

Karni GOLAN, Architectural Sculpture in the Byzantine Negev. Characterization and Meaning. Archaeology of the Biblical Worlds Bd. 3. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2020, XXIX + 684 S., 99 s/w-Abb., 351 farb. Abb.

As stated by the author, this book represents a rather unique attempt at a detailed presentation, analysis and examination of architectural decoration¹ of the Negev Desert (Israel), a remoted region of the Roman and Byzantine empire. After being cut off from the former Roman province of *Arabia Petraea*, this region became from 284 CE onwards and during the whole period discussed in this book one of the main areas of the province *Palaestina Tertia* or *Salutaris* with the capital at Elusa (Haluzza). It included a series of small towns/larger villages some of them with a strong Nabatean background (such as Mamphis and Oboda) others with a less visible one. Intensive archaeological activity of the past decades, has strongly emphasized the main development of these sites from the 4th century CE onwards, with a peak in the 5th and 6th centuries CE². These sites are the object of the study reviewed here, namely Shivta, Oboda, Mamphis, Nessana, Be'er Sheva, Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Sa'adon and Elusa. For the period in discussion all these settlements were of Christian character and included a couple of churches creating a kind of urban nucleus surrounded by dwelling quarters. As usual in such settlements the churches and their administrative staff had a leading position both initiating and carrying out of the architectural and decorative program, which often included imported marble decoration³. On the other hand, also design and decor of dwellings were not neglected,

¹ The term 'sculpture' in the title of the book seems a little bit pretentious, since it deals in fact with the field unanimously known as 'architectural **decoration**'.

² The Nabatean background of some of these sites is much debated in last years, due to the lack of Nabatean building remains in excavations; for some conclusions see Tepper, Y./Erickson-Gini, T./Farhi, Y./Bar-Oz, G. 2018. Probing the Byzantine/Early Islamic Transition in the Negev: The Renewed Shivta Excavations, 2015–2016. *Tel Aviv* 45, pp. 120-152; see also: Heinzlmann, M./Erickson-Gini, T./Schöne, Ch.A./Jordan, F. 2017. Elusa. Vorbericht zu den Kampagnen 2017 und 2018, *Kölner und Bonner Archaeologica* (KuBA) 7, pp. 99-124. For characteristics of the Nabatean culture still valuable, see: Negev, A. 1983. *Masters of the Desert. The Story of the Nabateans*. Jerusalem (Hebrew). I owe thanks to Tali Erickson-Gini and Yotam Tepper for sharing with me their experience in the research of the rural society of the Negev.

³ At a larger scale mainly in the capital city of the province, Elusa; see Goldfus, H./Arubas, B./Bowes, K. 2000. New Excavations in the East Church at Halutza (Elusa): Preliminary Report. *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13, pp. 331-342; Zöldföldi, J./Fischer, M., 2012. Provenance Analysis of the Marble from Elusa in Byzantine Palestine: A Poster Presentation, in: A.G. Garcia, P.L. Mercadal, and I.R. de Llanza (eds.), *ASMOSIA IX International Conference: Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone*, Tarragona, 8–13th June 2009, Abstracts, Tarragona, p. 159; for other sites, see now Fischer, M./Tepper, Y. 2021. A Group of Pilaster Capitals from Shivta: Marble Import in the Byzantine Negev, *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2020.1866328>.

and an interaction between the public and the domestic domain could be observed. The latter, however, was based mainly on local stones, which is the focus of this study.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to short introductions including methodology, history of research of the Negev. Out of these, the history of research of stone architectural decorations in Israel and the Negev Desert presents previous studies of decoration of the Negev sites as well as some references to general studies regarding decoration, which, however, take into account just a small part of them. However, some studies giving the background of architectural decoration based on Classical principles from the Hellenistic, Roman and mainly Byzantine periods (relevant to Karni Golan's study) are omitted⁴.

Chapter 2 is the catalogue dedicated to the presentation and a detailed description of the architectural decoration of the Negev sites, following the order mentioned above and dividing it among various architectural details such as bases, columns, capitals, cornices etc. as occurring in their architectural context. The latter includes freestanding elements and details used in doorways, which represent the main bulk of the material presented in the book. The presentation of the architectural remains is well organized, the descriptions follow a certain order, accompanied by tables and references to color plates. The photographs facilitate a better insight into the details of the decoration pointed out in the text. This catalogue represents one of the best achievements in the field of architectural decoration published so far in Israel, and should be used for other regions as well. It is definitely an excellent starting point for the analysis of the design and the motifs used by the artisans. As I mentioned above, the Nabatean background of some of the settlements is hardly to be discerned, perhaps only one specific phenomenon could be revealed, namely the popularity of door jamb capitals having a certain similarity with Nabatean capitals, mainly those with the high relief "horned" decoration⁵. It seems that any Nabatean tradition, which certainly existed in the pre-Byzantine era, has been replaced by a newly created architecture, guided by the developments of the Roman and mainly Late Roman period (4th century and onwards).

⁴ Just to mention a few of them: Avigad, N. 1954. *Ancient Monuments in the Kidron Valley*. Jerusalem (Hebrew with English abstract); Fischer, M.L. 1998. *Marble Studies: Roman Palestine and the Marble Trade*. Xenia, Konstanzer Althistorische Vorträge und Forschungen No. 40. Konstanz; Kautzsch, R. 1936. *Kapitellstudien, Beiträge zu einer Geschichte des spätantiken Kapitells in Osten vom 4-ten bis ins 7-te Jahrhundert*. Berlin.

⁵ Negev, A. 1974. Nabatean Capitals in the Towns of the Negev. *Israel Exploration Journal*, pp. 153-159.

In *Chapter 3*, the whole repertoire of decorative motifs is presented systematically and emphasized statistically, so that one can get a better picture of the amount of patterns used both in different sites and mainly on different items. Seven defined categories of motifs are discussed (p. 205): geometric, rosettes, floral, faunal, architectural, object-type and figurative. Colored charts and tables give a vivid picture of the distribution of these motifs among various architectural components. Thus, for instance, it becomes obvious that geometric motifs are the most popular ones in almost all items. As to symbolic motifs, a rather small number of crosses (*Chapter 3.2.21*) decorated various architectural components, mainly those belonging to doorways (see below). Architectural motifs depicting arcades and niches could be considered as reflecting the ecclesiastic reality (facades of churches and niches in apses), like the crosses do. Faunal and figurative motifs are rather limited occurring mainly in Oboda and Mamphis. An important part is *Chapter 3.9* dealing with the distribution of these motifs among various architectural components but not their distribution among the sites analyzed in the book. *Chapter 3.10*, which is a case study of the popular “zigzag pattern” is the only one where such a distribution is given and analyzed (Tables 11-13). One of the important conclusions is the fact that more complex motifs (usually frequent in Classical architecture) were less popular in the Negev sites, and a tendency to a simplification is visible.

This idea is concluded by Karni Golan in *Chapter 4* dedicated to the decorative compositions where she underlines (in tables and charts) the almost exclusive use of geometric patterns. Another conclusion refers to the use of decorative patterns for doorjamb capitals rather than column capitals, which were mostly used in public buildings (mainly churches, and often using imported marble) not discussed by Karni Golan for various reasonable reasons (pp. 213-216).

In a chapter termed ‘technical aspects’ (4.5) Karni Golan presents elaborated figures and explanations to the geological background of every site discussed by her, mainly represented by limestone and chalk, which were obviously the main building and decorative stones used in the sites. It should be also obvious that the builders and artisans used stones from quarries in the neighborhood even if these were not always identified. Unfortunately, this geological detailed presentation has not been used by Karni Golan to point out any differences between the decorative materials of the sites. It seems that the geological differentiation had no impact on the building industry and artistic design. More important are the limited geographical area discussed here and short distances between the sites and the tied relations between them as evidenced for instance in the famous *Nessana papyri*. As to use of stones from quarries close to the sites rather than carrying them from longer distances, an interesting reference

coming into mind would be the story of the difficulties faced by the builders of the Nea Church in Jerusalem under Emperor Justinian as related by Procopius of Caesarea⁶, reflecting the situation of building projects in the Byzantine period and the preference for local material.

An interesting and challenging contribution of the author is *Chapter 5*, which is an attempt to understand the possible symbolic meaning of the decoration. In a systematic way – as Karni Golan is doing it throughout her book – the author is surveying the motifs of a symbolic significance, those which carried the “message” following the tradition of semiotic analysis of art in general and motifs in particular. Due to the lacking of local written sources explaining the use of such motifs in the Christian milieu of the Byzantine Negev, Karni Golan bases herself on the literature analyzing the symbolism of motifs in Christianity published during the past generations (pp. 239-261). A very detailed and thorough overview is offered by her, though sometimes moving away from the essential purpose of this chapter. Relevant are her concluding remarks that “On the one hand, to claim that all decorations on the architectural elements must have had a symbolic meaning would be a misleading generalization; on the other hand, one should not disregard the observation that it is likely that most decorated elements were part of a greater scheme of decoration in which some elements were decorated with symbolic motifs”. An interesting point revealed by Karni Golan is the fact that most of the motifs decorated entrances, which give them an apotropaic meaning. That crosses were part of them is obvious but, as pointed out by Karni Golan, out of 357 decorative elements only 40 are crosses (p. 260; however, on p. 244 the number 30 is given), which would mean that other motifs (floral, faunal, architectural) could have the same strong Christian meaning.

In *Chapter 6*, a (too) short overview of comparisons with surroundings areas is offered; Karni Golan correctly points out that the architectural decoration of the Negev sites is not a unique phenomenon, in her words, “the inhabitants of the Negev did not live in isolation; they were part of a wider cultural world” (p. 263). Moreover, and it could have been stressed even more, their artistic repertoire is not a regional invention but also a result of the impact of a broader

⁶ Prok. *aed.* 5, 6: “...But the site itself, being inland very far from the sea and walled about on all sides by quite steep hills, as I have said, made it impossible for those who were preparing the foundations to bring columns from outside. But when the impossibility of this task was causing the Emperor to become impatient, God revealed a natural supply of stone perfectly suited to this purpose in the nearby hills, one which had either lain there in concealment previously, or was created at that moment...”; see Tsafrir, Y. 2001. Procopius and the Nea church in Jerusalem. *Antiquité tardive* 8, pp. 149-164; for the excavation of the Nea Church see Avigad, N. 1980. *Discovering Jerusalem*. Jerusalem, pp. 229-246.

circle of architectural and artistic activity of Palestine and even beyond it. In this survey, for instance, the rich and long lasting repertoire of rural architecture and decoration of larger Syria is missing, in spite of many parallels occurring there to the Negev material within the same time span examined by Karni Golan⁷. Such a use would have brought a better contribution to the typological and chronological frame of the elements discussed in the book.

Chapter 7 contains the conclusions. One of the main points is the similarity in the shapes and profiles of the architectural items as well as in their subjects. In fact, a certain uniformity between the Negev sites could be emphasized, which seems to be based on the relationship between main centers and peripheral areas as related also to the prototypes of architectural items, marble imports including. Even if some of the main architectural components made of imported marble were not used in this area, some of their artistic details, such as molds, profiles of bases, arrangements of leaves etc. became part of the artistic repertoire. Their origin is in the interaction between imported architecture of Classical character and its impact on the architecture based on local materials, such as those in the Negev. Karni Golan rightly described and pointed out that these elements changed their characteristics and shapes due to local workmanship, either of Nabatean origin or artistic skill emerging from a long lasting activity during the Byzantine period where a varied spectrum of artistic production was absorbed.

By reading and reviewing this book with its rich information about architectural decoration and its meaning one become aware of the high value of the latter referring to and emphasizing the social background of these settlements in the widest sense of the term. The local government and/or ecclesiastic leadership had the ability and economic power to lead and produce a highly systematized building industry accompanied by a decorative representation with numerous similar elements occurring in almost all architectural components. Both use of the same stone and similar decorative elements seem to reflect a real *koine* of a society led by close principles and traditions. In a certain way they reflect the economic and social picture as evidenced also by the *Nessana papyri* where the relationships between the Negev sites of the Elusa hinterland are described as close as to a kind of *common market* of the modern world⁸. Such a society

⁷ Such as the exhaustively documented and illustrated material published by Christine Strube: Strube, C. 1993. Baudekoration im nordsyrischen Kalksteinmassiv: Band 1: Kapitell-, Tür- und Gesimsformen der Kirchen des 4. und 5. Jahrhunderts nach Chr. Mainz; Strube, C. 2002. Baudekoration im nordsyrischen Kalksteinmassiv: Band 2: Das 6. und frühe 7. Jahrhundert. Mainz.

⁸ Kraemer, C.J. 1958. Excavations at Nessana, Vol. III. Non Literary Papyri, Princeton; see also Rubin, R. 1996. Urbanization, settlement and agriculture in the Negev desert – the impact of

produces an architecture and decoration with many similarities. This is the main picture emerging from this book. Based on the presentation and examination of the architectural decoration and its meaning the author offers an insight into the society of the Negev sites in the Byzantine period.

The chronological frame given by Karni Golan is the 4th-8th centuries CE, which is a long period including different chronological components with some political, social, cultural differentiations. The periods are Late Roman, "Early Byzantine" (which is a term more adequate for Greece and Turkey where the Byzantine era continues into the 14th-15th century while in Palestine the whole period of 4th-7th century is in fact "Early Byzantine"), and Early Islamic (Umayyad) period (7th-8th century CE). Although not pointed out sufficiently in the book, in her conclusions, Karni Golan reveals some differences between the Late Roman and the Byzantine period (p. 282). It remains unclear what does the 7th-8th century produce in these sites. Was it the continuation of the well-established Byzantine tradition or some degenerated and atrophied heterodox phenomena as it happened in other areas⁹?

The book is well organized offering a clear overview and use. Chapters and clearly defined and divided into reasonable sub-chapters. Tables and charts are included in the right places, and references to plates and figures are very helpful. A better design of the plates (some of them are rather empty, others are over-crowded) would have been an esthetic improvement. Beyond all this, in fact one important thing is missing, namely an *index*, making search for various subjects much easier.

In conclusion, we can definitely state that scholarship dealing with architectural decoration and its interpretation has been granted with an excellent collection of architectural decorative material of a certain geographical region during a well-defined period. Furthermore, the detailed description and the systematic presentation of the items and their decoration accompanied by a full illustrative documentation, tables and charts make any further research and use of the material easy. That a remoted region has been chosen which is represented by both Classical – Greco-Roman elements but mainly locally

the Roman-Byzantine empire on the frontier. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 112, pp. 49-60.

⁹ Such as in Arabia, Vaccarini, G. 1989. I capitelli di Ma'in. *Liber Annuus* 39, pp. 213-242, or in Egypt, Ryl-Preibisz, I. 2001. Remarks on Some „Rediscovered“ Nubian Architectural Elements. Centre d'archeologie mediterraneene de l'Academie Polonaise des Sciences, *Etudes et Travaux* XIX, pp. 288-298.

produced and sometimes invented decorative compositions is very challenging and definitely inviting future scholars to deal with such endeavors.

Karni Golan has brought the remoted Negev region and its cultural baggage to our attention and should be praised for this.

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