

DEATH at the

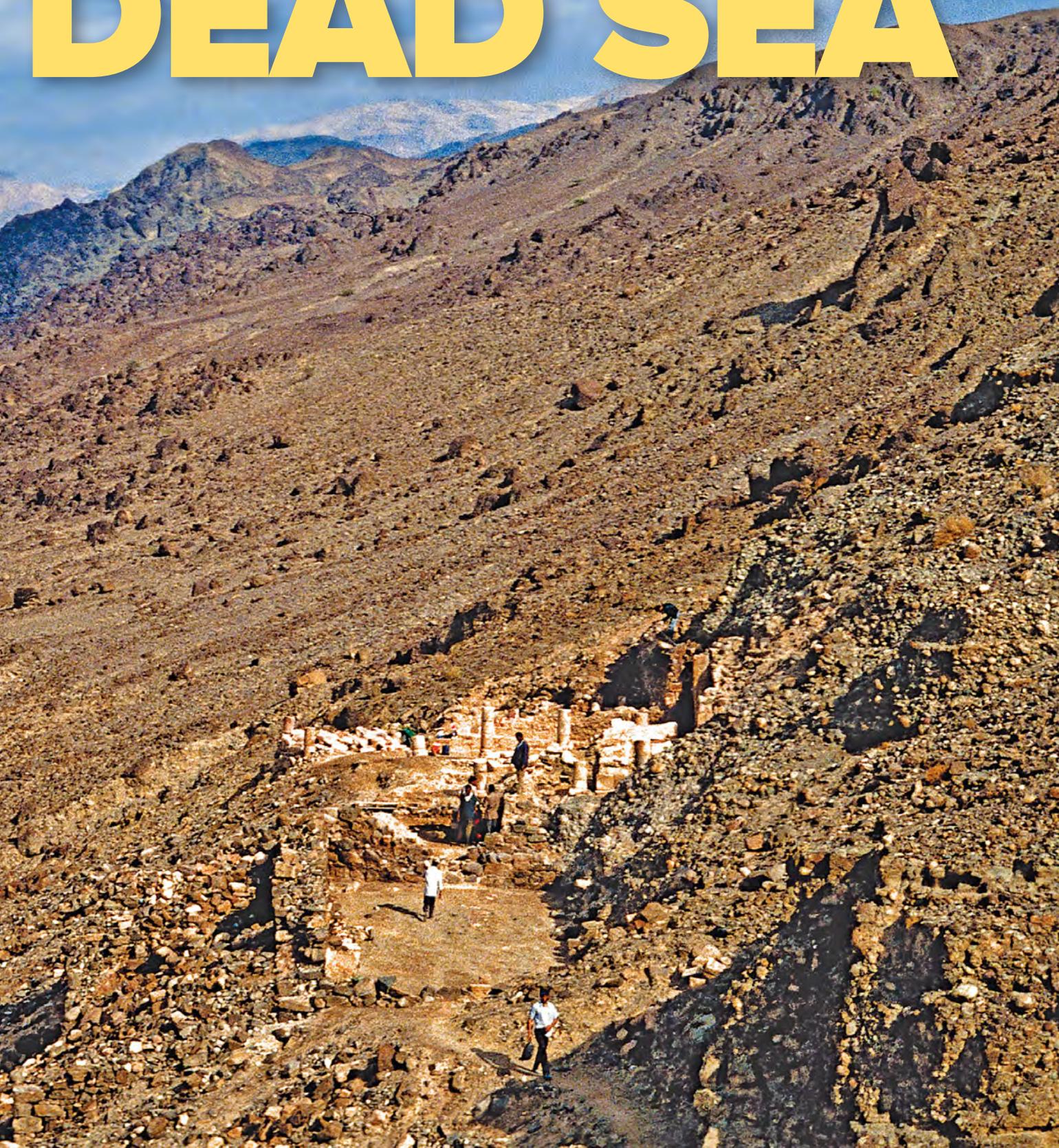
Konstantinos Politis

IF I WERE TO ASK YOU TO GUESS WHERE THE LARGEST group of cemeteries in the ancient world—with tens of thousands of graves—was located, where would you say? Outside some thriving ancient metropolis? In some verdant landscape redolent of Eden? The last place in the world that would probably come to mind would be the desolation and harshness of the lowest spot on earth. Yet that is where it is, southeast of the Dead Sea in modern Jordan.

More specifically, these ancient cemeteries are in the *ghors* (valleys) southeast of the Dead Sea. These *ghors* are alluvial fans at the mouth of *wadis* entering the Rift Valley from the east. The Ghor es-Safi, on which this article will primarily focus, lies at the mouth of the Wadi al-Hasa.

This is the location of Biblical Zoar, one of the five Cities of the Plain that rebelled against the

DEAD SEA



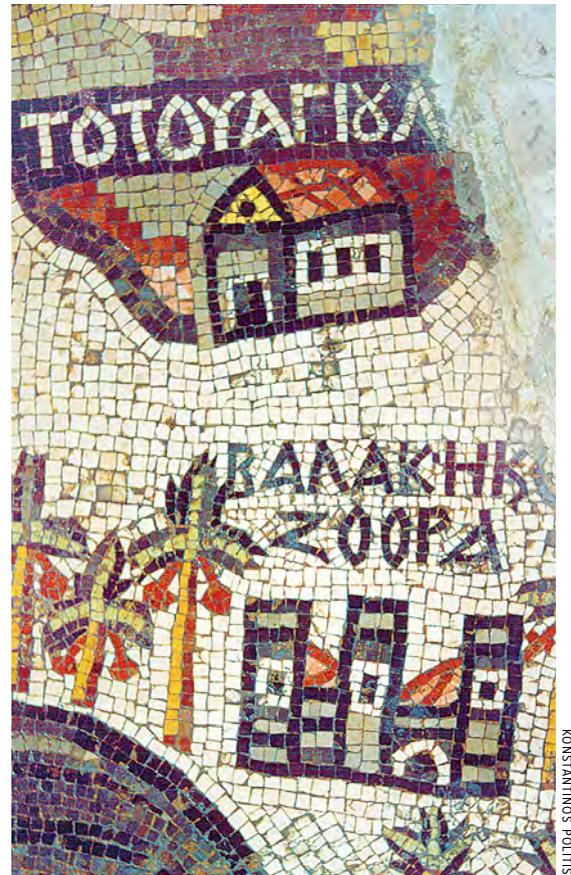
PREVIOUS PAGES: DEAD MAN'S LAND. At the south-eastern end of the Dead Sea, nestled between the salt-encrusted shores of the sea and the dark, foreboding slopes of the Transjordanian highlands, lies Biblical Zoar, known today as the Ghor es-Safi. According to the Bible and early Christian tradition, Lot and his daughters escaped to this barren wilderness after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, seeking refuge in a nearby cave that was commemorated with a monastery in the fifth century A.D. (the ruins of the monastery can be seen in the foreground). But as our author explains, the harsh, desolate hills of Zoar, located at the lowest spot on earth, also served for thousands of years as the favored burial ground for countless peoples and faiths.

king of Elam (along with the rebel kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim) (Genesis 14). Later, as Sodom and Gomorrah were being destroyed, Lot and his daughters fled to Zoar (Genesis 19:22–23). During the Byzantine period and even into the Umayyad period (fourth–seventh centuries A.D.) the Monastery of St. Lot flourished here, commemorating Lot's flight from Sodom.*

The Ghor es-Safi is rich in graves. Thousands of tombs were dug on the southeastern slopes at the mouth of the Wadi al-Hasa in the Early Bronze Age I–II (c. 3100–2600 B.C.).¹ A substantial population lived in the area, as evidenced not only by tombs but by walled settlements. In fact, just to the north of the *ghor*, two of the region's largest sites, Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, are considered by some to be the ruins of the ill-fated Biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In the Middle Bronze Age II (c. 1750 B.C.), numerous stone-built cairns or tombs in the Ghor es-Safi were constructed along the natural mountain shelf that runs along the eastern Dead Sea shore. But no trace of associated settlements has been identified. Modern Bedouin behavior may offer an explanation of this phenomenon: These nonsedentary, transhumant Bedouin

*See Konstantinos Politis, "Where Lot's Daughters Seduced Their Father," *BAR*, January/February 2004.



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PUTTING ZOAR ON THE MAP. In the sixth-century A.D. Madaba mosaic map, Zoar (identified in Greek as Zoora at center in the detail) is depicted as a fortified urban settlement with red-roofed buildings (indicating monasteries and churches) located on the fertile, palm-covered shores of the southeastern Dead Sea. Politis identifies Byzantine Zoara with the site of Khirbet Sheik 'Isa in the Ghor es-Safi region, a thriving Byzantine town with substantial buildings, beautiful mosaic pavements and towering fortifications. Depicted above Zoar on the map and nestled against the multi-hued mountains of Moab is the "place" (or monastery) of St. Lot, which Politis has identified with the site of Deir 'Ain 'Abata.

communities return each season to the same locale to set up their tent encampments and often have particular places within those locales where they bury their dead.²

Fast forward nearly 2,500 years—to the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. Ancient historians like Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus of Sicily—first century B.C.) and Strabo (first century B.C.—first century A.D.) describe a Nabatean community living near this part of the Dead Sea that flourished by trading in the rich natural resources of the area, such as bitumen, salt, balsam, sulfur, indigo and dates. A number of archaeological sites on the southeastern shore of the Dead





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Sea clearly evidence such Nabatean communities.³

The *Notitia Dignitatum* is a unique document detailing the organization of the Roman government in the fourth century. Today, it exists only in copies. According to the *Notitia Dignitatum* (73, 26), a garrison with a local cavalry unit (*Equites sagittarii indigenae*) was stationed at Zoar during the early fourth century. A large walled fortress, Umm et-Tawabin, lies above the Wadi al-Hasa with remnants of circular tent encampments littered with Nabatean-Roman pottery sherds. This fortress was probably associated with the Roman cavalry unit mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum*.

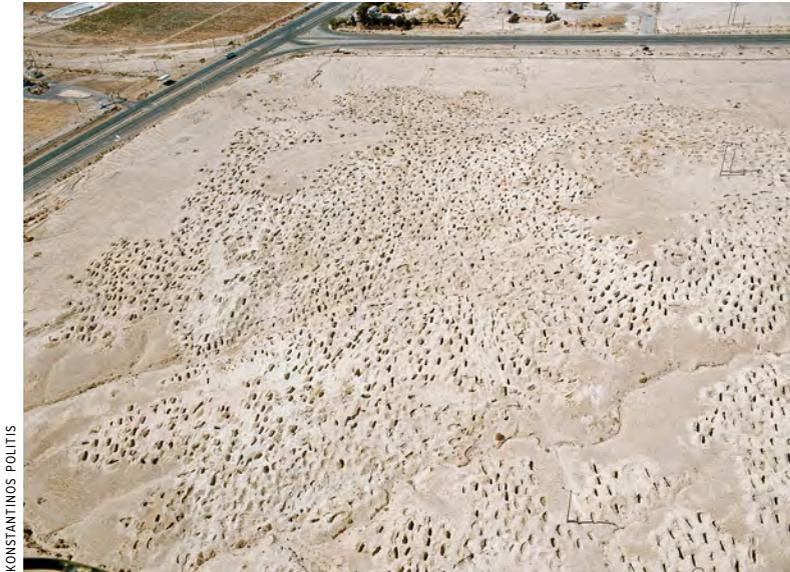
In the famous sixth-century Madaba map, Zoar (then Zoara) is pictured as a substantial settlement with three towers and two red-roofed churches (shown opposite, above). (The site is identified on the mosaic map in Greek as “Balak, also Segor, now Zoora [or Zoara].”) A large settlement with substantial buildings adorned with mosaic floor pavements and enclosed by fortification walls reflecting those

A LONG HISTORY WITH DEATH. Amid the tossed and tortuous landscape of Zoar, Politis has uncovered tombs that span the ages, including many large, well-built Early Bronze Age I–II (c. 3100–2600 B.C.) cist tombs lined with small field stones and covered with massive stone slabs. While some of these tombs have survived largely intact (such as the two in the center of the photograph above), most have been robbed and destroyed by looters, leaving behind only scattered stones, open cavities and mounds of upturned soil.

depicted on the Madaba map has been located in an area known as Khirbet Sheik ‘Isa. Recent excavations here suggest this was the urban center of Byzantine Zoara.

This urban area was surrounded by agricultural fields that were well watered by the perennial outflows of the Wadi al-Hasa. A dam and water conduit may be dated by pottery as early as the second century B.C. and were in use for centuries thereafter.

The Byzantine Monastery of St. Lot (Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata), referred to above, is another feature of



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DEATH FROM THE AIR. This aerial view of Khirbet Qazone (left), 15 miles north of Zoar, shows only a smattering of more than 5,000 burials from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. Although Politis was able to excavate and document 22 of these graves, most of which are simple shaft tombs, many times that number have been looted, resulting in a barren, lunar-like landscape pockmarked by the pits and spoil heaps of hundreds of illicit excavations.

An extraordinary cemetery about 15 miles north of the Ghor es-Safi was discovered by accident.⁵ The cemetery at Khirbet Qazone includes more than 5,000 graves dating from the Nabatean period to the fourth century A.D.*

Between 1996 and 2004, we excavated 22 of these graves. Unfortunately, many more graves have been looted. Between 1997 and 2004, the number of looted tombs doubled. (It's easy to recognize looted tombs: They are surrounded by irregular piles of unsystematically excavated dirt filled with broken pottery and bones.)

In several of the looted tombs, the looters left valuable remains, including an occasional *betyl* (a sacred stone in a conical shape representing a divinity) or a so-called *nefesh* stela (a sacred upright stone indicating a grave below). On four of these sacred stones that the looters missed, we found representations of Dushara, the Nabatean deity equivalent to the Greek Dionysos. The representations of Dushara are similar to those found at Nabatean sites like Petra; that is, they are aniconic, without any figurative decoration. They appear simply as a kind of block or rectangle. (Other representations of Dushara sometimes include stylized eyes, nose and mouth.) We also recovered an adobe brick with a Dushara sign engraved on it.

From the graves we excavated came earrings and bracelets in gold and silver, as well as in copper and iron. In one tomb, we found a wooden staff, a pair of sandals and a laurel wreath.

Greek was the *lingua franca* of the eastern Roman Empire, so the use of Greek was common in Nabatea during the first to third centuries A.D.

*See Hershel Shanks, "Who Lies Buried Here?" *BAR*, September/October 1999.

the Ghor es-Safi. When we excavated the site, we found artifacts from an earlier Hellenistic-Nabatean horizon, but no associated structures could be related to the Nabatean period. Yet the finds included Nabatean ceramic oil lamps, Nabatean coins and pottery and a sherd inscribed in the Nabatean-Aramaic script. All this bears witness to the extension of Nabatean territory north of Petra.⁴ This concurs with the literary sources. In addition, architectural elements with Nabatean characteristics were used in the later Byzantine church built over Lot's Cave. These Nabatean elements may be explained either as reused stones or as examples of decorative styles that persisted into later periods.

This area also served as a Nabatean burial ground in the first century B.C.–first century A.D., perhaps following the earlier local Bronze Age tradition. In the cave commemorated by Lot's monastery, we found some graves with Nabatean pottery sherds scattered on the surface. These graves belonged to Nabateans of high status, as evidenced by rare imported pottery and a South Arabian alabaster *pyxis* probably used as a frankincense container. The Nabateans specialized in the trade of these luxury products.



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Saving a Looted Heritage

During the 1980s an Italian construction company was hired to install a modern irrigation system in Zoar to revitalize agriculture in the area. The workers were local Jordanian villagers. They soon encountered archaeological remains. What then happened has been described by archaeologist David F. Graf of the University of Miami:

The result is that many antiquities from Zoar/Zoora now reside in fashionable homes in Amman and Kerak. Others were illegally transported to museums and private collections in Israel, or taken as booty by employees of [the construction company] back to Milan, or sold to wealthy diplomats and businessmen in Saudi Arabia, Italy, Britain and America ... The full extent of the trafficking is unknown.¹

At this point, the author of our article, Konstantinos (Dino) Politis, came to the rescue, at least partially. With several others, he began, in Graf's words, "a rather frantic campaign to record and photograph as many of the looted inscribed tombstones as he could locate. To accomplish this, Politis was forced to interact with the looters and illegal dealers, purchasing what he could ...

SALVAGE OPERATION. Decades of illicit digging and tomb robbing have turned the once-barren wilderness southeast of the Dead Sea into a seemingly endless lunar landscape of craters and upturned spoil heaps (above). During his 30 years spent working in the Safi region, however, Politis has managed to salvage more than 400 of the Greek and Aramaic tombstones that have been looted from the ancient cemetery.

"His ultimate goal was to create a museum at [the site] to display the results of this noble salvage enterprise."

Graf calls Politis's effort "heroic." He managed to salvage 386 Greek epitaphs from the Zoar cemetery. However, Politis estimates that more than 700 inscribed stones were discovered by the looters. If so, he recovered a little more than half. In addition, he saved at least 50 Aramaic inscriptions, primarily from Jewish tombstones. The total of these inscriptions is two-and-a-half times the previously known ancient inscriptions of any kind from this area, including Petra.—H.S.

¹ "Zoorā Rises from the Grave: New Funerary Stelae from Palaestina Tertia," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 22 (2009), p. 751.



biblicalarchaeology.org/zoarmuseum

Visit us online to get a behind-the-scenes look at the museum Politis built to house Zoar's tombstones.



NATURE'S PRESERVATIVE. Because of the Dead Sea's dry, arid climate, organic materials like wood, bone and textiles survive hundreds, even thousands, of years. Inside several of the tightly sealed shaft tombs at Qazone, Politis discovered some burials and burial goods in remarkably good condition, including skeletal remains that preserved the hair and even the skin of the deceased (left), as well as the tattered fragments of the shrouds in which they were buried, some marked with the L-shaped *gamma* motif (below, left). The *gamma* motif, as seen in a sixth-century mosaic from the Church of the Baptistry of the Arians in Ravenna, Italy (below, right), was used to indicate where the mantle should be worn on the body.

One female Nabatean's funerary stela was inscribed in Greek, "Afseni the pretty one."

More important, three Greek papyri found by tomb-robbers contain Nabatean names and refer to land ownership.

Because of the extremely dry conditions of the soil into which the burials at Khirbet Qazone were dug and the nearly airtight construction of the graves, many of the desiccated bodies of the deceased survived with skin, hair and even internal organs intact. Some of the bodies were wrapped in leather and textile.

The leather hides were made into shrouds stitched together, decorated and sometimes painted in red. The textiles consisted mostly of reused Greco-Roman style mantles and tunics.⁶ The mantles are the rectangular Greek type (*himation*, or *pallium* in Latin), decorated with four symmetrically placed purple motifs. The most common is the so-called *gamma* motif; it is in the shape of the Greek letter *gamma*, indicating where the shoulder should be on the garment. The tunics are of the Roman *tunica* type with a purple stripe or *clavus* running down from either side of the neck. This style of dress was universal by the second and

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BERICH LESSING

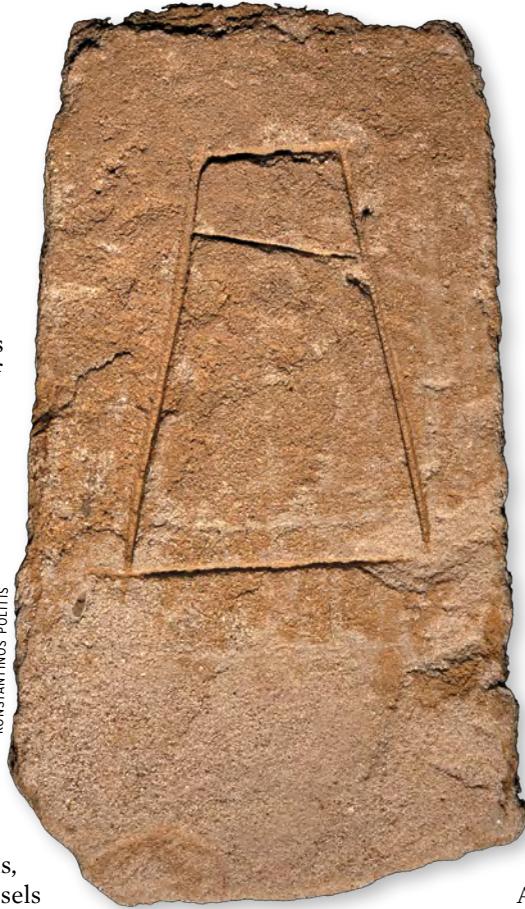
third century A.D. and was standard among peoples of the eastern Mediterranean. Average Nabatean Arabs, Jews and Greeks would have been indistinguishable in sartorial appearance.

A small circular pit in the Qazone cemetery filled with charred and blackened material associated with one of the tombs represents a well-constructed fireplace, indicating ritual dining in the cemetery. This conclusion is supported by broken pottery bowls, plates and drinking vessels scattered around the cemetery, all remnants of Nabatean funerary meals.

Although many of the burials were in shaft tombs (with burials at the bottom of the shaft) similar to those excavated on the other side of the Dead Sea at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, there is no evidence to indicate that these tombs belonged to the Essene community, whom most scholars believe lived at Qumran.

In the fourth century, Christian burials begin to appear in the neighboring Ghor es-Safi. The first hint of a Christian presence (in Zoara) is the name Paulus on a tombstone dated to 324 A.D. Several additional tombstones were discovered with incised crosses on them. Another had the *Chi-Rho* sign.*

WHO LIES HERE? The simple geometric designs inscribed on funerary stelae found in the Qazone graves indicate that many of the dead were Nabatean, an Arab people who grew wealthy from the lucrative trade that passed through their famed capital city Petra. In Nabatean iconography, the pyramidal shape (shown above), or *nefesh*, was used to memorialize the deceased, while a simple, unadorned rectangular block (right), called a *betyl*, represented the principal Nabatean deity, Dushara, whose name means “belonging to Shara,” a reference to a mountain range southeast of the Dead Sea.



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Christian graves were aligned east-west and were covered with large, roughly cut limestone slabs. Surprisingly, these graves sometimes contained multiple burials. In one of them seven individuals were buried.

Christian graves are hardly surprising here in this area. Early Byzantine Zoara was the seat of a bishop in the province of Palestina Tertia, which had a vibrant Christian community at least until the seventh century.

And Lot's monastery was

an important early Byzantine monastic complex. Nor was this the only monastic complex in the region. Others included hermitages on

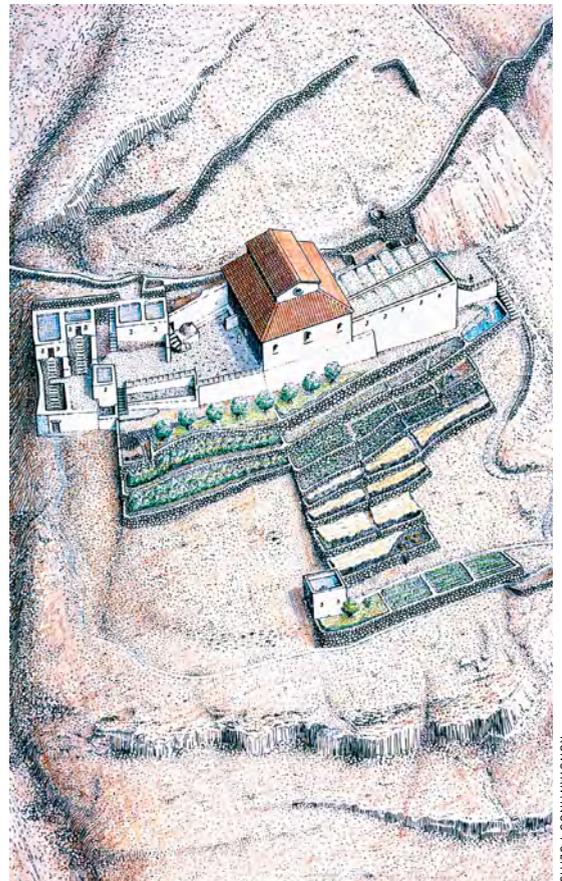
*The monogram of *Chi* (X) and *Rho* (P) superimposed. These are the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ.



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the Lisan peninsula of the Dead Sea and another on the northern slope of the Wadi al-Hasa. The monastic activities in the Zoara district seem to be closely linked to the Judean desert monasteries on the other side of the Dead Sea. Indeed, the Zoara monasteries are mentioned by St. Stephen the Sabaite for whom Mar Saba, the dramatic desert monastery 15 miles south of Jerusalem, is

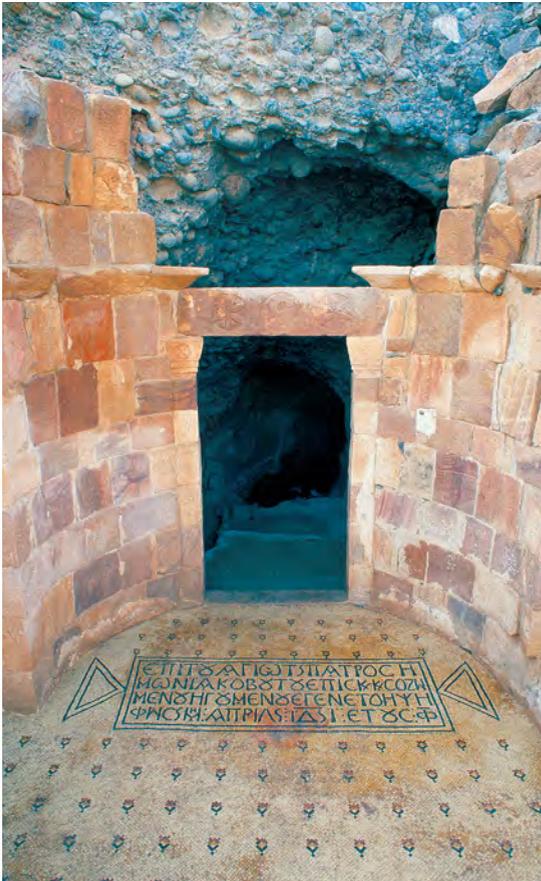
LOT'S MONASTERY. During the Byzantine period (fourth–sixth centuries A.D.), local Christians built an impressive monastery to commemorate the cave where they believed Lot and his daughters had found refuge during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The monastic complex, which included living quarters for monks, hostel accommodations for pilgrims and beautifully terraced fields and gardens, was centered on a large, three-aisled basilical church built directly into the hillside at the site of the cave (pictured below; see the artistic reconstruction of the complex at right).



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named. One of the tombstones belonged to Apsis, the bishop (*episkopos*) of Zoara, who died at age 55 on July 29, 369. Apsis is the earliest known bishop of Zoara and is followed by a string of four more bishops known from other sources.

Our initial anthropological analysis of ten burials we excavated in 2004 from the Byzantine period revealed that men, women and children were represented among these Christian burials. Only 10 percent of the men and 12 percent of the women reached the age of 65 years.

GUARDIAN OF LOT'S CAVE. Just to the left of the basilica's curved central apse (below) is the cave entrance, framed by an elegant doorway decorated with crosses and rosettes (left). The well-preserved mosaic pavement leading to the cave features a four-line Greek inscription, set inside a *tabula ansata* frame (a rectangle with side triangles), that names the church's bishop and abbot and gives the year as 605 A.D.



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One of the Greek-inscribed tombstones marks the grave of Shoshana [daughter] of Obedas, who died in 360/361 at the early age of ten (pictured at top of p. 54).

About 90 percent of the inscriptions on the gravestones are in Greek and 10 percent in Aramaic. One, inscribed in Greek, marked the grave of a high church official: Samakon [son] of Zabdadas, the archdeacon who was 40 years old when he died in the earthquake of May 18, 363.

Just as tombs of high-status Nabateans were found in the cemetery, so also in the succeeding Byzantine period. One gravestone identifies a

TOMB TYPOLOGY. Tombs of all types are found in the barren, sandy landscape of Zoar. Many Christian tombs, which sometimes interred up to seven individuals, were shallowly dug and covered with large, rough-hewn stone slabs (below, left). By contrast, the region's Nabatean population was often buried in shaft tombs where the deceased was laid out on a shelf dug at the bottom of a 5- to 7-foot-deep shaft that was then covered with stones and backfilled (below, upper photo). Unfortunately, hundreds of Zoar's ancient tombs, whether Christian, Nabatean or Jewish, have been looted in recent times, resulting in a landscape of dug-out tombs, undulating spoil heaps and broken, discarded human remains strewn about the surface (bottom right).



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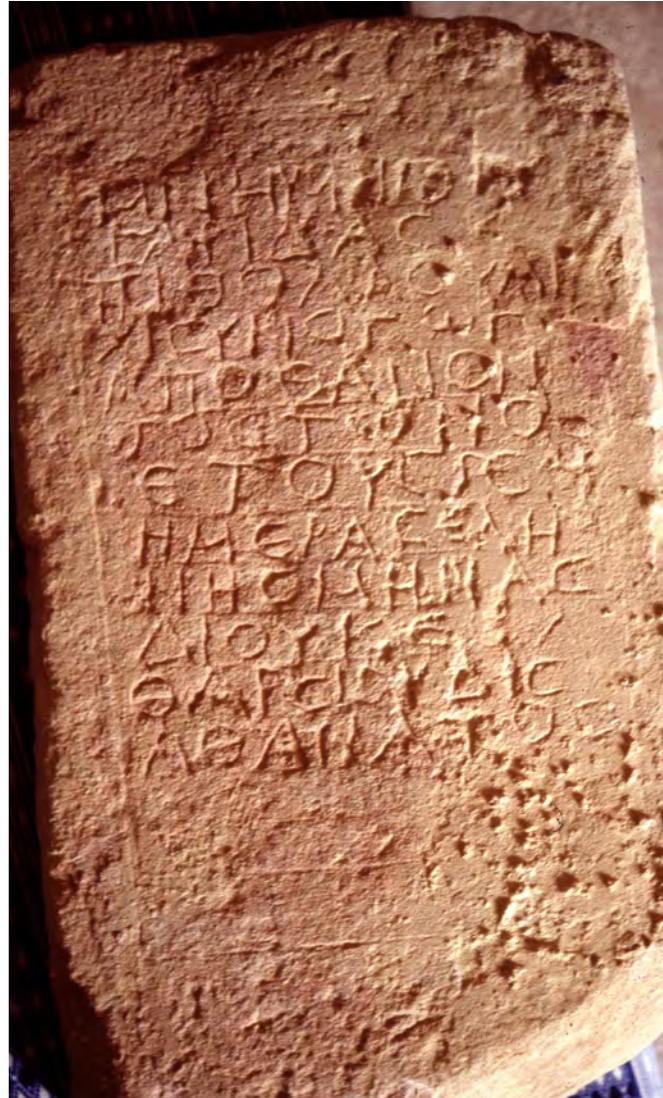


BABATHA, A WEALTHY JEWISH WOMAN living in the area of Zoar, held this papyrus document as proof of inheritance of date orchards purchased by her father from a Nabatean landowner in 99 A.D. After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., many Jews, possibly including Babatha's father, fled east and south to the shores of the Dead Sea, often taking up residence and buying land in the more fertile, well-watered areas of Zoar.

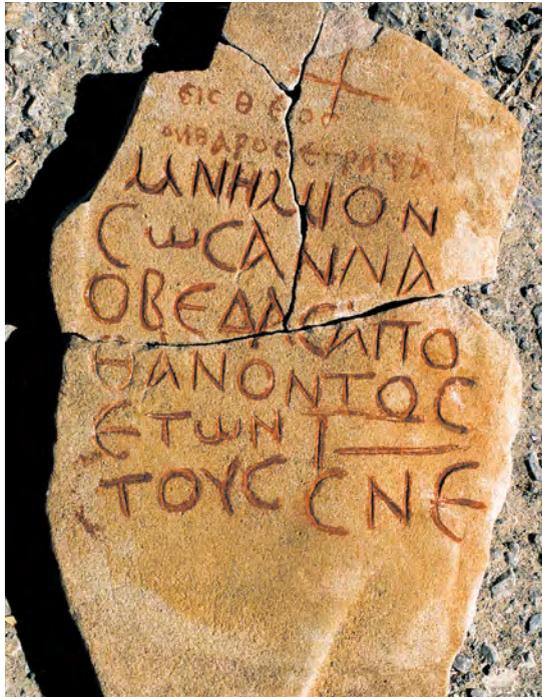
bouleuftis (city concillor) who died on November 25 in about 600 A.D. at the age of 30.

Military officials were also buried in the Zoara cemetery.⁷ One tombstone identifies a *praepositus*, a military high commander, possibly head of the local military unit at Zoara, who died at age 70, on December 27, 503.

Were Jews also buried in this cemetery?⁸ The answer is clearly yes, as reflected by the Aramaic tombstones (see "Tales from Tombstones," p. 55). One tombstone inscribed in Greek even identified an *archisynagogos* (head of a synagogue). His name

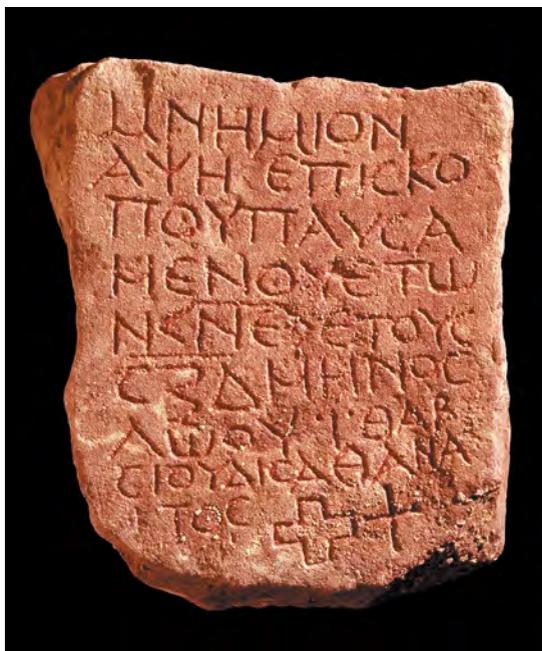


SIGN OF THE TIMES. Void of any decoration or religious iconography, the only sign that this tombstone marked a Jewish grave is its plainly inscribed Greek inscription for one Saridas Pitholaou, who is identified as a local *archisynagogos*, or head of a synagogue. That the tombstone of such a prominent member of the local synagogue was inscribed in Greek and not Aramaic illustrates the degree to which Zoar's Jewish community had become Hellenized during late antiquity.



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A CHRISTIAN TOMBSTONE inscribed in Greek and boldly highlighted with red ochre paint commemorates the 10-year-old Shoshana daughter of Obedas who died in 360/361 A.D. The inscription doesn't tell us anything of the sad circumstances surrounding young Shoshana's death, but her father's clearly Nabatean name (Obedas) and the faintly inscribed cross at the top of the stone indicate that Zoar's Arab populations retained something of their Nabatean identity, even after many had converted to Christianity.



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BELOW LEFT: ZOAR'S EARLIEST BISHOP. The Greek inscription from this tombstone marked with Christian symbols names the deceased as Apsis, a 55-year-old bishop of the Christian community at Zoar who died on July 29, 369 A.D. The date inscribed on the stone indicates that Apsis was the earliest in a series of bishops responsible for the Christians of Zoar, four of whom are known from other sources.

was Saridas Pitholaou, an obviously Greek name—reflecting the degree to which the Jewish community was Hellenized.

When the Romans crushed the Great Jewish Revolt of 66–70 A.D., destroying Jerusalem and burning the Temple, many Jews fled east and south to the shores of the Dead Sea. The final Jewish defeat occurred in 73 or 74 A.D. on the western side of the Dead Sea at Masada, where Roman soldiers with their Nabatean allies defeated the last rebel stronghold.

During the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome, the so-called Bar-Kokhba Revolt (132–135 A.D.), Jewish refugees fled to caves near the Dead Sea. In one of them was found the famous Babatha archive containing a number of Babatha's legal documents—showing that she came from Zoara!* Jews like Babatha who went west from Zoara were apparently fleeing from the Roman officials east and south of the Dead Sea. Many of Babatha's documents reflect her appearance before Roman authorities who ruled the area at this time.

This region certainly seems like a barren part of the world, but the remains of those who lived—and died—here speak to us from the grave. ☞

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*See Anthony D. Saldarini, "Babatha's Story," *BAR*, March/April 1998.