

— EARLY —  
CHRISTIANITY  
IN CONTEXTS

An Exploration across Cultures and Continents

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EDITED BY  
William Tabbernee

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# General Introduction

WILLIAM TABBERNEE

In December 2009 Professor Elizabeth Bolman, a specialist in Egyptian Christian art, was supervising the cleaning and restoration of some beautiful artwork painted on the walls of a fourth-century tomb chamber. The funerary chapel containing the tomb chamber, discovered in 2002, is part of the so-called White Monastery in Upper Egypt (see chap. 5). Its most famous abbot was Shenoute of Atripe (346/7–465 CE). This long-lived scholar-monk from the hinterlands of the Nile, who played a prominent role in one of the great ecumenical councils of the early church (Council of Ephesus in 431), was long neglected outside Egypt because his writings, regarded as the high-water mark in Coptic literature, were not translated into Greek and Latin. But inside Egypt many Christians, including three popes of the Coptic Church, have been named after him.

One of the barrel vaults of the chamber where Bolman and her team were working is decorated with a painting of three standing figures. The depiction of the central figure has almost completely survived the ravages of time, unlike those of his companions. Barefooted, bearded, the man wears a monk's garb and a stole with four crosses. His hands are raised in prayer, the left hand holding a victory wreath. Around his head is a (square) halo. Perhaps to their surprise, when they cleaned the wall above the saint's head, the team discovered an inscription. The initial words and a couple of later letters are missing, but the whole text may confidently be restored thus: “[The (holy) tomb/shrine] of A[bb]a Shenoute Archimand[r]ite” (Bolman, Davis, and Pike 2010, 457, 461). The final resting place of the great ancient abbot had been found!

## Recent Archaeological Discoveries

Bolman's is merely one of the latest significant archaeological discoveries made in recent years related to the history of early Christianity (ca. 30–ca. 400) or Christianity in Late Antiquity (ca. 400–ca. 640). In August 1998 a young Turkish villager, Murat Altın, sold to the Uşak Archaeological Museum a broken marble slab. His grandfather had uncovered the slab while plowing and used it as a step for the family home.

In July 2002 the Greek and Latin bilingual inscription on the slab provided a vital clue leading to the discovery of Tymion and Pepouza, the long-lost “New Jerusalem” of the Montanists, adherents of an early Christian prophetic movement (Tabbernee 2003; 2012; Tabbernee and Lampe 2008).



William Tabbernee

Fig. I.1. “Tymion Inscription”

In May 2006 a stone pillar was unearthed in Luoyang, China, and sold on the black market before being recovered by the authorities. It is the second stele known to have been erected by Christians of the Church of the East describing the establishment of Christianity in China (see chap. 4).

In January 2010 workers repairing Davis Street in Jerusalem’s historic Old City accidentally uncovered the original pavement of the Decumanus, the main east-west street built by the Romans after the Second Jewish Revolt. The discovery confirms the accuracy of the mosaic Madaba Map (see chap. 1). That

map shows the Decumanus slightly south (to the right on the map) of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The colonnaded street shown in the middle of the map is the *Cardo Maximus*, the main north-south Roman street.

Five years earlier, Ramil Razilo was one of fifty Israeli prisoners clearing an area of ground for the construction of a new ward at the Megiddo prison when his spade struck what turned out to be the mosaic floor of a (probably) third-century church (fig. 1.8). Claims about the mosaic being the oldest extant remnants of a building specifically constructed as a Christian church may be exaggerated, as that honor may belong to the mosaic flooring of the Theodorian Complex in Aquileia. On the basis of an inscription, that church can be dated between 313 and 319 (see chap. 9).

A number of other exaggerated or highly speculative claims, based on ancient artifacts, inscriptions, or other material evidence, have been made in



William Tabbernee

Fig. I.2. Pavement of Roman *Cardo Maximus*, Jerusalem



Fig. I.3. Madaba Map, Showing Jerusalem



recent years. These include the alleged identification of some early ossuaries as containing the bones of “James, the brother of Jesus,” of other members of Jesus’s family, and even of Jesus himself (Tabor and Jacobovici 2012). These claims are very controversial (see chap. 1). It is, nevertheless, important to recognize that our understanding of the past is always open to challenge and correction by the discovery of new “hard evidence” and/or by the reinterpretation of already-known material seen in a new light (Tabbernee 2013a).

## The “Abercius” Inscription

Until the late nineteenth century, scholars believed, on the basis of the extant fourth-century *Vita Abercii* (*Life of Abercius*), that a man named “Abercius” was a second-century bishop of Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale, Turkey). In June 1883, however, William Ramsay, a Scottish classicist and epigrapher, discovered two fragments of the tombstone of an “Avircius” (Ramsay 1883, 424–27 no. 36; *CB* 657). The discovery was made not at Pamukkale (ancient Hierapolis), but near Koçhisar (ancient Hieropolis) in the Phrygian Pentapolis, approximately 110 km northeast of Hierapolis (fig. 7.2). Two years earlier, at nearby Kilandırız, Ramsay had come across another tombstone, that of a man named Alexander, which had partially borrowed the wording of Avircius’s epitaph (Ramsay 1882b, 518 no. 5; cf. Ramsay 1882a, 339–53; *CB* 656).

The whole text of Avircius’s epitaph (see sidebar I.1) can be reconstructed on the basis of the additional information provided by the *Vita Abercii* (Nissen 1912, 1–55) and the wording of Alexander’s epitaph. In somewhat cryptic language, but language intended to be understood by “those in the know,” Avircius tells all who pause to read his epitaph that he is the citizen of a “heavenly city” as well as of his native city, Hieropolis; a disciple of Christ, the Holy Shepherd; an avid reader of the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul; and that he had traveled widely (as far west as Rome and as far east as Nisibis), everywhere sharing the Eucharist with people bearing the seal of baptism.



William Tabbernee

Fig. I.4. Avircius’s Tombstone (Reconstruction), Vatican Museum, Vatican City

### I.1 “Having Paul in the Carriage”—Avircius’s Cryptic Epitaph

I, the citizen of a select city, have prepared this while still living so that I might have a notable tomb here for my body. Named Avirkios, I am the disciple of a  
 4 holy shepherd | who feeds flocks of sheep on mountains and plains, who has powerful eyes keeping everything in view. For he it was who taught me . . .  
 8 faithful writings, he who sent me to Rome | to behold the capital and to see a gold-robed, gold-sandalled queen. Also a people I saw there having a res-  
 12 splendent seal | and I saw the plain of Syria and all the cities, (even) Nisibis,  
 16 having crossed the Euphrates; | everywhere I had kindred spirits. Having Paul  
 20 in the carriage, Faith led the way everywhere and set before me as nourishment | everywhere a fish from a spring, immense, spotless, which a holy virgin  
 24 caught. And this she gave into the hands of her | friends to eat always, (and) having a good wine, giving mixed wine with bread. That these things should  
 28 be written in this way I, | Avirkios, ordered, of a truth celebrating (my) 72nd year. May the one who understands and is in harmony with all these things pray  
 32 on behalf of Avirkios. | However, one shall not put anyone else in my tomb. Consequently, (any violator) shall pay 2,000 gold pieces to the treasury of the Romans and 1,000 gold pieces to my auspicious native city Hieropolis. (trans. Tabbernee forthcoming b)

Avircius is presumably the same person as the Avircius Marcellus to whom, in about 193, a now-anonymous bishop (perhaps from one of the other cities of the Phrygian Pentapolis) sent, at Avircius’s request, a copy of an anti-Montanist treatise, utilized extensively by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Historia ecclesiastica* (5.16.2–5.17.4). Since Alexander’s tombstone was erected in 216, Avircius’s own epitaph must have been composed before that date, perhaps in about 200 or even earlier.

## The Earliest Material Evidence for Christianity

Avircius’s epitaph, though one of the earliest extant Christian inscriptions, is not the earliest nonliterary evidence of Christianity. It is possible that a tombstone dated 157/8, from the territory of Cadi in Asia Minor, may be Christian, but it is certain that another one, dated 179/80, from Cadi itself definitely is (see chap. 7). The decade of the 180s seems to be the time when distinctively Christian terms, symbols, and art become recognizable in the extant archaeological material (Snyder 2003, 2–3). This is especially the case in Rome, where, at least from the very beginning of the third century, Christian cemeteries within the catacombs provided a certain amount of security

for expressing in word or symbol the Christian allegiance of the deceased—something that non-Christian neighbors knew anyway. Such security, however, was not to be taken for granted before Constantine (r. 306–337) adopted Christianity as his own preferred religion in the second decade of the fourth century.

Periodic outbreaks of actual persecution and the potential threat of being accused of disloyalty to the Roman Empire by refusing to participate in cultic activities made Christians reluctant to declare permanently on tombstones or walls that they were the monotheistic followers of Jesus. Even if they had wanted to do so, many early Christians belonged to the lower classes and could not afford to have even a simple grave marker, let alone to decorate their homes with Christian art. The “epigraphic habit” (MacMullen 1982; Tabbernee 2008a) was not an activity of the poor, and “graven images” (of whatever kind) were frowned on by the majority of early Christians. This began to change in the course of the third century and with the rise of social Christian elites in the middle of the fourth century, especially in the Western provinces of the Roman Empire.

Similarly, it was only when Christians stopped meeting and worshiping in homes (house-churches) and began adapting synagogues or constructing new basilicas, baptisteries, monasteries, and other specifically Christian buildings that they were able to leave to posterity monumental evidence of the details of their spiritual, liturgical, ecclesial, and communal lives. The great “building boom” of ecclesiastical edifices initiated by Constantine and his mother in Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, and elsewhere was paralleled in the fifth and sixth centuries, especially in the East, by emperors such as Justinian.

## **Early Christianity in Contexts**

This book focuses on utilizing the earliest available “material evidence” (realia) not only to give information about the origins of Christianity in a given location but also to provide a physical and cultural context for the particular kind of Christianity that existed in that location. The book is divided into ten geographic regions, and each chapter attempts to summarize what its region was like before the introduction of Christianity in terms of geography, politics, economics, agriculture, social patterns, and, especially, religious thought and practice. Each chapter then draws on inscriptions, coins, mosaics, remnants of church buildings, baptisteries, decorative artwork, icons, crosses, symbols, ecclesiastical vessels, reliquaries, and a host of other artifacts to describe and explain the region’s specific form of Christianity.

Knowledge of the time and manner in which Christianity was first introduced (or, in areas such as Britain, reintroduced) to and developed in these regions is not always able to be deduced from the archaeological evidence, given that in many regions Christianity commenced well before 180—that is, before there are recognizably Christian artifacts. Consequently, early literary texts and later documents containing earlier oral traditions are also essential sources for the history of some of the earliest Christians. Written sources also provide a great deal of information about Christianity in a particular region, even when archaeological or epigraphic evidence does exist. Literary texts are not confined to the writings of church historians such as Eusebius, theologians such as Origen, or polemicists such as Tertullian; they also include the letters of bishops such as Barsauma of Nisibis and scraps of papyrus written on by ordinary Egyptian Christians. There are Chinese Christian *sūtras*, discovered among a hoard of Buddhist and Manichaean manuscripts, and Syriac Christian poems; acts of the martyrs and lives of the saints; as well as records of church councils, travel guides, ancient maps, and the journals of early pilgrims. There are also liturgical texts, church manuals, sermons, exegetical essays, biblical manuscripts, and different versions of Christian Scriptures, including those that did not make it into the official Christian canon.

The surviving works of groups such as the New Prophecy (Montanism), various kinds of so-called Gnostics, Marcionites, Arians, Donatists, Nestorians, Monophysites, and others deemed heretical (or at least schismatic) by the winners of christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian controversies attest the wide diversity of early Christianity, so much so that it is almost possible to speak of early *Christianities*.

This book does not argue that a primal and essential (orthodox) unity devolved into diverse (heterodox) expressions, nor does it lament the repression of an original (creative and expressive) diversity into a set of monolithic orthodoxies. Instead, the authors of the book, all experts on their assigned region or subregion, present the various Christian communities that they document on their own terms and, as much as possible, with their own voice. For example, this book refers to a major component of Christianity east of the Euphrates not as Nestorian Christianity (which to Western ears inevitably suggests doubtful orthodoxy) but by its own self-designation: the Church of the East. Care is taken, however, to point out, rather than minimize, significant differences in practice and belief. To the extent that there was mutual awareness and communication between differing groups, care is also taken to note their perceptions of each other, including judgments as to “orthodoxy” and “heresy.”

The broad geographical and chronological sweep of this book—from Ireland in the west to India and China in the east, from Germany in the north

to Ethiopia and Equatorial Africa in the south, and (mainly) from the first century BCE to the ninth century CE—reflects current trends in the study of early Christianity and Late Antiquity as well as the broader movement within the humanities to take account of diverse cultures. In this way, the distinctive expressions of particular Christian groups can be seen in context as well as highlighted.

From the Roman Near East (chap. 1)—the region that includes Judaea and Galilee, where Jewish “Jesus followers” started a reform movement that eventually led to a new religion—the history of Christianity narrated in this book quickly moves beyond Rome’s borders to Mesopotamia and Persia (chap. 2), the Caucasus (chap. 3), and into Central Asia as far as China and on to India (chap. 4). The second half of the book returns to trace the development of Christianity within the borders of the Roman and (later) Byzantine Empires, covering the world of the Nile (chap. 5), Roman North Africa (chap. 6), Asia Minor and Cyprus (chap. 7), the Balkan Peninsula (chap. 8), Italy and its environs (chap. 9), and the Western provinces, including some areas beyond those provinces (chap. 10).

Special attention is given to particular cities especially important for the history of Christianity: Jerusalem (chap. 1), Nisibis and Edessa (chap. 2), Alexandria (chap. 5), Carthage (chap. 6), the “Seven Cities of Asia” (chap. 7), Athens and Constantinople (chap. 8), Rome and Ravenna (chap. 9), and Lyons, London, and Canterbury (chap. 10). The archaeological or literary evidence for the earliest existence of Christianity in dozens of other cities, towns, and villages is also presented in this book. Numerous maps provide a helpful geographic context. Where possible, both the ancient name (or names) and the modern name of a place are given in the text. Only the ancient name, however, normally is recorded on the maps. From the data presented, there are some surprises in store for those who think that early Christianity was primarily an urban phenomenon.

Another surprise for some may be the realization that although the Romans were dominant politically in most of the lands immediately surrounding the Mediterranean during the time when Christianity was developing as a religion, there were equally, if not more, powerful empires or kingdoms to the east and northeast of the Roman Empire. More than one Roman emperor spent much of his reign trying to defeat neighboring Parthians or Persians and was ultimately killed in battle or imprisoned in the process. There were also unconquered tribes north of the Danube and the Rhine as well as on the other side of the North Sea and what is now called the English Channel. Although in some non-Roman territories Christianity was not established for a number of centuries after the new “religion” first began in Judaea, careful examination of

traditions, literary texts, and archaeological data reveals that in many regions beyond Roman borders Christian communities were founded as quickly, if not more quickly, than within the Roman Empire (see chaps. 2–4, 10).

By the time Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325, there were literally hundreds of Christian communities within the borders of the Roman Empire and a significant number outside those borders. Christianity was most prevalent in the larger cities, but many smaller towns and even villages had a Christian “church”—either still a “house-church” or one of the few new basilicas. The spread of Christianity to the countryside, however, had been



Fig. I.5. Fifth-Century Church, Kharab al-Shams, Dead Cities Region, Syria

sporadic and continued to be so during the fourth and fifth centuries. In the so-called Dead Cities region of northwestern Syria alone there are scores of remarkably preserved churches built from the fourth century to the seventh. The “ruins” of these churches look as if they were still in use quite recently. In fact, they, and the seven hundred towns and villages in which they were situated, were abandoned soon after the eighth century, in the aftermath of Sasanian occupation of the area and a series of natural disasters.

Despite the unsuccessful attempt of the emperor Julian (the Apostate) to reassert the dominance of classical paganism during the 360s, Christianity prevailed. Under Theodosius I, the last emperor to rule the Roman Empire before the empire was divided permanently into (Byzantine) East and (Roman) West, “orthodox” Christianity became the “official” (albeit not the only) religion in 393. Outside the Roman Empire, however, the kingdoms of Axum, Iberia,

and Armenia had made Christianity their state religion a half century or more earlier. The reception of Christianity by the numerous communities inhabiting the “known world” during the first eight centuries or so of the Common Era was neither chronologically predictable nor theologically consistent. Similarly, the kind of Christianity that resulted from the interaction between those who introduced the new faith to a particular area and the local population with its own religious beliefs, traditions, and practices was far more diverse than has often been presumed. Only an exploration across cultures and continents, such as provided by the chapters of this book, can provide a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the diverse nature of early Christianity in its multifaceted contexts.

# The Roman Near East

LINCOLN BLUMELL, JENN CIANCA, PETER RICHARDSON,  
AND WILLIAM TABBERNEE

## Introduction

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Rome first intruded into the Near East in 64–63 BCE during conquests by Pompey the Great (106–49 BCE). Initially, only Syria (including Phoenicia) was governed through Rome’s provincial system. Twenty years later the senate chose Herod the Great (r. 37–4 BCE) to rule Judaea, Samaria, and Galilee as a client kingdom (Richardson 1996), while Nabataea and Arabia were left alone. The earliest Christian communities developed in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria (Acts 1:8) in the first century CE, and believers were soon found in Caesarea, Tyre, and Antioch. Christianity entered a difficult period with the Jewish Revolts of 66–74 and 132–135 CE. Though there was no formal parting of the ways (Richardson 2006)—Judaism and Christianity maintained a symbiotic relationship theologically, liturgically, architecturally, and ethically—the tensions led to Christianity developing independently and, ultimately, separating (S. Wilson 1995).

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This chapter was written by **Lincoln Blumell** (Sinai and the Negev, Arabia Felix), **Jenn Cianca** (Antioch, the Tetrapolis, and Syria Coele), **Peter Richardson** (Introduction, Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, Syria Phoenice, Phoenicia/Phoenicia Libanensis, The Decapolis, Northern Arabia, Central Arabia, Southern Arabia, Complexity of Christianity in the Roman Near East), and **William Tabbernee** (Jerusalem).



### *The Near East within the Roman Empire*

Pompey's organizational solution did not last, partly because the region was ethnically complex and historically convoluted. Syria in the north and Judaea in the south included various subregions, while semiautonomous cities survived from earlier Hellenistic foundations: along the Mediterranean coastline were cities such as Gaza, Dor, Tyre, Sidon, and, while inland, a Decapolis (ten cities) included centers such as Pella, Gadara, Hippos, and Gerasa.

Herod's death in 4 BCE brought change. Galilee and Peraea went to Herod Antipas (r. 4 BCE–39 CE), while Hulitis, Gaulanitis, Batanaea, Auranitis, and Trachonitis were ruled by Herod Philip II (r. 4 BCE–33 CE). Judaea (including Samaria and Idumaea) was given to Herod Archelaus (r. 4 BCE–6 CE), but it was made a minor Roman province in 6 CE after he was deposed. Judaea was reunited and nominally autonomous between 41 and 44 CE, under Herod Agrippa I (r. 39–44 CE). It was briefly under direct Roman control, but Herod Philip's territories passed to Agrippa's son Marcus Julius Agrippa II in 48, with an imperial procurator responsible for taxes and peace. Following the Jewish Revolt of 66–74, Judaea was expanded to include most of Herod's old territories; when Agrippa II died (ca. 90–100), Rome assumed direct control.

In 106 Trajan (r. 98–117) absorbed Nabataea and created the province of Arabia, whose capital was Bostra. Some Decapolis cities were transferred to the new province (Millar 1993, 95), some to Judaea, and some to Syria. Hadrian's plan to make Jerusalem the new Roman *colonia* Aelia Capitolina, among other factors, triggered the Bar Kokhba Revolt of 132–135; in the aftermath Hadrian (r. 117–138) changed the province's name to Syria Palaestina. Under Diocletian (r. 284–305) the region was divided into Palaestina Prima (Judaea, Samaria, Idumaea, Peraea, coastal plain) with Caesarea as administrative center, Palaestina Secunda (Galilee, Gaulanitis, the old Decapolis areas) with Scythopolis (Beth Shean) as capital, and Palaestina Tertia (the Negev, Nabataea) with Petra as center.

Syria's divisions were similarly complex. Pompey had united Phoenicia, historically a collection of independent cities with extensive maritime trading contacts, with Syria; soon the "official use of the Phoenician language" died out (Millar 1993, 286). Syria Coele (Hollow Syria), an ambiguous geographical designation, once referred to the Decapolis region (Millar 1993, 423) but came to be used of the areas around and between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains (Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.1–2, 16, 21). Confusing matters, Septimius Severus (r. 193–211), when he split Syria, named the southern portion Syria Phoenice, though it included more than ancient Phoenicia, and

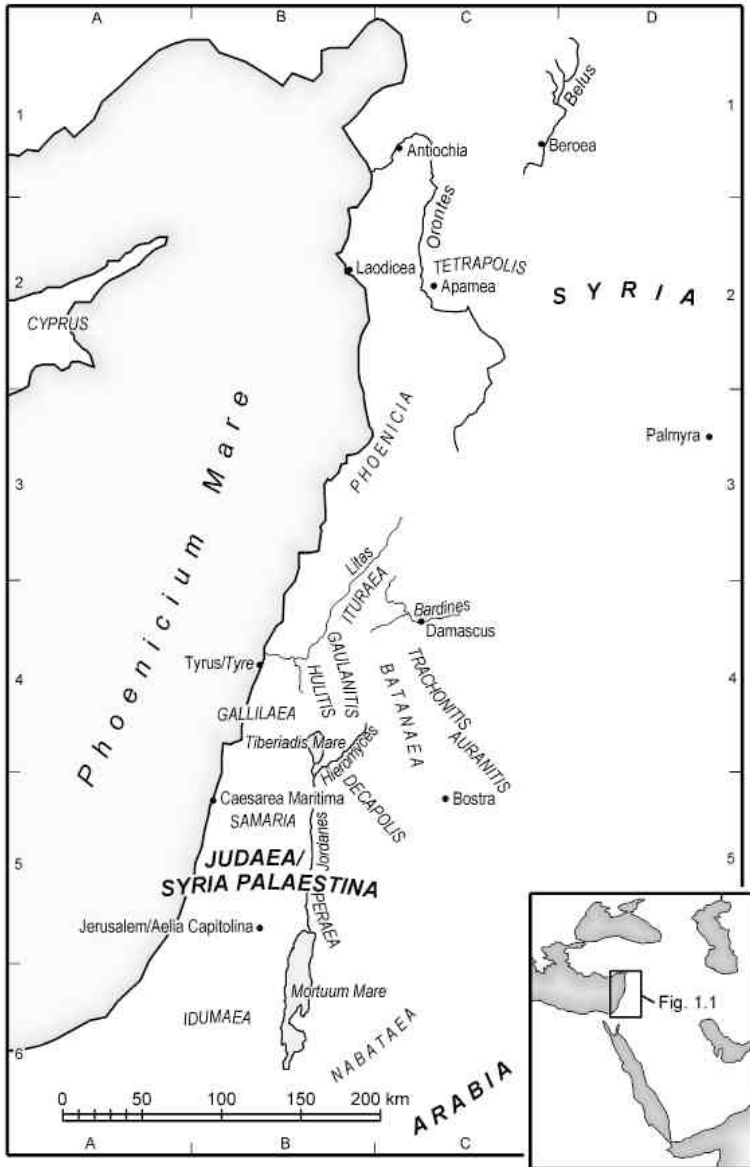


Fig. 1.1. Map of the Roman Near East

the northern portion Syria Coele, though that term once applied to areas in southern Syria. Theodosius I (r. 379–395) divided Syria in four: Syria Coele became Syria Salutaris and Syria Euphratensis; Syria Phoenice became Phoenice and Phoenicia Libanensis.

### *Geography and Ecology*

Three tectonic plates—Africa, the Arabian plateau, and Asia Minor—collide within the Levant, generating earthquakes and volcanoes, rifts and uplifted mountains. Because it is an important hinge, there have always been substantial movements of humans, wildlife, and armies in the region. The mountains and rifts of the Levant run mainly north and south, but there are complicating transverse features, such as the hills of Upper Galilee and the Carmel range. Four rivers arise between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon ranges: the Orontes runs north and the Litani runs south from the Bekaa Valley before they both turn west to the Mediterranean; the Barada runs east from the Anti-Lebanons, evaporating in the desert; and the Jordan runs south from Mount Hermon (2814 m), creating the Sea of Galilee (ca. 200 m below sea level) and the Dead Sea (ca. 400 m below sea level). The paucity of permanent rivers ensures that springs and oases acquire extra importance. The climate is generally hotter and drier to the south and east, though there are dramatic variations. Soil has formed from decomposed geological formations, mostly limestone; even where soil nurtures shrubs and trees, settlement pressures and military actions (especially by Romans and Crusaders) have denuded the hills of vegetation, resulting in serious erosion. The land's suitability for settlement, herding, and agriculture is varied, though the valley bottoms are usually fertile.

The Euphrates River, which marks the eastern limit of the Roman Near East, forms, along with the Tigris River, a “fertile crescent” that includes northern Syria and the coastal areas. This Fertile Crescent has indelibly stamped the region as a cradle of human civilization. The crescent's interior is largely desert, while the Sinai Peninsula is a wilderness appendage. Trachonitis, Auranitis, and Gaulanitis include extensive volcanic areas.

### *Peoples and Religions*

Settlements follow water, whether rivers and lakes (Apamea, Tiberias), oases (Palmyra, Jericho), permanent springs (Jerusalem, Petra), or aqueducts from mountain springs (Caesarea Maritima, Laodicea). Easily cultivated areas were settled early, less hospitable areas had small farmsteads, while desert areas supported nomadic or seminomadic groups who herded sheep and goats (Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.11), though the contrast between “the desert and the sown” (the title of Gertrude Bell's 1907 book) is less sharp than sometimes thought. In the first century the Near East was a hodgepodge of local peoples interspersed with Greeks and Romans. In his *Geographica* Strabo mentions groups on the margins, such as Scenitae (“peaceful” [16.1.27]); Ituraeans and

Arabians (“all of whom are robbers” [16.2.18]); Idumaeans (“shared in the same customs” with Jews [16.2.34]); “tent-dwellers and camel-herds” (16.4.2); Sabaeans (“beautifully adorned with temples and royal palaces” [16.4.2–3]); Ichthyophagi (“fisheaters” [16.4.4]); Spermophagi (“seedeaters” [16.4.9]); and Creophagi (“flesheaters” [16.4.9]).

#### PHOENICIANS

A sense of ethnicity and religion continued for some time in Phoenician city-states, including Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos. Their influence depended on commerce (notably purple dye) and exploration, together with their coinage (especially the Tyrian shekel) that was widely used until the second century CE. Phoenician deities were assimilated to Greco-Roman gods: Melqart, for example, was equated with Rome’s Heracles and Greece’s Hercules. Phoenicia practiced a northwest Semitic religion, adopting customs such as sacrifice (whether this included human sacrifice is still debated), offerings, prayer, purity concerns, and festivals (Schmitz 1992, 359–62). Berytus (Beirut) was not a Phoenician city, having been founded as a Roman *colonia* in 15 BCE.

#### ITURAEANS

Appearing desultorily in the historical record (Strabo, Josephus, New Testament, coins, inscriptions), Ituraea centered on Mount Hermon and extended into the Bekaa Valley, Trachonitis, Gaulanitis, Hulitis, and Upper Galilee. Widely dispersed inscriptions name Ituraeans as a Roman auxiliary unit noteworthy for archery; this auxiliary role continued after the ethnic group itself had virtually disappeared (E. Myers 2010). Nothing is known of their origins and very little about their religious activities, though they had cult centers on Mount Hermon (Dar 1993). Josephus (*Ant.* 13.11.3) claims that they were forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmonean Aristobulus I (r. 104–103 BCE), but he may exaggerate (Kasher 1988).

#### PALMYRENES

A distinctive culture emerged at Palmyra’s desert oasis by the first century BCE, with worship focused on Semitic deities, such as Baal Shamim and Bel. Family or clan burials were often in tower tombs, incorporating distinctive grave sculptures. Its architecture blended Roman and indigenous traditions: the Temple of Bel, for example, had a Palmyrene *naos* (inner sanctuary) within a Roman *temenos* (sacred enclosure) that included an altar, banqueting hall, and a ritual pool (Richardson 2002, 25–51). Palmyra prospered from the late first century BCE through the third century CE, reaping tariff income

through trading via the Euphrates, the Silk Road, and transdesert routes. After revolting against Rome under Queen Zenobia (r. 270–272), Palmyra only partially recovered.

### NABATAEANS

By the second century BCE, Nabataeans had displaced Edomites (Idumaeans) from east of the Dead Sea to west of it. By the next century, Nabataeans formed a prosperous kingdom stretching from southern Syria to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea (Strabo, *Geogr.* 15.4.21–26), which often conflicted with Jews. They were famous for sophisticated management of limited water resources and a magisterial skill in constructing rock-cut buildings whose details were indebted to Hellenistic architecture (Markoe 2003). Nabataean religion focused on Semitic divinities such as Dushara, al-llat, and Atargatis. As wealthy middlemen in international trade between the Mediterranean and the East, the Nabataeans joined Rome in a military expedition to Arabia Felix under Aelius Gallus in 25–24 BCE, but they lost their separate identity when Rome created the province of Arabia.



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Fig. 1.2. Temple of Bel, Palmyra