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## Funerary Customs in Sacred Spaces

Privileged and Monastic Burials in the Provinces  
of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*

### Introduction

In the last few decades, the study of funerary customs in churches has become an interesting issue of Late Antique archaeology.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of burials is fundamental not only for understanding the ecclesiastical architecture, but it also gives significant insight into the religious and cultural aspects of Early Christian funerary practices. Furthermore, the burial contexts reflect the cultural beliefs about death and their archaeological and bio-anthropological analysis offer new data on the societies of Late Antiquity.<sup>2</sup> According to the Church's doctrine on the issue of the resurrection of the body after death, the predominant funeral custom in Christian cemeteries became inhumation, and archaeological records point out the implementation of this practice.<sup>3</sup> The custom of burying inside churches was common from the 4th c. AD, when both high status members of the clergy and lay society expressed their desire to be buried as near as possible to the tombs or relics of martyrs, usually laid near the altar.<sup>4</sup> The practice spread rapidly as shown by archaeological contexts and homilies of the church fathers until the second half of the 6th c. AD when the synodal councils began to oppose the funerary custom of burial in churches.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*, it is worth mentioning that graves, at and in churches, are detectable in some cases, but most of the ecclesiastical buildings, had no burial places. This evidence shows that the custom of inhumations in churches, while common, was by no means universally practised, and the vast majority of the Christian population were buried in ordinary cemeteries.

- 1 The literature on the subject is extensive; for studies on burials within churches see KÖTTING 1965; DUVAL 1988; SCHOLZ 1998; VOLP 2002; YASIN 2009, 46–100; see also contributions ARBEITER, ARDELEANU, FELLE, GATIER, MAINARDIS, MERTEN, OSNABRÜGGE, PRIEN, VALEVA and ZIMMERMANN in this volume.
- 2 On the topic, see FOX/TRITSAROLI 2019, 103–110.
- 3 More in general on this issue, see KYRIAKAKIS 1974; VELKOVSKA 2001.
- 4 CHAVARRÍA ARNAU 2011, 183f.
- 5 On theological requirements regarding the burials within churches see SCHOLZ 1998, 271–285.

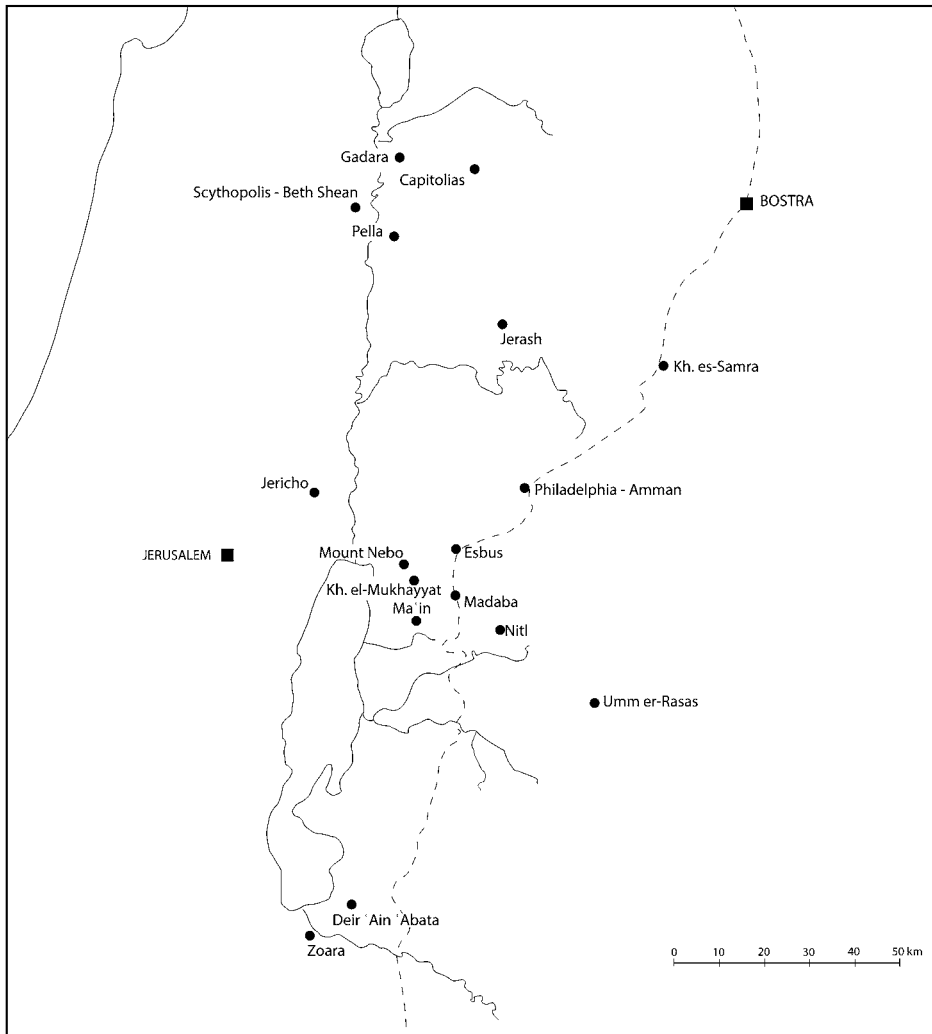


Fig. 1: Map of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* with sites mentioned in the text.

This paper intends to analyse a group of burials found in rural churches and monastic complexes in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* (Fig. 1). It will discuss the typological characteristics of the burials, which in some cases, such as the monastery of Mt Nebo, are enriched by new data from recent excavations and bio-archaeological analysis.<sup>6</sup> The study will also take into consideration a more holistic documentation that includes epigraphic, spatial, social, and bio-archaeological analysis in order to highlight peculiar aspects of mortuary habits in the region under examination.

The chosen case studies are located in the Southern Levant, precisely in the Roman provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*, which are situated on the East and West of the River Jordan. In Late Antiquity, after the reform of Emperor Diocletian in AD 295, the borders of these provinces were partially modified.<sup>7</sup> The province of *Arabia*, whose territories were included between the capital Bosra and the Madaba region, was extended slightly to the north, while its territories south of the Wadi Hasa were included in the province of *Palaestina*. The latter was then divided after AD 429 in three units: *Palaestina Prima* with its capital *Caesarea*, *Palaestina Secunda* in the North with the territories of Galilee and the cities of the *Decapolis* and its capital *Scythopolis* and *Palaestina Tertia* or *Salutaris* in the South with its capital *Petra*.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous studies have examined burials within the churches of these provinces, but they have often focused on a few isolated cases resulting in the lack of a unitary corpus dedicated to this region. Haim Goldfus, whose dissertation focused on the territory of modern Israel, remains an indispensable publication for the study of the burials in churches and monastic contexts in Byzantine Palestine.<sup>9</sup> A more general overview of funeral practices in Israel is summarized in the chapter on Palestine in Late Antiquity in the book by Hans-Peter Kuhnen.<sup>10</sup> Particularly interesting are the bio-archaeological investigations in some funerary contexts and necropolises of Christian Palestine mentioned by Sherry C. Fox and Paraskevi Tritsaroli, carried out on the bone remains found in the mass burial of Mamilla Cave, in the crypt of the Khan el-Ahmar monastery and in an Early Byzantine sewer in Ashkelon.<sup>11</sup> On the phenomenon of the so-called *inventio* of tombs of Christian saints and martyrs, it is important to mention the contribution of Leah Di Segni on the development of Christian cult sites on tombs of the second temple period.<sup>12</sup> For the study of funerary customs in sacred spaces of the province of *Arabia*, a fundamental study is given by Anne Michel's monograph, with a large catalogue of churches and useful bibliographical references.<sup>13</sup> Christoph Eger has collected more recent studies on the subject in his article devoted to the rock chamber necropolis of Khirbet Yajuz.<sup>14</sup> Together with Michael Mackensen, he also published the proceedings of a conference on death and burial in the Near East, in which several burial contexts from sacred spaces are mentioned.<sup>15</sup> For instance the study of Robert Schick in this volume deals with the types of burials in churches in Jordan in the Byzantine

7 On this topic, see CANOVA 1954, LVIII–LIX; BEJOR 1993, 563.

8 On this topic, see HAMARNEH 2003, 29–34.

9 GOLDFUS 1997.

10 KUHNEN 1990, 345–351.

11 FOX/TRITSAROLI 2019, 111, 117f. For further information on individual case studies, see NAGAR 2002; HERSHKOVITZ et al. 1993; SMITH/KAHILA 1992.

12 DI SEGNI 2006–2007.

13 MICHEL 2001.

14 EGER 2018.

15 EGER/MACKENSEN 2018.

and Early Islamic periods, including some data from the excavations at the Quwaysmah South Church.<sup>16</sup> Excellent insights are provided by epigraphical studies of the funerary *stelai* found in the necropolises of the el-Karak region and Ghor es-Safi with information on the death of the deceased, their age at the time of death and some chronological data.<sup>17</sup>

### Framing the Burial Space at Mt Nebo and in Lot's Sanctuary

The first case study concerns the burials in the monastery of Mt Nebo, with two distinct typologies: primary tombs and ossuaries; the latter contain multiple skeletons. The Memorial of Moses on Mt Nebo is one of the most renowned Byzantine monasteries in Jordan.<sup>18</sup> The three naves-monastic church is located in the centre of the *coenobium* and was erected in the second half of the 5th c. AD. The basilica was enlarged with the addition of a triconchial presbytery in the late 5th – early 6th c. AD and later completely rebuilt in the late 6th c. AD; some restoration works were carried out in the church after the earthquake that struck the area in AD 749.<sup>19</sup> It is worth mentioning that the ecclesiastical building has a funerary connotation because it was built on the site linked to the death of Moses and many graves were found inside the church.<sup>20</sup> Among these burials a peculiar empty tomb that was discovered in recent excavations provides new data concerning the meaning and the location of funerary structures within the monastery church (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> This tomb is located along the axis of the church's main nave, exactly on the highest peak of the mountain's spur. The interior of the tomb was found empty, devoid of organic residues or grave goods, showing that the burial had been closed after its construction. The funerary structure is ca. 19 cm deep and made up of a lower row of local stone coated with red plaster and with some architectural fragments of re-used alabaster marble. The archaeological stratigraphy together with coins and pottery sherds allow dating the construction of the tomb to the second half of the 5th c. AD. The typology and the location of this tomb suggest a peculiar purpose, perhaps devotional, in connection with the biblical episode regarding the death of the biblical prophet.<sup>22</sup>

16 SCHICK 2018.

17 CANOVA 1954; MEIMARIS/KRITIKAKOU-NIKOLAROPOULOU 2005.

18 For an introduction to the archaeological site and to the excavations of monastery of Mt Nebo, see SALLER 1941; PICCIRILLO/ALLIATA 1998 and BIANCHI 2018b.

19 More in detail on the architectural phases of the memorial church for Moses and on the archaeological data, see BIANCHI 2021, 70–80.

20 For more on funerary practices, see SANMORÌ 1998, 413–417.

21 BIANCHI 2018a, 39–42; for a detailed description of the tomb structure and the archaeological context, see BIANCHI 2019.

22 Deut. 34, 5.



Fig. 2: Mt Nebo Church, detail of the burial found in nave and the tombs nos. 72–74 behind it.



Fig. 3: Mt Nebo, tomb no. 73.

The location of the empty tomb provides new evidence to understand the other fourteen funerary structures built around that focus.<sup>23</sup> This privileged burial was originally set under the presbytery of the oldest ecclesiastical building erected on Mt Nebo, which was internally divided into three naves.<sup>24</sup> Behind the presbytery, archaeologists found a room with a funerary purpose dated to the first phase of the basilica with three tombs under the mosaic floor (nos. 72–74).<sup>25</sup> The central tomb (no. 73) contained the bones belonging to a single man while the lateral ones (nos. 72 and 74) were polysomic burials (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that tomb no. 73, arranged following the same axis as the privileged burial, seems to be a potential tomb *ad sanctos*.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the presence of a single skeleton confirms the affluent character of this tomb, perhaps intended for the body of a high representative of the monastic clergy. The lateral tombs (nos. 72–74) may have been destined for a limited group of monks who, in the capacity of their particular status or for having held prestigious monastic assignments, could have been buried near the privileged tomb. Sylvester Saller formulated a possible interpretation, based on lit-

23 In detail, the excavation of the church nave and the analysis of the perimeter walls allow a new hypothesis on the architectural evolution of the basilica of Nebo; see BIANCHI 2019; BIANCHI 2018b.

24 BIANCHI 2018a, 44, fig. 6.

25 The three burials are ca. 3m deep. See SANMORI 1998, 411f. For the architectural analysis of the tombs, see ALLIATA/BIANCHI 1998, 189.

26 SALLER 1941, 38 reports that the lateral tombs each contained the skeletons of eight bodies.

27 The burial *ad sanctos* is generally considered to be the custom of being buried next to the tombs of martyrs and saints. On this practice, see FIOCCHI NICOLAI 2016, 619–670; on critical discussion of the concept, see YASIN 2009.

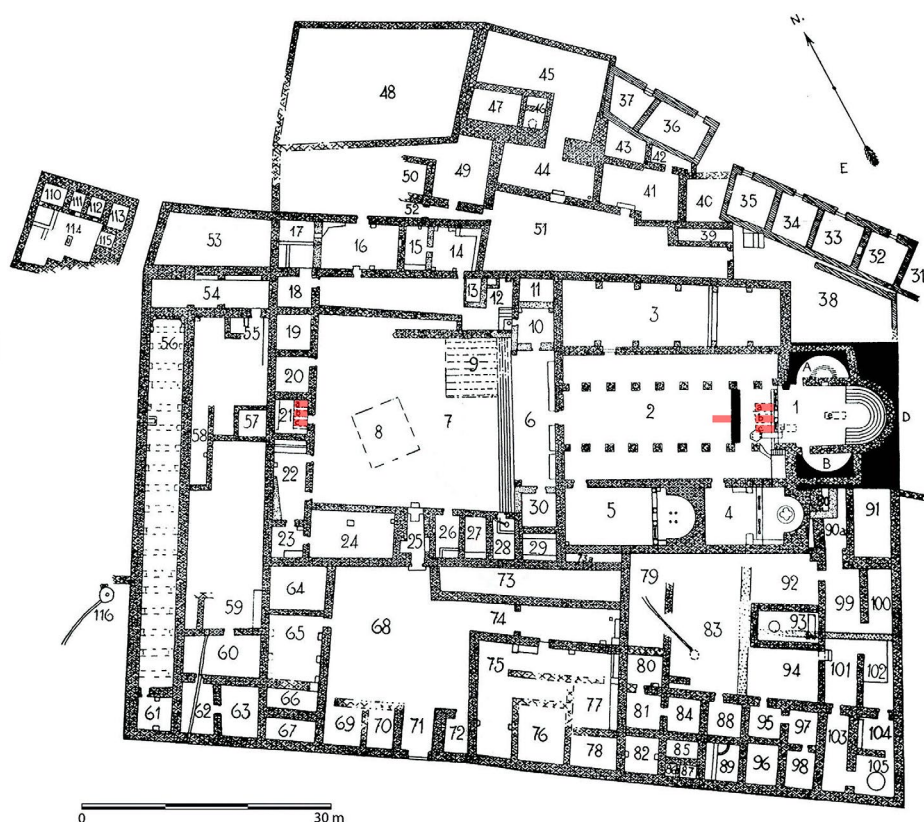


Fig. 4: Mt Nebo, plan of the monastic complex with the tombs found inside the church and in room no. 21 highlighted in red.

erary sources, of this peculiar three-tombs-arrangement.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, although no epitaph was found at the tombs, the *Life of Peter the Iberian* by John Rufus recalls that Bishop Peter, who visited Mt Nebo in 430 and 477 AD, died in a monastery near Gaza and was then buried in a tomb flanked by two others, intended for his disciples.<sup>29</sup> However, the lack of archaeological evidence so far leaves the question open.

Room no. 21, most likely contemporary to the room with tombs nos. 72–74 located in the *atrium* opposite the basilica, in line with the burials of the nave, was also configured as a funerary chamber with three collective burials containing the bones of more than 100 bodies (Fig. 4).<sup>30</sup> In addition to the same number, also the

28 SALLER 1941, 38–39.

29 Joh. Rufus. *V. Petri Ib.*, nr. 142. Transl. by HORN/PHENIX 2008, 273–275; BIANCHI 2018a, 42f., no. 26.

30 SANMORÌ 1998, 414 discusses the definition of this room, preferring not to consider it as a funeral chapel, due to the lack of an altar or liturgical supplies suitable for the celebration of Eucharistic rite; ALLIATA/BIANCHI 1998, 152–154 already proposed the construc-

tombs of room no. 21 have the so-called *pellaiikon* typology as tombs nos. 72–74.<sup>31</sup> The funerary chamber was probably equipped with a system of some glass votive cups, as suggested by the metal wick-holders recovered in the excavation of S. Saller.<sup>32</sup> The discovery of some almost intact upper skeletons and many buckles connected to lacerations of leather belts suggests that the burials had a primary character and that they have been used over time.<sup>33</sup> The peculiar place of the room suggests a potential connection with the privileged burial, but its location outside the church and the large number of bodies buried, strongly suggests that these funerary structures were intended for the burial of simple monks or perhaps of some lay donors.<sup>34</sup>

The loss and alteration of the bones from the tombs excavated by S. Saller in the 1930s did not make the bio-archaeological study of human remains possible. However, radiocarbon dating and isotopic analysis were carried out on the skeletal remains found in the so-called funerary chapel of *hegumenos* Robebus located to the east of the main *coenobium*. The structure consists of a quadrangular room of 4.50 × 5.50 m, with a mosaic floor that includes an epitaph recalling the burial of the 'holy fathers' (beginning of the 6th c. AD) (Fig. 5).<sup>35</sup> Two hatches in the floor led to two funerary crypts divided into two distinct rooms in which multiple burials and fragments of oil lamps were found.<sup>36</sup> Between 2007 and 2010, Margaret Judd analysed the skeletal remains from the east crypt of the funerary chapel (Fig. 6).<sup>37</sup>

The bio-archaeological analysis of dimorphic cranial features reveals that the burials contained skeletons of at least 73 bodies, but the anthropologists could estimate the age for only 46 individuals, presumed to have been monks. The age

tion of the two funerary chambers in the same chronological horizon. Recent archaeological investigations confirm this hypothesis. See SALLER 1941, 35–39, 126f.

31 Both tombs nos. 72–74 and in room 21 were closed by slabs of which one was perforated to facilitate the reopening of the burial. More in detail on the *pellaiikon* typology, see SALLER 1941, 37f.

32 SALLER 1941, 126, fig. 18, no. 3.

33 SALLER 1941, 126, fig. 18, nos. 1–2.

34 The tombs of room 21 have the same *pellaiikon* typology of tombs nos. 72–74. See in detail, SANMORI 1998, 414.

35 The inscription (I.Jordanie II 116 = SEG XL 1538) reads: Ἐπὶ τοῦ [θε]οσε[βεστάτου] | Ῥοβέβου [πρεσβ(υτέρου) καὶ ἡγουμέ-] | νου ἐκ θεμελίων ἐκτίσθη | ὁ τ[ό]πος τῶ[ν] πρεσβ(υτέρων) τῶν ἀνα- | πεπαυμέ[νων] ἐν ἀγίοις. (In the days of the most God-fearing priest and *hegumenos* Robebus, the [tomb of the priests] who are resting [among the saints] was built [from the foundations?; trans. by L. Di Segni]. DI SEGNI 1998, 437f., no. 34, n. 38 suggests that these tombs were intended to contain a few selected bodies and not collective burials. See also contribution GATIER in this volume.

36 PICCIRILLO/ALLIATA 1990, 403–404.

37 I would like to thank M. JUDD from the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh for sharing with me some information on her study and for sending me her last articles. For detailed analyzes, see JUDD 2007; JUDD 2008; JUDD 2010; JUDD/GREGORICKA/FORAN 2019; JUDD 2020.

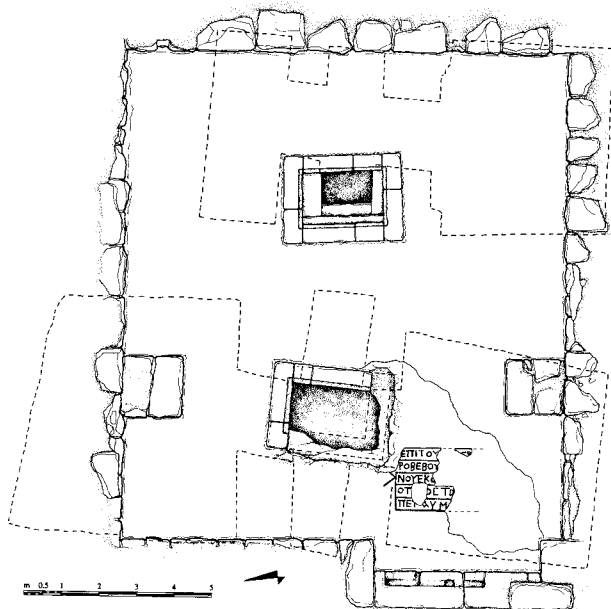


Fig. 5: Mt Nebo, plan of Robebus chapel.



Fig. 6: Mt Nebo, east crypt, south chamber of Robebus chapel, prior excavation.



ranges of the deceased were between 15 and 18 (one skeleton), 18 and 25 (four skeletons), 25 and 35 (twenty-one skeletons), 35 and 50 (nineteen skeletons one of which perhaps a female) and over 50 (one skeleton).<sup>38</sup> This data is interesting because very few female skeletons have been recovered in the monasteries of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia*, as for example at Deir 'Ain 'Abata.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the disposition of the bones shows that the deposition of the bodies did not occur simultaneously, but access to the crypt and burials continued over time. This practice is particularly evident through the addition of new bodies, which resulted in a disordered assembly of the skeletal remains (Fig. 7).<sup>40</sup> Among the most interesting results of the bio-archaeological analysis, M. Judd mentions that a number of skulls and ribs had small portions cut out after the burial – i.e. *postmortem* – seemingly as relics for other monks or pilgrims.<sup>41</sup> The custom of reopening the tombs, especially those of monks who

had led a pious and charismatic life, to allow the burial of other bodies or the removal of fragments of bones is mentioned in some episodes of the *Spiritual Meadow* by John Moschus and in the *Life of Stephen the Sabaite* by Leontius of Damascus.<sup>42</sup>

The isotopic examination of the bones also provided data on the monks' diet, suggesting that about half of the skeletal samples examined belonged to men who in their childhood consumed water and foodstuffs from the wider geographical context of the Arabian Peninsula before they reached the monastery of Nebo.<sup>43</sup> If the deceased buried in the funerary chapel of Robebus were monks, it is therefore



Fig. 7: Mt Nebo, Skeletal remains found in east crypt, north chamber of Robebus chapel.

38 JUDD/GREGORICKA/FORAN 2019, 457f., tab. 2.

39 GRUSPIER 2012, 421–448. Although bio-archaeological evidence does not allow affirming the sex of the skeleton with certainty, hagiographic sources recall the presence of women in male monastic communities, whose identity was often hidden by the monastic habit like the episodes of St Mary/Marinos and Matrona of *Perge* who disguised themselves as men to be admitted to monastic life. On the topic see, TALBOT 1996, 1–64.

40 A really interesting fact is that many bones were laid in anatomical order, but not in anatomical position. JUDD 2008, 524.

41 JUDD 2008, 525 mentions that discs of bone had been removed from at least five of the skulls selected for this funerary practice.

42 Jo. Mosch, 91; Vit. S. Steph. 26, 2, 4. On this topic, see BIANCHI 2018a, 38.

43 JUDD/GREGORICKA/FORAN 2019, 464.

possible to imagine a particularly heterogeneous ethnic component of the monastic community.

The topographical arrangement of the burials at Mt Nebo seems to find a parallel in some monasteries in the Judean Desert. The analysis of these monasteries by H. Goldfus shows that there was a division of the burial plots according to the monastic hierarchy.<sup>44</sup> Burials were reserved for the *hegumenos* and the leaders of the monastic community in the most prominent place of the church, while for ordinary members of the monastic clergy and possible lay people, the cumulative burials were located outside the inhabited areas of the monastic complex.<sup>45</sup>

The funerary practice of collective burials in monastic complexes is also attested in the sanctuary of Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abata, close to the village of Zoara-Ghor es-Safi in Jordan.<sup>46</sup> In the excavation area K.II, located to north of the monastic church, one disused cistern was converted into a communal burial chamber for the burial of twenty-eight adult males, most presumably monks, one adult female and three children.<sup>47</sup> Bio-archaeological analysis of the skeletal remains shows that a high percentage of the bodies presents signs of pathologies of chronic illnesses, suggesting that the monastery may have served as a hospice or hospital.<sup>48</sup> To the north of the cistern, there were several cist burials containing the single inhumations of one foetus, one infant, four children and one adult.<sup>49</sup> The most interesting archaeological evidence is the position of the tombs and common burial that was extremely close to the sacred cave set at the end of the church's north aisle. Since this place was the focus of the pilgrims' devotion, it is reasonable to assume that the deceased had intended to be buried next to this holy spot. The sacredness of the cave is also indicated by two secondary burials located in the back of the structure, with skeletal remains of two males, probably serving in some capacity as relics.<sup>50</sup>

## Familial Burials in Palestinian Ecclesiastical Complexes

In order to understand who could be buried in monastic foundations, special attention should be paid to funerary inscriptions, which in many cases indicate that the tombs could not have been intended only for monks. A good occurrence of fe-

44 This practice is particularly well attested in the monasteries of Euthymius and Martyrius, see GOLDFUS 2006, 415–417. More in details on these two monastic complexes, see HIRSCHFELD 1993; MAGEN 2015.

45 GOLDFUS 2006, 417.

46 More in detail on the excavation reports, see POLITIS 2012a.

47 For the analytical description of archaeological stratigraphy, see POLITIS 2012b, 145–150.

48 The severity of some skeletal traumata would suggest that some of these individuals were not self-sufficient, but they needed other people' physical assistance. GRUSPIER 2012, 447.

49 GRUSPIER 2012, 421–424.

50 GRUSPIER 2012, 447f. points out that many small bones of the skeletons are absent, in particular from hands and feet.

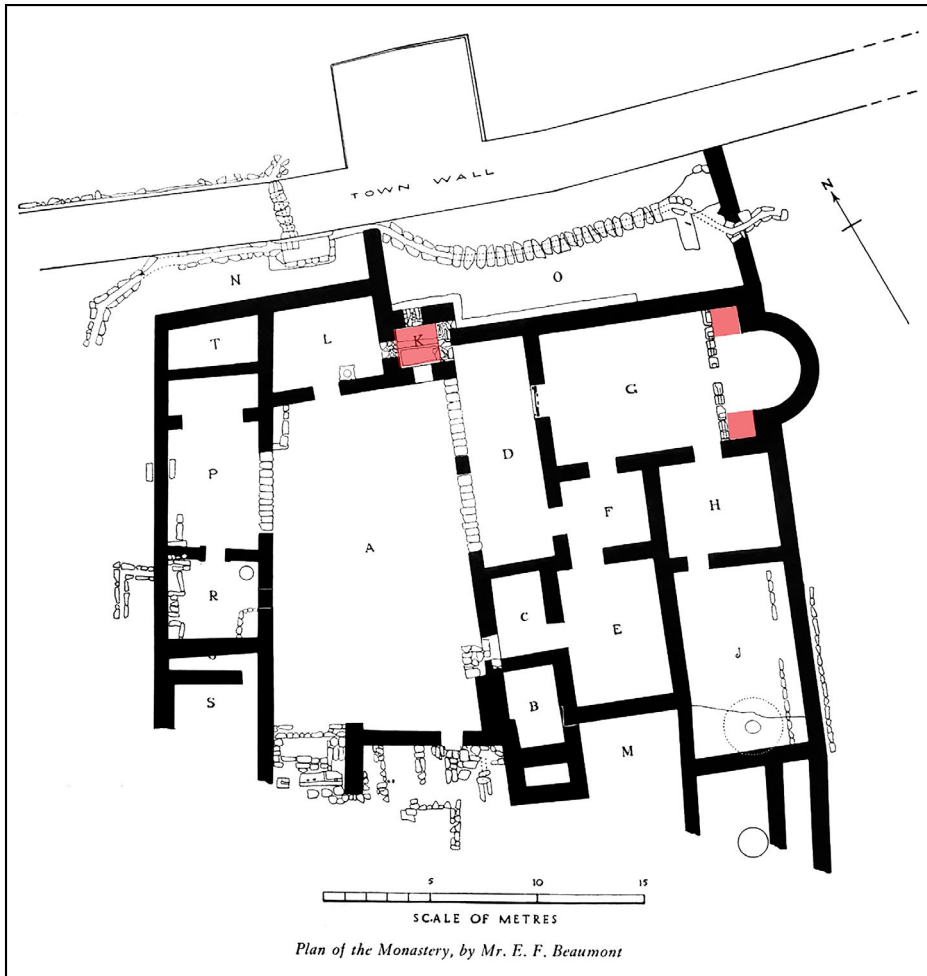


Fig. 8: *Scythopolis/Beth Shean*, plan of the monastery of Lady Mary with the funerary areas highlighted in red.

male names and lay titles on epitaphs and skeletons of women and children were found in churches in the lower Galilee and in the Negev as in Rehovot, *Nessana*, and Shivta, suggesting burials of lay people.<sup>51</sup> The inhumation of lay members of the society would presumably be attributed to their direct financial involvement in founding and funding the monastic complex. Through their donations, people claimed for themselves the right to be buried in ecclesiastical buildings and in some cases, this privilege could be extended to other family members or even to future generations.<sup>52</sup> Most likely, the lay founders or financiers chose to be buried in

51 GOLDFUS 1997, 176–236 discussed this topic in detail in his dissertation.

52 For similar evidence of distinct familial burial zones within Late Antique cemeteries and burial churches, see contributions ARDELEANU, MAINARDIS and MERTEN in this volume.

monastic foundations so that the monks could pray continually and constantly for their soul. An interesting case study of lay burials in ecclesiastical contexts is the monastery of *Kyria Maria* at *Scythopolis*/Beth Shean in Galilee.<sup>53</sup> The monastery, located in the northern part of the city, consists of two wings with several monastic rooms and a chapel arranged around a central courtyard (Fig. 8).<sup>54</sup> Many of the rooms in the monastery have mosaic floors of excellent technique, most of which date from the second half of the 6th c. AD.<sup>55</sup> Seven mosaic inscriptions that include information on the benefactors' identity were identified in the monastic complex; in particular, the inscription in the room in front of the chapel bears the name of the female donor Lady Mary (*Kyria Maria*), who contributed financially to the construction of the western wing.<sup>56</sup> According to L. Di Segni this sector of the monastery was built to accommodate a recluse monk named Elias.<sup>57</sup> Two burials are located inside the chapel in the presbytery area, a particularly privileged area given the proximity to the altar in order to gain the blessing and prayers for the deceased. Two very detailed mosaic inscriptions inform not only about the type of burial and the practice of reopening the tombs to bury new deceased, but also the right of the founders or benefactors to be buried in the monastery they financed (Fig. 9).<sup>58</sup> Both burials seem to have a familial character: in the northern inscription the recluse Elias buried his sister who died on 10th April AD 567, but the tomb was reopened later as indicated by the remainder of the mosaic inscription and the skeletal remains belonging to four individuals.<sup>59</sup> In the southern inscription, placed over a

53 For a detailed report on the excavation, see FITZGERALD 1939. See also TSAFRIR/FOERSTER 1997 for the urban planning of *Scythopolis* in the Byzantine age.

54 FITZGERALD 1939, 2–5. DI SEGNI 2017, 67 n. 24 proposes a review of the construction phases of the building and she suggests that the eastern wing of the monastery was built in the first phase, and the western one was added later.

55 FITZGERALD 1939, 5–10; GOLDFUS 1997, 217.

56 The inscription reads: + Χ(ριστ)ἔ ὁ θ(εὸς) Σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου, ἐλέησον | τὴν φιλ(ώ)χ(ριστο)ν κυρ(ι)αν Μαρ(ι)αν κ(αι) τὸν | ταύτης υἱὸν Μάξιμον, κ(αι) ἀνα- | παῦσον τοὺς αὐτῶν γ(ο)νεῖς, | εὐχαῖς πάντων τῶν ἁγίων· Ἀμήν. (O Christ the God, saviour of the world, have mercy upon the Christ-loving Lady Mary and her son Maximos, and grant rest to their forefathers, through the prayers of all the saints, amen; trans. by FitzGerald). FITZGERALD 1939, 14, n. 3. DI SEGNI 2017, 67 suggests that this wing was built to accommodate a recluse monk named Elias.

57 DI SEGNI 2017, 67.

58 FITZGERALD 1939, 14f., n. 3f.

59 The inscription SEG VIII 40 reads: + ὅπου ἐστὶν τό στεφαν(ο)σταυρί(ο)ν | ἐκ(ε)ῖ κεῖτ(αι) τὸ πελλαϊκόν τοῦ | στόματος τοῦ μνημ(ε)ρίου | ἔχον κρικ<ε>ία. Ἐνθα κατέθ(η)κα | τὴν φιλόχ(ριστό)ν μου ἀδελφὴν | Γεωργίαν ἐγὼ Ἥλ(ε)ίας ἐλάχιστ[ος] | ἐλέει Θε(ο)ῦ ἐ(γ)κλ(ει)στός· ἀν(ε)πά- | (η) δὲ μην(ι) Μαῖω | τετάρτη, Ἰνδικτι(ῶ)νος | πεντεκ[αιδ]εκάτης, | ἡμέρα δὲ ἦν [τῆς Μ]εσο(ο)- | πεντηκοστ[ῆς] “+ (Where the wreath-cross is, there lies the *pellaiikon* of the mouth of the tomb, having rings. There have I laid my Christ-Loving sister Georgia, I Elias, by the mercy of God a most lowly recluse; now she died on the fourth day in the month of May of the fifteenth indiction, moreover it was the day of Mesopentecost; trans. by FitzGerald). After FITZGERALD 1939, 15.

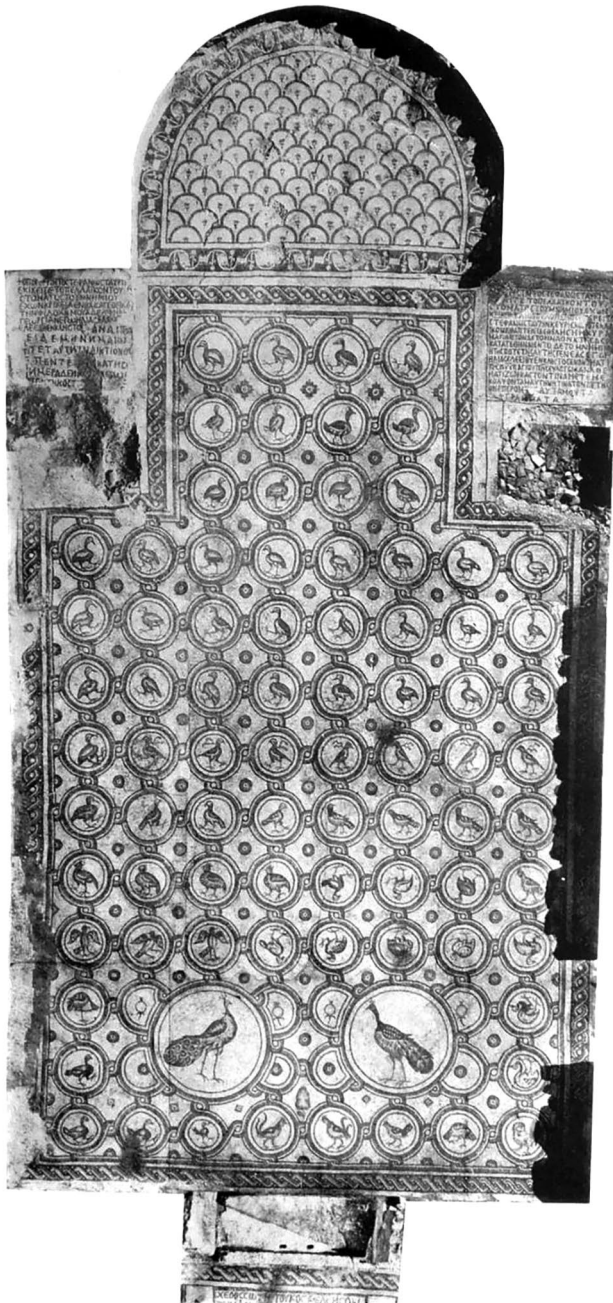


Fig. 9: Scythopolis/Beth Shean, chapel in the monastery of Lady Mary.

burial containing two individuals, the right of the benefactress Lady Mary and her descendants to be buried in the church is made explicit.<sup>60</sup> The tomb seems to have been a private family burial place for Lady Mary's heirs, whose burial privilege was strongly reaffirmed in the epitaph through an anathema against anyone who would have hindered this practice or removed the inscription.<sup>61</sup>

A funerary chamber was built in the north-eastern corner of the courtyard; some bones and two skulls were found under the fragments of the mosaic floor, which according to Gerald M. FitzGerald was intentionally broken in some parts to allow the tomb to be reopened. In front of the entrance to the room, a mosaic inscription invokes Christ for the protection of Lord John, *gloriosissimus* ex-prefect and his blessed house, who is most likely identified as another donor of the monastery together with other benefactors mentioned in a second inscription set at the southern edge of the hall in front of the chapel.<sup>62</sup> Given the proximity of the inscription to the funerary chamber, it is possible that Lord John, like Lady Mary, wished to be buried together with his heirs in the monastic complex.

60 The inscription [SEG VIII 39](#) reads: [+ὄπο]υ ἐστὶν τό στεφαν(ο)σταυρί(ο)ν | [ἐκ(ε)ῖ κ]εῖτ(αι) τὸ πελλαϊκόν τοῦ | στόματος τοῦ μνημ(ε)ίου ἔχ(ο)ν | κρικ<ε>ῖα· καὶ ὁ βουλόμενος ἐπ(αι) ρει τὸ | στεφαν(ο)σταυρί(ο)ν κ(αι) εὐρίσκει το πελλα- | ῖκὸν κ(αι) θάπτει. Εἰ δέ θελήσῃ ἡ κυρ(ι)α | Μαρία (ἡ) τόνδε τὸν ναὸν κτ(ι)σασα | κατατεθῆναι ἐν τ(ῶ)δε τ(ῶ) μνημ(ε)ίῳ, | ἢ τ(ι)ς ποτέ τῆς αὐτῆς γενεᾶς, ἐγὼ | Ἡλ(ε)ίας, ἐλέει θε(ο)ῦ ἐ(γ)κλ(ει)στός, ἐν ὀνόματι | Π(ατ) ρ(ός) κ(αι) Υ(ι)οῦ κ(αι) Ἁγίου | Πν(εύματος) εὐλογῶ κ(αι) ἀναθε- | ματίζω ἕκαστόν τινα μετ' ἐμέ | κ(ω)λύοντα ἢ αὐτήν ἢ τινα τ(ῶ)ν αὐτῆς | ἢ κ(αι) ἐπ(αι)ροντα ταῦτά μου τὰ | + γράμματα + (+ Where the wreath-cross is, there lies the *pellaikon* of the mouth of the tomb, having rings; and he who wishes lifts up the wreath-cross and finds the *pellaikon* and buries the dead. But if Lady Mary, who founded this church, desires to be laid in this tomb – or anyone of her family at any time – I, Elias, by the mercy of God a recluse, in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost curse and anathematize everyone after me that hinders her or any of hers, or that takes up this my + inscription +; trans. by FitzGerald). After FITZGERALD 1939, 14f.

61 Through the mosaic inscription, it was possible to visually reiterate the privilege of burial.

62 The inscription in front of the burial chamber reads: + Χ(ριστ)ὲ ὁ θε(ός)ς ἡμῶν, σκέπη κ(αι) ἀντιλημψίς γενοῦ | κυρ(ι)οῦ Ἰωάννου ἐνδοξ(ο)τάτου) ἀπὸ ἐπάρχων κ(αι) τοῦ | εὐλογημένου αὐτοῦ οἴκου, εὐχ(αῖ)ς τῶν Ἁγίων· + Ἀμήν (O Christ our God, be the protector and succour of Lord John, *gloriosissimus* ex-prefect, and of all his blessed house, through the prayers of the saints, amen.; trans. by L. Di Segni). After FITZGERALD 1939, 14, no. 2. DI SEGNI 2017, 68 discusses the inscription in detail and suggests that John was a member of the senatorial aristocracy. The second one reads: + Πρ(οσφορά) (?) ὑπὲρ [μν]ήμης κ(αι) τελ(ε)ίας ἐν | Χ(ριστ)ῷ ἀναπαύσεως Ζωσίμου | Ἰλουστρίου κ(αι) σωτηρίας κ(αι) ἀντιλήμψεως Ἰωάννου | ἐνδοξ(ο)τάτου) ἀπὸ ἐπάρχων κ(αι) Πέτρου | κ(αι) Ἀναστασίου φιλοχρίστων | κομίτων κ(αι) παντὸς τοῦ εὐλογ(η)μέν(ου) | αὐτῶν οἴκου, εὐχ[αῖ]ς τῶν Ἁγίων· Ἀμήν + (Offering for the memory and perfect rest in Christ of the *illustri*s Zosimos, and the preservation and succour of John, *gloriosissimus* ex-prefect, and of Petros and Anastasios, Christ-loving *comites*, and of all their blessed house, through the prayers of the saints, amen; trans. by L. Di Segni). After FITZGERALD 1939, 13f., no. 1; DI SEGNI 2017, 68.

The practice of family burials within churches is also attested in the Negev, particularly in *Nessana*/Tell Nitzana, where some epitaphs over the graves in the two aisles of the North Church, recall the burial of members of an important local family: the priest and *hegumenos* Sergios, his son Patricius and the daughter of the latter, Maria.<sup>63</sup>

## Funerary Goods in Umm er-Rasas

Archaeological evidence suggests that the privilege of being buried within churches was granted to a limited number of people in this area. In addition to epitaphs, an indicator of the presence of subjects not related to the clergy can come from funerary goods. Well known is the Roman and Late Antique custom of dressing the deceased in clothes that they used to wear during their life, and of equipping them with objects that belonged to them and to their status.<sup>64</sup> In Umm er-Rasas several burials in the churches of the northern district of the settlement were found.<sup>65</sup> The excavations in the church of Bishop Sergios, in the Court Church, in the St Stephen basilica and in the Aedicula Church show several pit tombs built with blocks of masonry stones with an east-west orientation and covered by large slabs as well as a hypogean funerary chapel.<sup>66</sup> In most of the cases the bodies, at least two or more per tomb, were laid supine with their head turned to the West and accompanied by funerary goods, mainly jewels. The most significant case of possible lay burials is in the so-called Court Church, dated to the beginning of the 7th c. AD, where two rectangular pit tombs covered with four stone slabs and characterized by the usual east-west orientation were recognized.<sup>67</sup> Inside the polysomic burials, archaeologists found the skeletons of sixteen bodies and a large group of funerary goods, including necklaces of glass paste beads, a bone crest needle, finger-rings, bracelets, copper crosses, and small fragments of iron chain metallic bracelets, which were probably worn by the deceased at the time of the burial (Fig. 10).<sup>68</sup> The presence of three iron buckles with a fixed fitting, typically belonging to male clothes, suggests that the bodies were men.<sup>69</sup> In addition to the personal jewellery items, glass ves-

63 For the description of the excavations of the church, see COLT 1962, 17–20; in greater detail on the burials, GOLDFUS 1997, 82–87; for the [epitaph of Sergios and Patricius](#), see COLT 1962, 140f., no. 12; for [Maria's epitaph](#), see COLT 1962, 140f., no. 14.

64 This issue is extensively studied, see VIELLA 2020, 140–151 with further literature; EGER 2003. For the Jordanian context an interesting comparison are the funerary goods found in the rock chamber necropolis of Khirbet Yajuz; see EGER 2018, 156–161.

65 For a general study on the church's excavations in Umm er-Rasas, see PICCIRILLO/ALLIATA 1994.

66 On this topic, see BIANCHI 2018a, 51.

67 PICCIRILLO 1991, 345f., fig. 10; ALLIATA 1991, 379.

68 ALLIATA 1991, 369, 379–382.

69 EGER 2018, 165; EGER 2003, 163–178.



Fig. 10: Umm er-Rasas, funerary goods found in the burials of the Court Church.



Fig. 11: Umm er-Rasas, funerary goods found in the burial of the Aedicula Church.



sels and *balsamaria* were found in the burial places of the Aedicula Church at Umm er-Rasas (Fig. 11)<sup>70</sup>. These vitreous finds, which may have had a ritual function, are not isolated cases in the province of *Arabia* as shown by the juglets found in a tomb close to the Western Church of Ma'in some of which were eulogia glass vessels.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, no bio-archaeological investigation has so far been carried out on the bones to identify their biological sex; however, the privileged burial place inside the churches of the ecclesiastical complex of St Stephen would suggest that members of the local elite could be buried in these tombs.

## Conclusions

The interpretation of the funerary customs in churches of the Provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* is a complex issue due to the lack of archaeologically well-dated burials, and by the limited presence of funerary goods and epitaphs. Indeed, in many cases the absence of these key-elements does not allow knowing the identity and the status of the deceased. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the funerary contexts, which contemplates not only the archaeological data of the tombs with their grave goods, but also the epigraphic records, the shape and structure of the burials, their topographical distribution and the anthropological study of the organic remains is essential.

It is important to mention that the discovery of numerous cemetery areas in the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* of the Byzantine era, characterized by tombstones that contain information on the deceased, the age and the cause of death, shows that most of the population were buried in the necropolises and not in churches.<sup>72</sup>

Almost all the burials in the churches of the provinces of *Palaestina* and *Arabia* are multiple depositions where several bodies are accumulated or moved, disturbing the original burial sequence. The analysis of the burials presented in this paper shows that their presence and position was not accidental. Indeed, the location of the burial within the church and its structural configuration are factors that in Christian funerary contexts begin to assume a decisive importance in the social differentiation of the deceased. The most common type of burial analysed is that of

70 For the analysis of these objects, see ALLIATA 1991, 369, 372–378.

71 For the analysis of the excavation of the western church of Ma'in, see PICCIRILLO 1985, 349; MICHEL 2001, 371–373. For more details on the glass vessels with other *comparanda* in Jordan, see BARAG 1985, 367–374. Some of the finger-rings and bracelets found in the burials of the Aedicula Church at Umm er-Rasas still encircled the bones of the hands and the arms of the deceased. For glass and jewellery as grave goods in other Late Antique contexts, see contributions ARDELEANU, PRIEN and MERTEN in this volume.

72 Christian cemeteries with hundreds of tombstones on the south side of Ghor es-Safi, Khirbet es-Samra, and Karak have been identified in the territory of present-day Jordan. On this topic, see SCHICK 2018, 177f.; on funerary epigraphy in Early Byzantine *Arabia*, see contribution GATIER in this volume.

ordinary people (clergy or lay) set below the church pavement in the nave, in the side aisles, outside the church or in special funeral chambers, reserving the area of the *presbyterium* for the clergy or for the so-called sepulchres *ad sanctos*. The epigraphic evidence suggests that an ecclesiastical authority governed burial habits in sacred spaces through specific rules. In some cases, as in the case of the monastery of *Kyria Maria* at Beth Shean, in addition to donating or financially supporting these ecclesiastical complexes, lay members of society could found a monastery that would become a family chapel whose members might have had the right to be buried there. However, from the limited cases known so far only a small number of people had this privilege. Unfortunately, the identities of the buried individuals are known from inscriptions only in a few cases.

In monastic complexes, a particular role was linked to the hierarchy of the clergy, and it is possible to assume that individuals buried alone in the most prominent part of the church held high ecclesiastical ranks. The recent bio-archaeological investigations on the skeletal remains carried out in particular in the funerary contexts of Mt Nebo and of Lot's sanctuary in Deir 'Ain 'Abata are particularly useful for scientific research. The results of the analysis can add new data not only on the state of health of the deceased, on their diet and origin, but also on the internal social structure of the monastic community. Indeed, the results of isotopic analysis suggests that almost half of the people buried at Mt Nebo spent their childhood in a non local context, showing that these people arrived at the Memorial of Moses sometime later in life.<sup>73</sup> These elements indicate that the two monastic shrines had not only local importance, but that they were crossroads of monks and pilgrims from a wider regional context.

The burials inside the monastic and rural churches are very interesting case studies within the funerary landscapes of the Late Antique Levant. The investigation of these sepulchral realities, which involved numerous disciplines of funerary research, has allowed not only to better define the funerary customs in the context under examination, but also their social, devotional and commemorative implications.

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