

Caravanserai-Sanctuaries in Roman Syria

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ABSTRACT

The position of shrines in antiquity was a consequence of a complex relationship between human, deity and landscape. The study of the interaction among these three elements can open up further interpretation of rural sanctuaries. Based on these observations, this essay aims to emphasize the interaction between rural places of worship and their landscape, in order to trace the phenomenon of 'caravanserai-sanctuaries' in the Levant from their origin, particularly during Roman times.

KEYWORDS

Caravanserai, Rural Roman sanctuary, Syria

The definition of space as sacred came from human reflection on landscape in which the divinities demonstrated their own supernatural capacity through various 'miraculous' manifestations. The concept of the sacred therefore indicated not only the place of worship, but also the divinities themselves who were anchored strongly to the place from which they took names and epithets.¹ If such a notion of 'sacralization' was generally at the origin of the foundations of shrines, particularly in the Levant's rural areas the development of those places depended on concrete factors which are related not only to the religious practices, but also to the socio-economic growth of their territories.² These factors would have determined the location of some rural sanctuaries in relation to the landscape and the connecting roadways since their appearance in the first millennium BC, and they would also have influenced the architectural style and organization of sacred spaces.

1. Iron Age temples and trade routes

The growth of trade routes in isolated Levant territories between the ninth and seventh centuries BC favored the appearance of a particular phenomenon, which Oggiano called 'frontier' or 'border sanctuaries'.³ A well-preserved example of these sanctuaries is the site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, which is located along the roadway between Rafah on the Mediterranean and the Aqaba Gulf in the Red Sea in northern Sinai.⁴ The site consists of a quadrated building 22 × 13 m with four towers at the corners, and includes storehouses and rooms with stone benches for ritual activities. Although it was built according to a fortress plan, it did not function as such. Archaeological evidence shows that Kuntillet 'Ajrud was likely a fortified and isolated religious center that served travelers and caravans drivers, or

pilgrims to Sinai.⁵ In Phoenicia, in contrast, the so-called 'Syrian temple' seemed to expand also into rural areas, including the Qadbuon Temple (ninth century BC), which is located in a remote part of the Syrian coastal mountains near Qadmous village.⁶ Excavations at Qadbuon have yet to reveal the nature of the settlement at the site or its development through the centuries (fig. 1).⁷ However, the ruins of a large tower behind the northern side of the temple could indicate a defensive structure from an undetermined period. Although uncertain because of the lack of stratigraphic study and archaeological finds, categorization of the Qadbuon site as a 'border or caravanserai temple' is a possibility because of its strategic location on the ancient road between the Gab plain and the Phoenician coast. Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Qadbuon could be the origins of places of commerce and religion that arose in rural areas, and which played an important role in the connection networks between urban centers.

⁵ Since its discovery, extraordinary documentation of this small settlement has aroused great curiosity within the scientific community, who continue to discuss the original function of this complex. Many scholars have suggested that the building served as a way-station or caravanserai (e.g. DEVER 1990, p. 140), sanctuary-caravanserai (e.g. OGGIANO 2005, pp. 130-136) or remote religious center inhabited by a community of priests (e.g. MESHEL 2012, pp. 65-69).

⁶ The sanctuary has a trapezoidal-shaped *cella* with a high platform at the back, which is preceded by a tripartite vestibule, i.e. three rooms that connect to each other and have their own entrance (BOUNNI 1997, pp. 779-782). The plan of the temple coincides with the stele of Ball discovered at the site, which dates back to the eighth century BC (cf. BOUNNI 1991, ABOU ASSAF 1992).

⁷ According to Bounni, the Greco-Roman architectural elements found in the temple suggest that it was still in use during that period, and the stele of Ball was conserved in Roman *favissa*; cf. BOUNNI 1997, pp. 779-780. As the archeological finds from the excavations have not yet been studied, it is not possible to test Bounni's thesis, and the presence of some Roman architectural elements cannot attest the continuity of religious activity in the building. In addition, there is another temple at the site located on the lower terrace, which seems to have a classical layout. According to Bounni, the temple (11.8 × 9.3 m) was (re)constructed in the Roman period and has *pronaos* and *naòs* with *adyton* in the back wall, cf. BOUNNI 1997, p. 778. Our survey of the site has not revealed any Roman architectural elements in the area around the second temple; instead we note several spaces beside the eastern side, which could be associated with this temple. We are still ignorant of the chronology of the site, especially in the lower terrace, and the dating to the Roman time of the second temple is still doubtful.

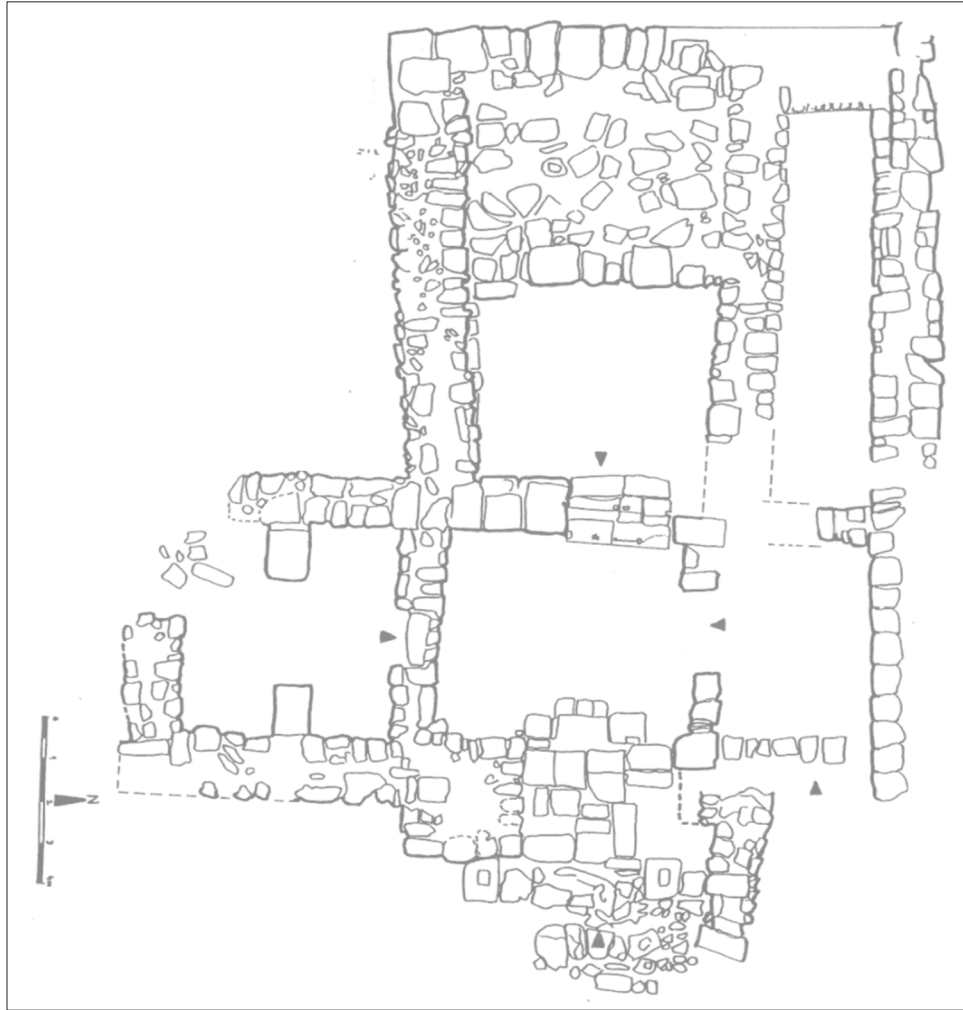
¹ There are many examples; for more on this theme, see AHMAD 2015, pp. 7-10.

² Cults practiced at rivers and streams, springs or cave springs, especially those which had specific geological characteristics were well known in antiquity.

³ OGGIANO 2005, pp. 124-125.

⁴ MESHEL, GOREN 2012, p. 11-59.

FIGURE 1
The upper temple
at Qadbuon
(after BOUNNI 1997,
p. 785, fig. 5).



In the following centuries (eighth and seventh BC), rural places of worship in Phoenicia underwent a remarkable change and transformed into rural and collective religious centers linked to the nearest urban centers. It is undeniable that temples such as Amrit, Ain el Hayat and Bostan el-Sheikh were constructed near certain landscape contexts (e.g. springs), which were considered sacred due to their extraordinary and miraculous features. Their original architecture created a collective rural shrine, where the political, socio-economic and religious dimensions intersected along the Phoenician coastal road.⁸

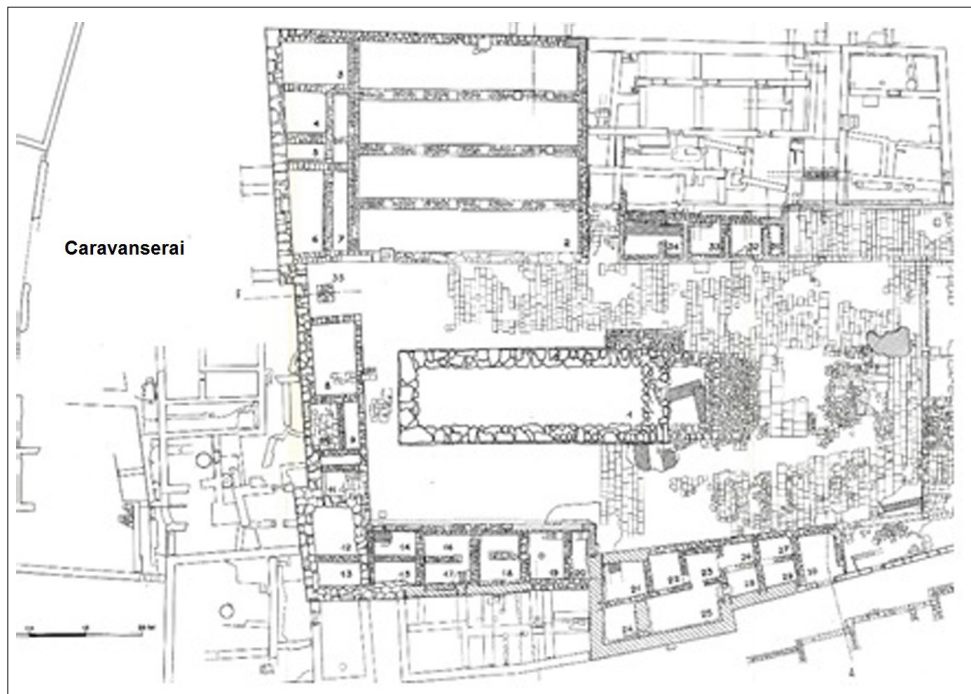
⁸ About Amrit cf. OGGIANO 2014, p. 203. About Bostan el-Sheikh cf. STUCKY 2005.

2. Hellenistic rural sanctuaries

Despite scarce evidence from the Hellenistic period, it is possible to trace a certain continuity in the relationship between rural temples and trade routes, as is the case of Qasrawet in northwestern Sinai. It constituted a Nabatean administrative, commercial and religious center and served as a station for caravans on their way to the Gulf of Suez from the second century BC.⁹ In the Levant, the village of Oumm el-Amed (Hammoun), 20 km south of Tyre,

⁹ The site includes two Nabatean temples and several structures which were identified as ordinary dwellings or private houses, and which can be found in other Nabatean caravanserai, cf. OREN 1982, pp. 206-208.

FIGURE 2
Milikashtar's
sanctuary at
Oumm el-Amed-
(after DUNAND,
DURU 1962, pl. 90)



occupied a dominant terrace on the coastal plain on the Tyre roadway. Hammoun had two temples that adopted the Hellenistic architectural style, of which Milikashtar's was raised at the center of a *temenos* surrounded by various spaces (Fig. 2). According to excavators, the structures located on the lower terrace adjacent to the western side of this sanctuary could have belonged to a caravanserai associated with it. Indeed, this building has a separate structure, which seems to have a courtyard surrounded by several rooms. The location of Milikashtar's temple on the southwest edge of the village near the coastal road, plus its layout with more than 30 rooms suggests that it played an important role as a collective cultural and commercial exchange center that provided hospitality for travelers and animals in their caravans in an associated building – the 'caravanserai'.¹⁰ During the late Hellenistic period, the political scenario changed and the Ituraean brigand phenomenon strongly influenced

Lebanon's rural landscape. Maritime cities and trade routes were subjected to several attacks by these brigands, who were entrenched in the mountains until their fortress was destroyed by the Roman army.¹¹ Although evidence of an Ituraean 'fortresses' is scarce, the spatial organization is rather reminiscent of the category of Iron Age border sanctuaries, where some places of worship were incorporated into fortified buildings.¹²

¹¹ Strabo recounted that Pompey destroyed the Ituraean fortresses in Mountain Lebanon and liberated some cities on the coast. Str. XVI, 2, 18. On the Ituraean nomadic life, cf. Jo. BJ XV, 344-348; ALIQUOT 1999-2003, p. 208.

¹² This was the case for Qalaat el-Hoson (16 km east of Batrun). It was built between the end of second century BC and the end of the first century AD on top of a rough mountain dominating the el-Gouz valley. The site has three main sectors, each with a central courtyard surrounded by rectangular rooms. An open religious space (altar-platform) was located in the highest part. Several votive altars and other architectural elements were recently found there. E. Renan was the first scholar to suggest attribution of this site to the Ituraean 'fortresses', cf. RENAN 1864, p. 253; see also the recent research on the site in: GHANIMÉ-MARION 2007, pp. 108, 112-117, 138.

¹⁰ DUNAND, DURU 1962, pp. 54-56, 80-81.

3. New rural configuration of Roman Phoenicia

The rural areas saw a remarkable growth in places of worship in the coastal ring mountains during the Roman period. Such prosperity would have reflected the demographic and cultural influence of the Ituraeans, who integrated gradually into the new Roman province. On the other hand, it has been noted that these places of worship expanded into landscapes where many villages and hamlets were already located near natural resources. Janouh in Lebanon maybe a good example of the relationship between sanctuaries and villages, in which some Roman villages were located on the wooded slopes and transhumance areas, where some streams flow into the lower part of a valley and feed the river Adonis (today Nahr Ibrahim).¹³ All Syrian coastal range mountains appear to be mosaics of small, diverse and localized microclimates, where vast variations coexisted and changed forms among themselves. The region was subjected to new rural configurations that appeared within the new cultivation of terraces, with vertical transhumance on the high summits and forestry activities. It was a gradual change that is clearly revealed in the abandonment of brigandage at the el-Hoson fortress, which was contemporary with the growth of the adjacent el-Gouz valley with some villages and shrines: the village of Douma, sanctuary of Hardine and Hadrian's forest confines.¹⁴

The line between the appearance of places of worship and the new rural configurations with several economic activities occurs clearly in the delimitation of cultural, private or imperial properties in rural areas, for example the demarcation of Hadrian's forests. In this sense, it would be possible to distinguish the old properties and trace a dense

network between the inner plains and the coastal towns through villages, shrines and imperial forests. The most well-known example comes from the Afqa-Yanouh valley, where some famous sanctuaries and villages were located. This area contains many Greek-Latin inscriptions, which indicate clearly the demarcation between the Afqa sanctuary property and those of Hadrian's forests.¹⁵ In addition, some others indicate Roman road network planning from the Domitian period onwards, such as that of the Aquora path, which linked the Afqa-Yanouh valley to the Bekka plain.¹⁶

Compared to rural settlements, the study of sacred landscape — alongside epigraphic and architectural evidence — generally classifies rural sanctuaries into two main types based on their location.¹⁷ The first refers to village temples, or those that were built within clusters of rural settlements. The second type includes many temples located on terraces of slopes or surrounding hills near to villages. We could add a further few isolated temples to these two categories, which seem to be contemporary with the growth of the dense road network between rural territories and cities, assuming a socio-economic as well as religious value. Would this type be a new rural configuration of sanctuaries-caravanserai in Roman times? The topographic analysis of the sacred landscape and the organization of the architectural spaces of Wadi Mousa in Lebanon and Hoson Sulaiman (*Baitokaike*) in the *Bargylus* could answer this question. These sites have particular structures, which could be identified as not only ritual spaces but also buildings for 'hospitality services' and bazaar-caravanserai sanctuaries.

3.1 Sanctuaries with 'hospitality services'

The Wadi Mousa site is located at the crossroads between Abou Mousa's stream and the river Nahr Mousa, which flows into the sea at the Roman town Orthosia a few kilometers north of Tripoli. The site

¹³ About the geo-archaeological and prospection study in the valley of Janouh, cf. GATIER ET AL. 2002, pp. 230-234.

¹⁴ Renan mentioned some Roman tombs of Douma, including that of Castor who was a priest of Asclepius and *Hygie* probably from the nearby sanctuary of Ain Akrin, ALIQUOT 2009, pp. 157-158; RENAN 1864, pp. 255-256. For the Roman sanctuary of Hardin see YASMINE 2009, pp. 124-134. Some Latin inscriptions attested the confines of Hadrian's fortress at north Douma village, cf. RENAN 1864, p. 256; BRETON 1980, n° 5132, ABDUL-NOUR 2001, pp. 78-80.

¹⁵ For the properties of Afqa sanctuary, cf. GATIER ET AL. 2004, pp. 203-204. For the imperial forest inscriptions, cf. Breton 1980; ABDUL-NOUR 2001; GÈZE, ABDUL-NOUR 2006.

¹⁶ RENAN 1864, pp. 303-304.

¹⁷ Cf. ALIQUOT 2009, p. 109.

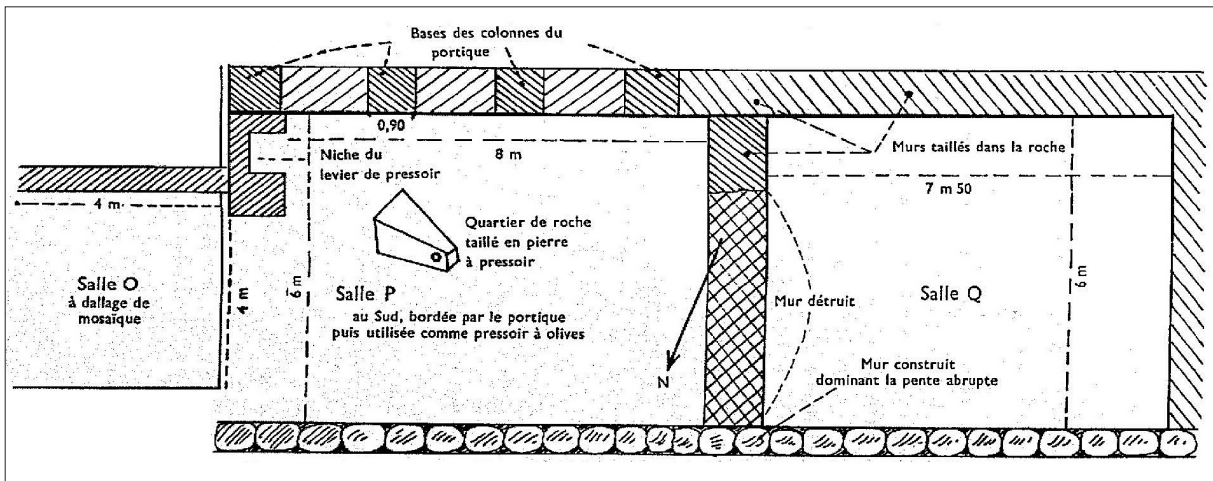


FIGURE 3.
Wadi Mousa sanctuary (after TALLON 1972, fig. 2)

constituted an extended promontory on the southern side of the river, on whose lower part (300 m a.s.l.) a small temple *in antis* (12.73 × 6.50 m) was built.¹⁸ Another complex dominated the top of the promontory (about 390 m a.s.l.), where an inscription was found beside a small niche. The inscription indicates the construction of some rock-cut spaces: banquet room, portico and cistern, which a certain Diogenes offered in AD 184 (according to the Seleucid Era):

ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας Καίσαρος
Μάρκου Αὐρηλίου Ἀντωνεῖνου
Σεβαστοῦ τοῦ κυρίου Διογένης Χορ[η]γίου
[ἄ]μα Διοδότῃ συμβίῳ εὐξάμενοι ὑπὲρ ὑ-
γείας τοῦ κυρίου καὶ ἑαυτῶν τὴν βαίτην
τὴν σὺν τῇ ἐν αὐτῇ στιβάδι καὶ τῇ πρὸς ταύ-
τη χειμένην στοᾶ καὶ τῷ λάγχῳ χατεσεχέ[α]-
σαν ἔχτεμόντες τὴν πέτραν ταύτην
διεχοῦσαν μέχρι τοῦ ἔργου τοῦ ἱεροῦ
καὶ ἀφιέρωσαν ὀγδόῃ Δύστρου τοῦ
πέμπτου ρυ ἔτους

‘For the salvation of Emperor Cesare Marcus Aurelius Antonius Augustus (Commodus), the lord, Diogenes son of Choregios, with his wife

¹⁸ TALLON 1972, pp. 117-119, fig. 4.

Diodota, an ex-vote for the lord's health, has built a shelter, which includes banquet room, annexed porch and cistern, cutting into the rock inside the sanctuary and consecrated in the eighth of Dystros of year 495¹⁹

Tallon identified these rock-cut spaces *in situ*, where he recognized ruins of the complex enclosure within a cistern and a niche for a divine image.²⁰ The shelter *βαίτην* can be identified within the complex of three cut-rock spaces on the summit of the promontory (fig. 3). The eastern one probably constituted the banquet room with benches *στιβάς*, which was paved with mosaic and had a small niche to display the religious symbols. As the remains of their bases showed, the adjacent room has a porch *στοᾶ* made of at least three columns. While the inscription does not indicate the western space, it could have been a service room (kitchen and / or warehouse). Rey-Coquais emphasized that the rooms were built within a sacred space, which is delimited by a simple ‘barrier’ *ἔργου τοῦ ἱεροῦ*. Therefore, he suggested that it was a sanctuary in which ritual spaces were normally constructed.²¹ In fact, according to the

¹⁹ REY-COQUAIS 1972, pp. 85-89; *SEG* 26, 1652.

²⁰ TALLON 1972, pp. 111-116.

²¹ REY-COQUAIS 1972, pp. 90-91.

epigraphic and archaeological evidence, the banquet room, porticoes and cisterns were widespread in Syrian Roman sanctuaries.²² However, the position of the site and the distribution of its buildings on two terraces seem to suggest other functions. Firstly, the sacred landscape constitutes a forested area surrounded by steep, rough slopes, which are devoid of any clusters of dwellings or cultivation. Therefore, the development of this place of worship was instead related to the road network, which connected the coastal towns and Mount Lebanon's rural sites. In fact, a geo-archaeological study of the landscape in this part of northern Lebanon suggests that the el-Bared/Abou Mousa valley allowed easier access from Orthosia into Lebanon, particularly in the direction of Sir-el-Dnaiya valley, where some Roman villages and rural sanctuaries were found.²³ The site of Wadi Mousa was located along this valley-road, 18 km from Orthosia, and could serve the travelers or pilgrims reaching the Hoson Sfire religious complex, 8.5 km to the south.²⁴ In addition,

²² Cf. ALIQUOT 2009, p. 110.

²³ Orthosia is located at the modern Ard Artous (Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp). The Phoenician site was already known in the list of El-Amarna, cf. DUSSAUD 1927, pp. 78-79). The small town does not seem to be included in the Ituraean territories between the end of the first century BC and the first half of the first century AD, cf. ALIQUOT 2009, p. 55. The city issued coins from 90/98 BC using the Seleucid era, with a phase of interruption between the reign of Nero and the Severan age cf. BURNET, AMANDO, RIPOLLÉS 1992, pp. 644-645. Recently a Lebanese archaeological mission excavated on the site and confirmed that the Roman town extended on the lower part of the Tell, like the case of the nearby Roman town of Arqa.

²⁴ Hoson Sfire is located on the southeastern slopes of a rocky spur of Qornet Hoson el-Atiq (1346 m a.s.l.), and dominates over vast cultivated terraces. It is an architectural complex that consists of three sacred areas occupying the southeast corner of the spur. Two modest 'hypaethral monuments' were built on the two highest terraces, which could be attributed to the early Roman period. The third sacred area occupied the lowest terrace at 1240 m a.s.l., where three religious buildings were erected over time. The oldest was a monument similar to those on other terraces, which was delimited by an enclosure wall around AD 212. In the early Roman period, an Ionic *in antis* temple was built oriented to the east in the middle of the terrace. Beside this temple, another large pseudo-peripteros hexastyle peristyle was raised around CE 283-284, oriented to east facing the 'columnar monument', cf. KRENCKER, ZSCHITZSCHMANN 1938, pp. 20-34, figs. 34-54, pl. 12-18, 117-118; COLLART, COUPEL 1977, pp. 75-76 (column monument); YON 2009, pp. 189-206 (chronology and epigraph of monuments). At 1.2 km from

organization of the spaces in Wadi Mousa into two separated areas does not appear as a Greco-Roman sanctuary, which usually includes the *cella*/temple inside the *temenos*. However, the *in antis* temple is considered the main religious building of the site, while the complex on the promontory seems to be an open refuge space for travelers / pilgrims, where the divinity offered protection, housing and food. It looks like a 'caravanserai-sanctuary': a delimited sacred space, in which the shelter of Diogenes served as a function for travelers as well, rather than just for religious activities. Of course, the development of this place coincided with new Roman configuration of the rural landscape, in which some places of worship, such as Hoson Sfire, became famous religious and pilgrimage centers.

3.2 Sanctuaries and market-caravanserai

The place of worship at Baetokaike (modern Hoson Sulaiman) is located in a high valley at the source of the river al-Gamqa, 35 km from the Syrian coast (Phoenicia) and in the direction of the ancient city of Aradus. It is around 20 km from Raphanea on the eastern side, where the Roman III Gallica legion was stationed in the second and third centuries AD. During the Seleucid period, the sanctuary obtained a series of privileges, which were later confirmed by Roman emperors and engraved on a block of the sanctuary propylaeum. These privileges included, in addition to the property of the village, the possibility of operating markets that traded in agricultural produce, animals and slaves twice monthly, and which were exempt from paying taxes.²⁵

The site consists of two complexes and other worshipping monuments, including a *sacellum* and aedicule, which likely date back to second century AD. The archaeological and epigraphic evidence attributes the site to second century BC.²⁶ The first complex is a sanctuary typical of Roman Syria: a

Hoson Sfire, there is another Roman temple in the modern village of Sfire: ALIQUOT 2009, p. 224, fig. 123.

²⁵ IGLS VII, 4028 in particular l. 26-27 (REY-COQUAIS 1970).

²⁶ For the new chronological study of the site, see AHMAD 2018, pp. 45-47.

FIGURE 4
The complex of Baitokaike
(Hoson Sulaiman)
(after DABBOUR, THOLBECQ
2009, fig. 1).



large *temenos* in which an Ionic temple was raised beside an altar-tower. The other complex, situated 58 m northwest of the sanctuary, is in the form of a square forum-market in which an exedra, U-shaped structure and small temple were built (Fig. 4). The southern side of the complex is characterized by a façade with a series of windows, and has two entrances allowing access to the complex. Recent research confirms that originally the area included only the *in antis* temple (probably dated to first century AD), which was incorporated in the enclosure and remained accessible from outside. Planimetric analysis allows us to make some

general points. The two monuments on the east and north sides of the enclosure are both 10 m wide, which leads to the suggestion of symmetry in the spatial organization, which would have developed in relation to the *in antis* temple axis (16 m) rather than the main entrance. We note that all distances between monuments and entrances along the wall of the enclosure are equal: the first between the main door and the temple on the southern façade, the second between the southwestern corner of the complex and the wall parallel to the southern façade, the third between the latter and the rectangular structure, and the

fourth between the northwest corner and the exedra. According to this planimetric view, the exedra and U-shaped monument will be precisely on the axis of a courtyard, and we could imagine a symmetric closed space along the eastern side of the complex. Our limited surveys *in situ* provided some interesting archaeological finds, including amphorae and cooking pots, which suggest domestic activities in this area.²⁷ The market mentioned in the inscription of privileges could have taken place in this complex, especially on its southern side, where there is a depiction of a man holding amphorae.²⁸ The small complex of Baetokaike could be a caravanserai-bazaar with shops, storehouses and dormitories for merchants, pilgrims, travelers and others, who continuously frequented the site along the road between Aradus and the coast on one side, and the Gab plain and Raphanea on the other.

3.3 Caravan networks in inner Roman Levant

One of the inner Levant's salient features is its dense road network, where those of the Nabataean and Palmyrene caravans imposed evident influence on the landscape. The increase in trade in the area from the first century AD onwards had a big effect on rural development and the foundation of numerous agricultural settlements in the Hauran and Arabia. In fact, the area around Petra included villages or hamlets which constituted water-points, fortress-caravanserai, road-heads and rural agricultural settlements, and which were in close contact with the trade routes.²⁹ It is undeniable that there was a connection between the Levant sanctuaries (mostly urban) and economic-trade activities, where markets took place alongside or within their enclosures, often accompanied by religious festivals. However, not all extra-urban sanctuaries along the main roads can be called

'sanctuaries-caravanserai' or 'caravan stations', as Freyberger suggested.³⁰ Their layout, which had large *temenoi* and with which wide squares-markets were associated, seems to be characteristic of urban sanctuaries rather than of those rural sanctuaries, which do not have archaeological or epigraphic evidence of hosting markets nor commercial infrastructure.³¹ On the other hand, the location of some places of worship on the desert fringes has more to do with the dynamic relationship between different rural landscapes in terms of religious, political and social life, rather than with the trade networks. This is the case with the Sahr site, which is located on the northeast edge of Laja (*Thrachonitis*), 7 km east of the ancient Roman settlement Mismieh.³² The isolated location of the site, sitting in the middle of a lava field, access difficulties and the absence of resources limited the product exchange as well as the relationship with the trade routes. These factors suggest that Sahr was, instead, a seasonal tribal center of worship where only temporary religious festivals took place.

However, some sites could provide a direct relationship between worship places and trade routes, which would attest to the phenomenon of the caravan-station sanctuaries.

³⁰ FREYBERGER 1998, p. 109.

³¹ E.g. the worship place of Sheikh Barakat is located near the crossroads of the main two roads in northern Syria: Antiochia-Aleppo (east-west) and Apamea-Cyrrhus (north-south). The plan of the Roman sanctuary does not seem to have additional structures associated with a quadrate enclosure (68 m) within a temple in the center of the *temenos*, cf. TCHALENKO 1973, pp. 116-127.

³² The site was the subject of an American expedition at the beginning of last century that recognized only two structures: a sanctuary with a Nabatean plan and a theatre on its west side constituting a Nabatean sanctuary, cf. BUTLER 1919, pp. 441-446. Recent fieldwork has identified more than 80 small unit-buildings and three cisterns in an area c. 500 m around the religious centre. These units constitute small room(s) extending around a delimited courtyard DENTZER-FEYDY ET AL. 2017, pp. 179-235. Two main types of rooms can be distinguished: most examples are rectangular or T-shaped with archways (*iwan* type?) or U-shaped with porticoes. Both types were furnished with several niches in the walls. Their features are completely different from those of the domestic architecture in southern Syria, cf. e.g. KALOS 1997, p. 972. The function of these structures has been interpreted as banquet rooms and meeting halls that can be compared with the architectural type of banquet rooms in the Ancient Near East, DENTZER-FEYDY ET AL. 2017, pp. 246-251.

²⁷ AHMAD 2018, pp. 30, 47-48.

²⁸ ERTEL, FREYBERGER 2008, p. 750 (wine shops and magazines); FREYBERGER 2004, p. 36. Other scholars attribute to the southern side of the complex a function related to the pilgrims' services: hosting, dormitories and care: DABBUR, THOLBECQ 2009, p. 213; or banquets: FANI 2004-2005, pp. 107-109.

²⁹ ZAYADINE 1992, p. 226.

3.4 Sanctuary-caravan station

This category can be better observed in Arabia, e.g. at Sabrah which is located 6.5 km south of Petra. It is a hamlet extending along both banks of the narrow valley of Wadi Sabra, which forms a natural route toward the Nabatean capital. Sabrah includes several rock-cut buildings and a hydraulic system powered by a perennial spring that gives life to a small oasis. The sanctuary dominates on the right bank of the site and constitutes a quadrangular *temenos* (35 × 40 m) surrounded by porticos and crypto-porticos, with several associated structures: baths on the southern side, an industrial area on the southeast plus a possible Roman garrison.³³ On the valley's left bank is a rock-cut theatre with water facilities: an aqueduct and channels. On the opposite side, a quadrangular space c. 23 × 12 m including several perpendicular walls and perhaps an isolated courtyard structure which could be interpreted as a possible caravanserai.³⁴ Tholbecq's survey concluded that Sabra was a religious center where religious festivals took place associated with major fairs and commercial activities. The location of the site on one of the main natural access routes to Petra and the additional commercial and industrial spaces suggest that Sabra was a sanctuary caravan-station, which proved security, religious and various other services related to trade.

4. Conclusion

The origin of sanctuaries-caravanserai could be attributed to the caravanserai-fortresses themselves, which would be sited along the trade routes in isolated and border areas. It is notable that this category developed during the Hellenistic period in structures associated with rural sanctuaries, a phenomenon that was widespread in Roman times. In fact, the new Roman configuration, especially in rural areas, and the appearance of 'caravans-cities' with dense road networks were clearly reflected in the increased number of rural sanctuaries, which played a prominent part in economic-trade activities as well as the main religious role. The Roman categories of this phenomenon were established according to their architectural structures and the spatial organization related to supporting trade activity and hospitality services for travelers and caravans. Finally, we should remember that our current state of knowledge is limited to some rural sanctuaries, which show clear epigraphic and archaeological evidence. Many others would have played a primary role in serving their rural community rather than by developing such a caravanserai phenomenon, in spite of their strategic location on the main or secondary communication routes.

³³ THOLBECQ 2016, pp. 285-287, fig. 5; LINDNER 1982, p. 158.

³⁴ THOLBECQ 2016, pp. 288-292.

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