights of steps and a vertical shaft. Two rock-cut windows provided light and air for the interior of the church. The church was nearly rectangular and measures 5–6.6 × 7–9 m at a height of 2 m (Fig. 11). A round apse was cut in the eastern wall, and a square niche to the south. In front of the apse four holes for the legs of the altar and the remains of a possible reliquiary were found.[82] Three small rooms joined by openings were located east of the church in a northeastward direction. The room next to the central prayer hall had a sleeping shelf and a hollow for a lamp. This chamber might have been the abbot's cell.[83] Two further cells, both with semicircular niches in the eastern wall, were attached to the east.[84]

[80] For later remains see MEINARDUS 1965, 227–229.

[81] See HIRSCHFELD 1989, 95; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 119. Caves like that were used by the Jews during the First Revolt against the Romans, see HIRSCHFELD 1990b, 433. The site of the cave church might be the hiding place of Simeon, son of Gioras, mentioned by Flavius Josephus.

[82] See HIRSCHFELD 1990b, 435.

[83] See HIRSCHFELD 1989, 96.

[84] See HIRSCHFELD 1989, 96.

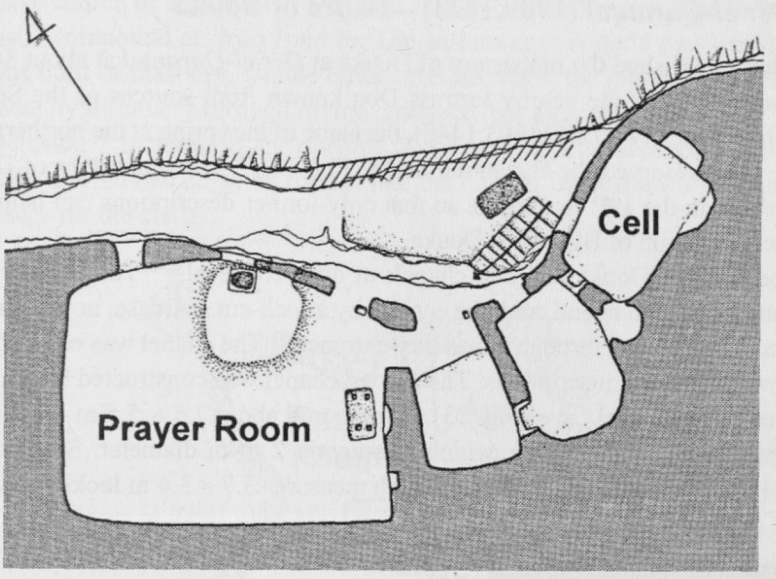

Fig. 11: Laura of Pharan at *Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra* (after HIRSCHFELD 1992, 57)

The cave church was consecrated by Chariton. Later it was called the "Old Church", indicating that another church was built that can be found below the cave church. The new church was built of rock-cut ashlars and the grave of Chariton was shown there.[85] A large structure partly with a white mosaic floor was built about 25 m west of the new church. This complex could be used as domestic annexes for the laura, such as storerooms and bakery. A huge water reservoir, plastered with hydraulic plaster and with a capacity of about 600 m^2, was cut out at the foot of the southern cliff.[86]

The Laura of Pharan at *Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra* is different from the monastic compound at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*. The opening of the cave church is to the north. Moreover, the cave church at Pharan had a natural rock façade with rock-cut windows, whereas other cave churches had a closing wall built of masonry. Only the annexed rooms are comparable to other cave churches, but they are located on the eastern side and not west of the central prayer room. These differences might be explained by topographic reasons. Since this place was sanctified with a miracle[87] and not found by divine guidance, like other caves, the planning of a comparable monastic structure was not possible at that place.

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[85] For this tradition see MEINARDUS 1965, 227 n. 34.

[86] For the archaeology of *Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra* see LECLERCQ 1929, 1968; HIRSCHFELD 1989, 95f.; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 22.

[87] According to Byzantine sources, Chariton was captured by robbers in a cave and was rescued by a miracle. This story explains how a robbers' cave could become a church of God, see *Vita Charitonis* 9–11 in DI SEGNI 1990, 402–404. For the history of Pharan see SCHIWIETZ 1913, 136–138; LECLERCQ 1929, 1966–1968.

4.5 *Dēr el-Qaranṭal* (1909.1423) – Laura of Douka

Chariton established the monastery of Douka at *Dēr el-Qaranṭal* at about 340 CE and named it after the nearby fortress Doq known from sources of the Second Temple period.[88] *ʿĒn Dūk* (1903.1448), the name of the spring at the northern foot of the hill, preserved the Byzantine name (Fig. 12).[89] The monastery of Douka was rebuilt in the 19th century CE so that only former descriptions can help with the reconstruction of Byzantine Douka.

The laura of Douka had two chapels at different levels.[90] The lower chapel measured 8.2 × 5.5 m and could be entered by a rock-cut staircase, now damaged, that led to the chapel through a masonry entrance.[91] The chapel was covered with frescos, graffiti and inscriptions. The second chapel was constructed by masonry southeast of a natural cave (Fig. 13). It measured about 7.6 × 5.5 m – including the apse on its southern side, which was nearly 2 m in diameter. South of the chapel was an outer lower platform which measures 3.7 × 3.4 m looking over the rocky slope.[92]

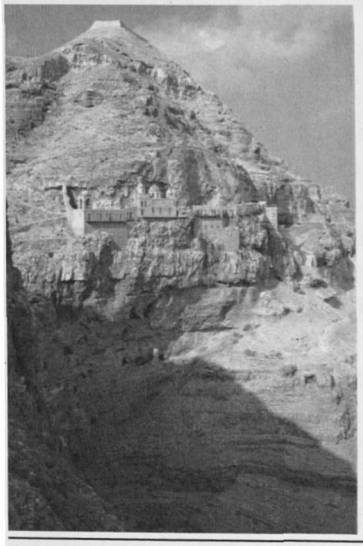

Fig. 12: *Dēr el-Qaranṭal* today (photo by Abraham Graicer)

[88] See 1Macc 16:11–18. For the name Douka see also VAIHLÉ/PÉTRIDÈS 1904, 342f. n.3. According to MARTI 1880, 14, the name *Qaranṭal* is related to the Crusader period (Quarantania). This site was identified with the place of the temptation of Christ, see also CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 184. For the history of Douka see LECLERCQ 1929, 1968–1970.

[89] See TYRWHITT DRAKE 1874, 71; LECLERCQ 1929, 1970. According to SCHIWIETZ 1913, 138f., the name Douka could be found as early as the time of the Maccabees. At that time the fort of Duk was built on top of the hills of *Qaranṭal*. Thus, the legend that the site got its name by the by-name dux of the monk Elpide defending the laura against the nearby Jews is unsustainable.

[90] See HIRSCHFELD 1990b, 436f.

[91] See CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 200–202.

[92] See CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 203.

The cave church of the Laura of Douka at *Dēr el-Qarantal* was different from the monastic compound at *'Irāq Isma'īn*. The eastern apse is not a rock-cut feature, but was built of masonry. Unlike other cave churches, the one at Douka did not originate by discovery through divine guidance, but already had a history of use for seclusion.[93] In addition, the opening of the cave is to the southeast. However, this cave church had adjacent rooms, like the ones at *'Irāq Isma'īn*, which were necessary for the clergy.

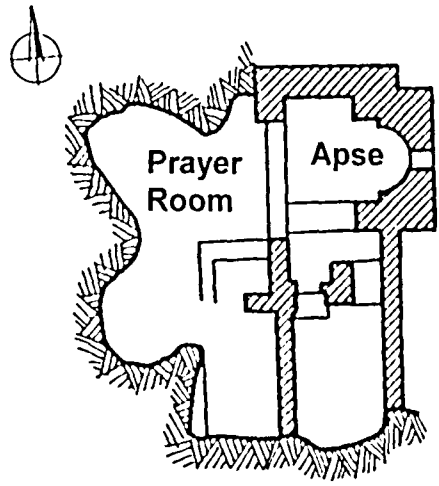

Fig. 13: Laura of Douka at *Dēr el-Qarantal* (after HIRSCHFELD 1990, 9)

4.6 *Dēr Mār Sābā* (1815.1236) – Laura of Sabas

In 478 CE Sabas settled in the Kidron valley. After a few years, several monks gathered here as well. In 483 CE Sabas established the Great Laura with 70 monks. This monastery existed without interruption to the present day.[94] Therefore, the original state of the monastic complex during Byzantine times is far from certain. However, since the so-called Theoktistos Church was built in a cave, it was not subjected to deterioration and thus essentially retained its original form.[95] This church is dedicated to St. Nicholas at present[96] and is divided into two parts: a chapel and an oratory commemorating the martyrs of the Parthian invasion under Chosroes II in 614 CE.[97]

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[93] See *Vita Charitonis* 19 in DI SEGNI 1990, 408: "And at the end of one day's march he came upon another cave, situated in the vicinity of Jericho, but in a deserted spot that offered him the greatest quiet, as he desired."

[94] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 31. For the identification of this monastery see MARTI 1880, 33f. For the history of the Great Laura see PATRICH 1995, 61–66.

[95] See PATRICH 1995, 69.

[96] See PATRICH 1994, 81*.

[97] See VAILHÉ 1899, 333.

The cave church, dedicated in 490 CE, is mainly carved into the rock (Fig. 14). It is a broad room with an eastern apse, about 2.6 m deep. It was said to be a "God-built" church (*Theoktistos*), since Sabas found this cave with a natural apse and a sacristy.[98] The central prayer room, which is almost square, measures approximately 11 × 11 m, whereas the whole cave, including all its components, measures 14.5 × 12.5 m.[99] South of the apse is a baptistery with a stone immersion basin. North of the central prayer room is the *diakonikon* connected by a shaft with the Tower of Sabas built above the church. This shaft used by St. Sabas to descend to the church was sealed in later times.[100]

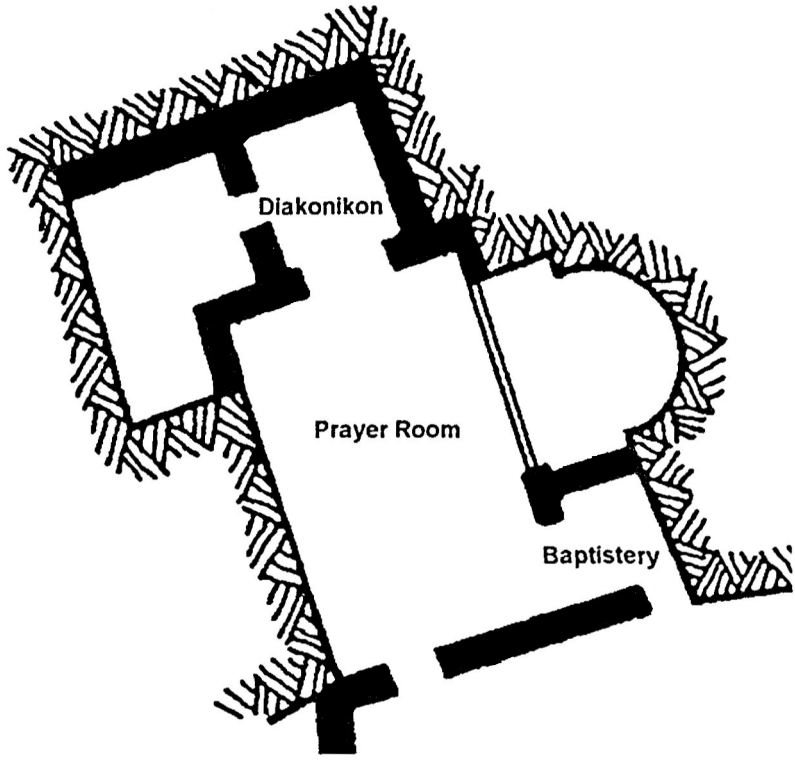

Fig. 14: Laura of Sabas at *Dēr Mār Sābā* (after HIRSCHFELD 1990, 32)

The Cave Church at *Dēr Mār Sābā* has some parallels to the monastery of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*: It has a central prayer hall with an apse in the east and additional rooms for liturgical purposes. The façade of the cave opens to the south. However, the dimensions of the cave at *Dēr Mār Sābā* are more moderate than at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*.

The following chart gives a summary of the principal features of cave churches that form the nucleus of a monastic complex, either a laura or a coenobium:

[98] Kyrillos, *Vita Sabae* 18 [PRICE 1991, 110f.]. See also OVADIAH/DESILVA 1981, 240f.
[99] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 128.
[100] For the archaeological remains see especially PATRICH 1995, 72.

Name	Cave Church	Height	Façade
Dēr el-Qaranṭal	7.6 × 5.5 m	?	southeast
Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra	9 × 6.6 m	2 m	north
Dēr Mār Sābā	14.5 × 12.5 m	?	south
Dēr Mukellik	17 × 9 m	3–4 m	south
Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye	25 × 9 m	3–6 m	southeast
Irāq Ismaʿīn	25 × 20 m	5–10 m	south
Ḫirbet ed-Dēr	26 × 11 m	3–5 m	south

Name	Room	Chapel	Baptistery	Rooms
Dēr el-Qaranṭal	square	no	no	yes
Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra	square	no	no	yes
Dēr Mār Sābā	square	no	yes	yes
Dēr Mukellik	square	yes	no	yes
Ḫallet ed-Dinnabīye	square	?	yes	yes
Irāq Ismaʿīn	square	yes	?	yes
Ḫirbet ed-Dēr	square	yes	yes	yes

The plan and size of these cave churches differs and uses the natural conditions. Some of the cave churches are clearly closed, either by natural rock (*Ḫirbet ʿĒn Fāra*) or by masonry (*Dēr el-Qaranṭal*, *Dēr Mār Sābā*, *Dēr Mukellik*, *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*), so that a prayer room was created secluded from the outside. Maybe the cave church of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* had a wall closing the cave's opening as well. Most prayer rooms used the square form of the natural cave, whereas additional chapels built to the south have a round apse (*Dēr Mukellik*, *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*). At *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* there is a huge prayer room and a southern chapel with round apse as well. According to size and principal layout, *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* has close parallels to the coenobia of *Dēr Mukellik* and *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*, so that the monastic complex at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* could also be a coenobium.

However, the reason for the establishment of the coenobia is different. Venerated monks secluded themselves from public life by residing in certain caves of the Judean Desert, such as those of *Dēr Mukellik* and *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*. In contrast, it seems that *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* was established as a memorial site, and not as shelter for hermits. Some caves were venerated because saints had resided in them, whereas others were honoured because they were associated with biblical stories. In light of these differences, several caves of veneration will be examined more closely, in the following.

5. Caves used as Memorial Sites

5.1 *Ḫirbet Ḫarētūn* (1727.1172) – Memorial Site of St. Chariton at Souka

In approximately 345 CE, St. Chariton established the laura of Souka[101] also called the "Old Laura" or later the "Monastery of Chariton". This place is securely identified with the site *Ḫirbet Ḫarētūn*, which preserves the name of Chariton.[102]

About 800 m south of the nucleus of the laura of Souka there is the famous "Hanging Cave of Chariton" (1725.1165) (Fig. 15)[103]. This karstic cave was a memorial site remembering St. Chariton, the founder of the "Old Laura". Here the aged monk found a place for his seclusion.[104] Chariton's hermitage was a small alcove in a cliff, approximately 15 m above ground level, on the southern bank of *Wādi Ḫarētūn*. This site is difficult to enter. The "Hanging Cave of Chariton" could be climbed only by ladder via two lower caves. The cave at ground level (7 × 15 m) had several rock-cut cisterns and a small pool, which was probably used as a baptismal font. These cisterns provide evidence for the permanent use of these caves during the Byzantine period.[105] The second cave could be reached by a ladder via an opening in the ceiling, about 3.5 m above floor level. This middle cave served as a small chapel with several rock-cut niches. It features crosses and Greek inscriptions. On the southeastern side there was another cistern (1.5 × 3.1 m). Obviously, the middle cave was carved at a later stage, when the site of Chariton's seclusion was venerated by later monks as a cultic place for pilgrimage.[106] The alcove, above, could be entered through a rock cut opening at the uppermost corner of the middle cave and a narrow passage with some steps at its end. The pear-shaped alcove measures 1 × 2 m and is nearly 2 m high. The walls were plastered and painted with monograms and drawings.[107]

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[101] The etymology of the word Souka is disputed. It is related to the Arabic word *sūq* meaning "marketplace" or to the Hebrew word *zuq* meaning "crag", see HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 9. It could also be a Syriac word meaning "convent", see VAIHLÉ/PÉTRIDÈS 1904, 333; LECLERCQ 1929, 1970.

[102] See SCHIWIETZ 1913, 141; HIRSCHFELD 2000, 315.

[103] See HIRSCHFELD 1985, 34*f. This site is also called *Muġāret Ḫarētūn* see MARTI 1880, 38; SCHIWIETZ 1913, 141. For the archaeology of the "Hanging Cave of Chariton" see HIRSCHFELD 1985, 34*f.; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 228–232; HIRSCHFELD 2000, 348–360. See also the description in SCHIWIETZ 1913, 141f.

[104] See *Vita Charitonis* 9–11 in DI SEGNI 1990, 410f.: "Therefore, when he discovered downstream a cave opening in a steep hillside, not far from the chaste laura (what is called to the present day 'St. Chariton's hanging place', as it is impossible to climb up there, except with a ladder), he thought to take his abode high up there." This matches perfectly the situation in the "Hanging Cave of Chariton", see HIRSCHFELD 2000, 348.

[105] See HIRSCHFELD 1985, 34*; HIRSCHFELD 2000, 352–354.

[106] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 232; HIRSCHFELD 2000, 354–357.

[107] For the alcove see HIRSCHFELD 2000, 357–360.

The "Hanging Cave of Chariton", near the Laura of Souka, is a memorial site visited by pilgrims. It was associated with the famous monk St. Chariton. Later building alterations testify to the high regard of this tradition and the need for a chapel commemorating the life of St. Chariton.

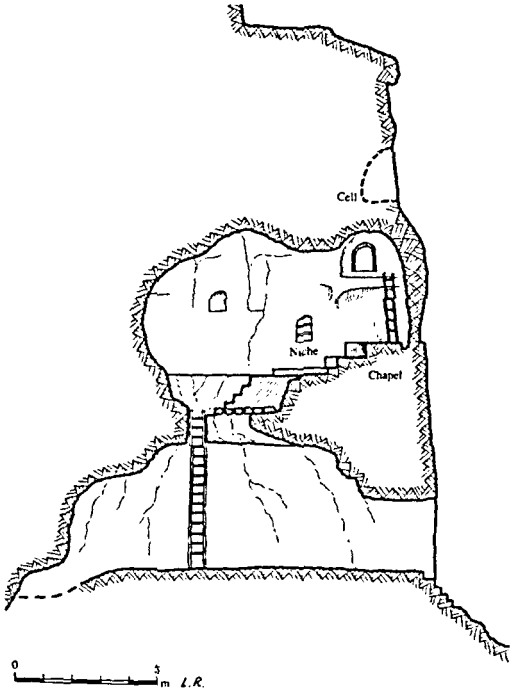

Fig. 15: Memorial Site of St. Chariton at Souka (after HIRSCHFELD 1992, 231)

5.2 *Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr* (1802.1097) – Memorial Site of St. Cyriac at Sousakim

St. Cyriac chose Sousakim, located at the meeting point of *Wādi el-Quṣēr* and *Wādi Muqtaʿ eğ-Ğuss*, as a place for seclusion.[108] The remains found at *Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr* indicate that this site cannot be a laura as previously assumed.[109] The chapel at *Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr* is a domed tower with thick walls (Fig. 16). It was already attached to the opening of a natural cave in Cyriac's lifetime[110] and used as a memorial site. The large cave has two stories. There are two entrances to this two-storied cave: a small opening of the cave at the southern ledge and the main doorway in the southern wall.[111] The opening to the upper level is blocked by the

[108] The site of *Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr* was identified with Sousakim by MARCOFF/CHITTY 1929, 175f. See also BLAKE 1969, 92.

[109] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 69f. MARCOFF/CHITTY 1929, 175 thought that the tower and the caves around were used as a laura with another cave church not found so far. However, the domed tower is fronting a cave and the upper level was used as a chapel.

[110] See HIRSCHFELD 1992, 219.

[111] See BLAKE 1969, 89.

chapel, whereas the one on the lower level, cut into the limestone terrace, is guarded by a roughly constructed stone wall.[112] The lower room of the cave measures 4 × 5 m and is about 2 m high. A small opening goes to the upper room which measures 4 × 4.5 m and has a similar height in the front part. The chapel on the upper level measures 3.6 × 4.1 m and is about 3.3 m high. However, due to thick walls the interior scales only 2.2 × 2.45 m.[113] Three windows in the northern and eastern walls, as well as above the main doorway, provided light for the interior of the chapel. A niche under the eastern window was most likely used for prayer. Moreover, there are two cupboards in the northern and eastern walls.[114] The chapel was roofed with a dome.[115] The roof of the upper cave is stepped. A natural ledge in the rear part of the upper chamber was perhaps used as a sleeping niche. Next to the cave there are an oval cistern (2 × 4 m) and a garden plot fronting the lower cave.[116]

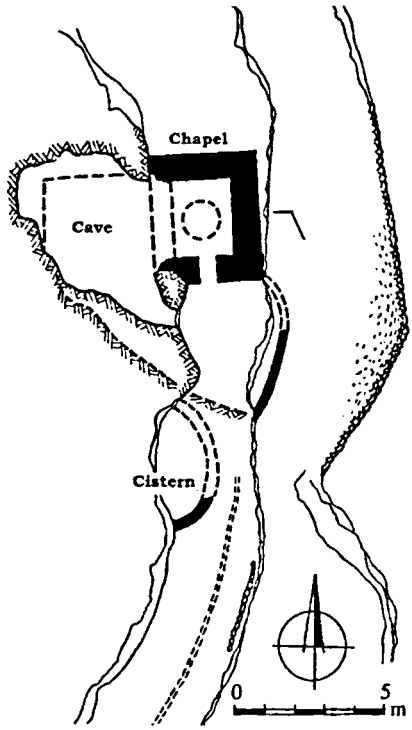

Fig. 16: Memorial Site of St. Cyriac at Sousakim (after HIRSCHFELD 1992, 221)

[112] See BLAKE 1969, 89.

[113] See BLAKE 1969, 89f.: The average thickness of the walls is 75 cm.

[114] See BLAKE 1969, 90: The northern one lying above floor level measures 50 × 55 cm, the eastern one 75 × 90 cm.

[115] For the archaeology of *Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr* see MARCOFF/CHITTY 1929, 175 interpreting the structure as a watchtower; BLAKE 1969, 87–93; HIRSCHFELD 1992, 219f.

[116] BLAKE 1969, 92 identified the lower cave as the 'den' of St. Cyriac's lion known from literary sources.

Ḫirbet el-Quṣēr was another site for the veneration of a famous monk. It was the place where St. Cyriac went for seclusion, and where he lived out his saintly life. At Sousakim, he kept a tame lion to protect his vegetables from wild animals.[117]

5.3 *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār* (1842.1259) – Memorial Site of St. Sabas at Spelaion

The coenobium at *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār*, also called "Spelaion" – or the "Monastery of the Cave"[118] – was founded by St. Sabas in 508 CE, after he spent the season of Lent with his disciple Paul in a cave on the northern slope of *Wādi Abu Šōle*, at a distance of about 6 km from the Great Laura west of Castellium.[119] The small monastic complex was intended for only up to 15 monks.

The coenobium of "Spelaion" was constructed on three levels (Fig. 17).[120] The monastery wall on the upper level enclosed a strip measuring approximately 90 × 20–25 m. The wall was built of large stones and surrounded the complex in the west, north and east, whereas cliffs protected the southern site.[121] The upper entrance gate was located in the northeastern corner of the wall.[122] An upper cistern (7 × 9 × 5 m), formerly paved with mosaics[123] and still functioning today, was built on the edge of the cliff.

The main structure at *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār* was built on the central level, including the church, three dwelling caves and additional cisterns. The central cistern measures 4 × 14 × 5 m. A staircase leading from the lower to the middle level is attached to its southern wall.[124] Another large L-shaped cistern, installed within a cave, can be found at the western end of the middle level.

Underneath the upper reservoir is a cave measuring 3.2 × 7.4 m. Water from the upper cistern drips down into this cave, giving the site its modern name, *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār*, which means "well of drops".[125] Between both levels are two further caves. The smaller one (2.2 × 3.6 m) to the east has a closing wall and can be entered from the east. The larger one is the so-called "Cave of Sabas," which measures 10 × 4 m, and was later converted into a chapel. This cave could be entered by a steep rock-cut tunnel. South of the upper tunnel entrance, the foundations of a small altar built against the eastern wall of Sabas' Cave are found.[126]

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[117] Kyrillos, *Vita Cyriaci* 16 [PRICE 1991, 255f.].

[118] For this identification see already FURRER 1880, 235.

[119] Kyrillos, *Vita Sabae* 37 [PRICE 1991, 135]. See also HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 38; PATRICH 1991, 429f.; PATRICH 1994, 54*. For the history of the "Monastery of the Cave" see PATRICH 1991, 429–432.

[120] For the archaeology of *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār* see KASTEREN 1890, 110–112; HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 39; PATRICH 1991, 433–447; PATRICH 1994, 54*–56*; PATRICH 1995, 150–153.

[121] See PATRICH 1994, 54*f.

[122] See PATRICH 1991, 440.

[123] See KASTEREN 1890, 111.

[124] See PATRICH 1991, 441.

[125] See PATRICH 1991, 441.

[126] See PATRICH 1994, 55*.

At the lower entrance of the tunnel there are remains of a moulded Corinthian capital.[127]

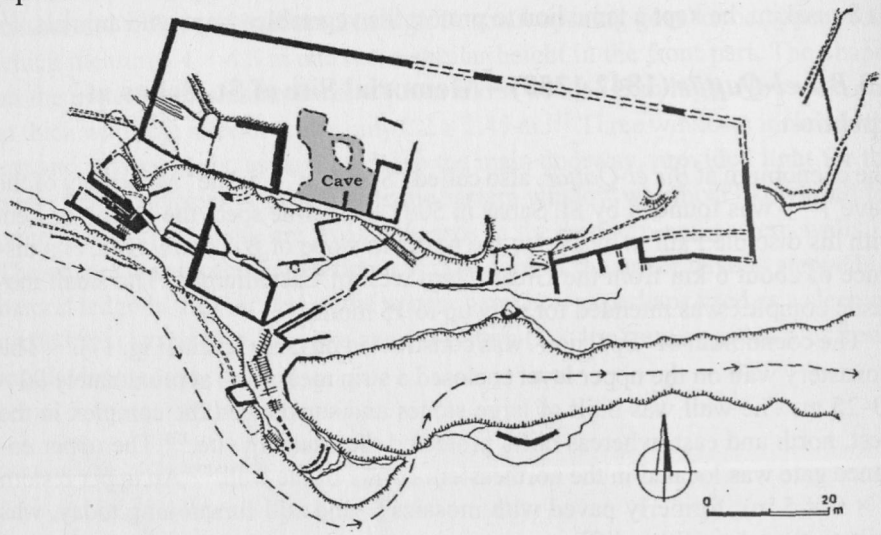

Fig. 17: Memorial Site of St. Sabas at Spelaion (after HIRSCHFELD 1990, 40)

Another church, which measures 5–6 × 12 m, was cut into the cliff below Sabas' Cave. This church had a white mosaic floor with geometric patterns and fragments of a gray marble altar.[128] The porch above the eastern end of the church had mosaics as well.[129]

The central structure on the lower level measured 14 × 14 m. It was apparently a service building with refectory, kitchen, bakery and storerooms. The monastery gate was near the southeastern corner of this service building.[130]

The main features of the lower level were the gate, a drainage channel, some structures and the garden.[131] A rock-cut staircase leads from the gate to an open space and out to the wadi. A nearby cistern that served the needs of visitors measures 2.2 × 2.3 m. The eastern structures, on the lower level, may have been the dwelling units for the coenobium. The garden on the lower level was protected from erosion by damming walls.

The cave at Spelaion appears to have been the location where St. Sabas and his disciple Paul secluded themselves for the season of Lent. It is not surprising that *Bīr el-Qaṭṭār* is another site for pilgrims to venerate a famous monk.

The above mentioned three places were memorial sites for famous monks (St. Chariton, St. Cyriac, St. Sabas) who settled in remote caves. Pilgrims and monks

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[127] See PATRICH 1991, 443.
[128] See PATRICH 1994, 55*.
[129] See PATRICH 1991, 445.
[130] See PATRICH 1994, 55*.
[131] See PATRICH 1991, 446.

alike venerated these caves that have been associated with monastic complexes. Only Sousakim cannot be considered a laura due to the scarcity of the visible remains. It is only a hermitage.[132] The chapel at the cave of Sousakim was obviously built in honour of St. Cyriac. The following two sites are places that recall biblical traditions.

5.4 *Tell el-Ḥarrār* (2037.1387) – Memorial Site of John the Baptist at Sapsas

The laura Sapsas/Sapsaphas was founded at about 500 CE, maybe in the time of Patriarch Elias. The name Sapsas or Sapsaphas is related to the Euphrates poplar trees growing on the banks of the Jordan. The Madaba map shows a similar tree with the inscription "Aenon now Sapsaphas" that might be identical with the laura Sapsas. This site might have been a place for the veneration of Elijah and John the Baptist, both with a long tradition in that region.[133] Sapsas/Sapsaphas seems to be associated with Elijah's ascension to heaven and the sojourn of John the Baptist in the Jordan valley. This monastery can be identified with the complex at *Tell el-Ḥarrār*. In fact, according to Byzantine sources, the cave at *Tell el-Ḥarrār* is thought to have been the grotto of John the Baptist.[134]

The nucleus of *Tell el-Ḥarrār* is a cave church (Fig. 18)[135] that measures 13 × 13 m and is located west of the so-called Rhotorius monastery. The cave church has two parts: a semi-circular rock-cut apse with lamp niches in the walls and a nave that is separated by a chancel screen. It seems probable that the cave associated with the apse was reused from an earlier period. The prayer room, which was not part of the cave, has a main hall and two side aisles, which were separated by columns.[136] Only four column bases – all of which were built of well-dressed sandstone ashlars – have been found, whereas no remains of the roof have survived. The floor of this church was originally covered with mosaics.[137]

While its apse is a man-made cave, the church itself is not located inside a cave, as in the case of other cave churches. However, it does recall and give place to important biblical traditions associated with Elijah and John the Baptist. It seems, therefore, that Byzantine monks used existing caves to build monastic sites around these veneration sites. The reason for choosing the cave at *Tell el-Ḥarrār* was that the biblical traditions about Elijah and John the Baptist were associated with this region.

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[132] See HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 69.

[133] See WAHEEB 2012, 207.

[134] See WAHEEB 2012, 205f. who refers *inter alia* to the testimony of Johannes Moschos and the monk Epiphanius.

[135] Further features are additional cells and cisterns, see HIRSCHFELD 1990a, 36.

[136] See WAHEEB/BALA'AWI/AL-SHAWABKEH 2011, 184; WAHEEB 2012, 208.

[137] See WAHEEB 2008, 119.

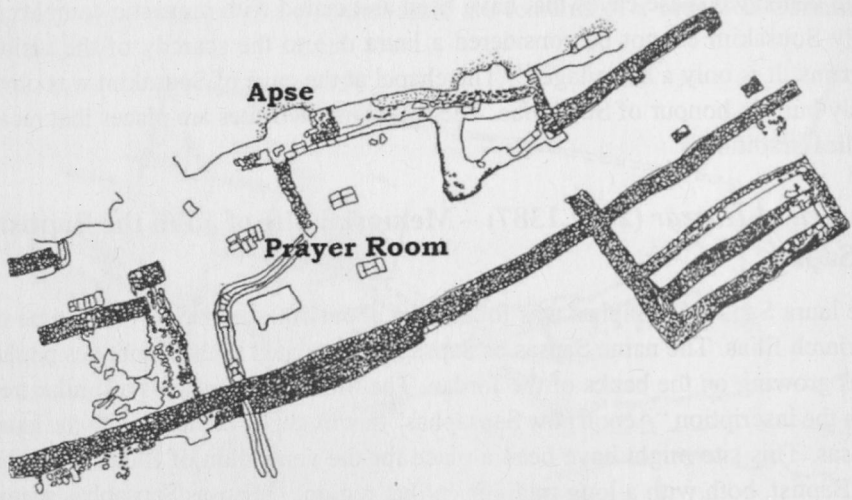

Fig. 18: Memorial Site of John the Baptist at Sapsas (after WAHEEB 2011, 195)

5.5 *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* (1979.0527) – Memorial site of Lot

The monastic complex of *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* is located on a mountain cliff, high over the southeastern shore of the Dead Sea. It was built in the Byzantine to Abbasid Periods (5th–8th century CE). Nothing is known about the date or the circumstances of the establishment of this monastic compound.

The three-aisled basilica in front of a natural cave has three apses and is adorned with mosaics (Fig. 19). One of the mosaics, in the nave of the church before the chancel area, specifies that a renovation occurred in 691 CE.[138] It also describes the church as a great basilica. This church seems to have been built, therefore, primarily for pilgrims rather than for monks, who would have only needed a small chapel. Furthermore, this inscription labels the place a "holy site", maybe a veneration site. The Byzantine pilgrims most likely thought that Lot and his daughters took refuge in this exact cave. This may have been due to a long-standing oral tradition.[139] Apparently, the cave was a memorial site presented to pilgrims as the biblical place where Lot resided after the destruction of Sodom.[140] It matches the depiction of the Sanctuary of Lot on the Madaba Map perfectly.[141] Since there are indications of various places around the Dead Sea where Lot was venerated, it is not surprising that a memorial site was finally established for him in Byzantine times.[142]

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[138] The basilica was renovated during the Umayyad rule in Palestine, thus attesting to religious tolerance, see POLITIS 2010, 161.

[139] See POLITIS 2010, 167f.

[140] See POLITIS 1993a, 506.

[141] See POLITIS 1999, 225; POLITIS 2010, 155.

[142] See POLITIS 2010, 175. Two stones inscribed with the name Lot testify to the identification of the site with the Sanctuary of Agios Lot, vgl. POLITIS 1999, 226.

Within the basilica, the remains of a heptagonal ambo and of a chancel screen made of imported white marble have been found.[143] The southern aisle paved with sandstone slabs might be used as *diakonikon*. Unfortunately, the narthex on the western side had totally collapsed. The main entrance seemed to be in the south-west part of the basilica, adjacent to the water reservoir.[144]

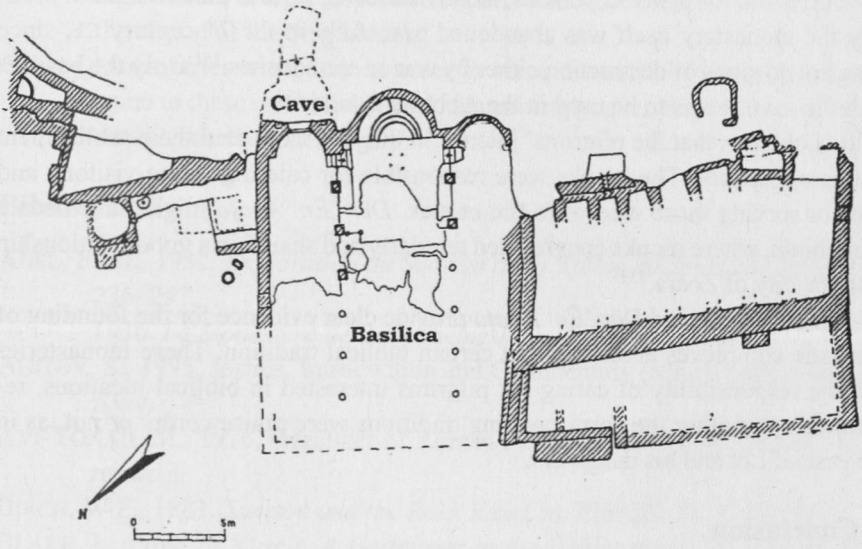

Fig. 19: Memorial site of Lot at *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* (after POLITIS 1993, 504)

Beyond the entrance to the cave of *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa*, two sandstone steps lead into a rectangular room with plastered walls.[145] The interior of the cave measures about 2 × 2.5 m. It was paved with fine white marble slabs.[146] The mosaic in front of the cave has a four-line inscription within a *tabula ansata*, which gives a construction date of April 605/607 CE.[147] Another mosaic is inside the cave entrance. The cave was neither used as a storeroom nor as a tomb. Moreover, it had no altar or other cultic features. Thus it had no obvious liturgical or practical function, but was incorporated into the church as a central feature of the complex. Pilgrim graffiti at the entrance of the cave, as well as the presence of many animal bones in the refuse – which would have been unusual for monks, who were mainly vegetarian – both point to the presence of pilgrims at this site. Apparently, the monks received and cared for pilgrims who visited this location.[148]

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[143] See POLITIS 2010, 163f.
[144] See POLITIS 2010, 164.
[145] See POLITIS 1993a, 505.
[146] See POLITIS 2010, 167.
[147] See POLITIS 2010, 160.
[148] See POLITIS 1999, 226; POLITIS 2010, 175.

The monastery was built on a terrace and protected by an enclosure wall. To the north of the basilica there was an open courtyard, a pilgrims' hostel[149] and the refectory of the monastery. The refectory has long benches and a kitchen with a stone oven, 3 m in diameter. Maybe the monastic complex served as a hospital as well.[150] Furthermore, there is a large water reservoir. A former cistern was used as a burial site for up to 32 persons, mostly suffering serious diseases. Most probably the monastery itself was abandoned peacefully in the 7th century CE, since there are no signs of destruction either by war or earthquakes.[151] Only the basilica with the cave seems to be used in the Abbasid Period.[152]

It is obvious that the pilgrims' interest in this site motivated the establishment of this monastery. The monks were responsible for catering to the visitors, and also for serving those who were tire or sick. *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* might have been a coenobium, where monks congregated regularly and shared in a good relationship with the city of Zoara.[153]

Tell el-Ḥarrār and *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa* provide clear evidence for the founding of monastic complexes at sites with a certain biblical tradition. These monasteries had the responsibility of caring for pilgrims interested in biblical locations, regardless of whether the corresponding traditions were praiseworthy or not, as in the case of Lot and his daughters.

6. Conclusion

After comparing similar monastic complexes, the following conclusions about the monastic compound at *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* can be drawn:

1. The cave church of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* has strong parallels to the layout of the structures at *Dēr Mukellik* and *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr* regarding its size, arrangements, and its components (prayer room, chapel with round apse, *diakonikon*).
2. The monastery of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* has components that are similar to those at comparable cliff-type coenobia (gates with adjacent structures, towers, huge cistern at *Dēr Mukellik* and *Ḫirbet ed-Dēr*), which suggests that it be interpreted as a coenobium.
3. Cliff-type coenobia were built not only in the Judean Desert,[154] but also at other sites that were used for pilgrimage, such as *Dēr ʿĒn ʿAbaṭa*, on

[149] See POLITIS 2010, 175.
[150] See POLITIS 2010, 172.
[151] See POLITIS 2010, 160.
[152] See POLITIS 1993b, 338.
[153] See POLITIS 2010, 175.
[154] Contrary to TAXEL 2008, 62 who thinks that cliff-type coenobia are "an endemic phenomenon of that region".

the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, which memorialized the biblical traditions about Lot and his daughters.

4. Saints and biblical characters were venerated by pilgrims at certain caves in Byzantine times.
5. Even less praiseworthy characters, like Lot and Samson, were held in high esteem in their respective regions (the area around the Dead Sea and the region of the Shephelah).
6. Monasteries were built in order to serve the needs of the pilgrims who came to these memorial sites. Unsurprisingly, even the sick went to these sites in search of healing.

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