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There's Pagans in the Churches: Traces of Traditional Roman Religion  
in the Early Christian Architecture of Arabia

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**Abstract:** In 363 CE, an earthquake devastated much of the southern Levant. The event led to the destruction of most of the pagan temples still in use in the Roman provinces of Palestine and Arabia and ended the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem that had been approved by the last pagan emperor, Julian. Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem at the time, interpreted the destruction as an act of the Christian god, one that condemned the continued toleration of non-Christian religious practices in an empire that had, supposedly, rejected those beliefs.

In other parts of the Roman empire, especially North Africa and Europe, pagan structures were simply reoccupied and transformed into Christian churches—after all, the structures were an appropriate size for a church and “unnecessary” (although surely many pagan residents disagreed). But in the Levant, the Christian god’s apparent condemnation of Jewish and pagan temples led to a unique Christianization of the landscape. Rather than transform the pagan temples into Christian churches, church builders raided the pagan structures for building material, stripping them of statues and elegant marble columns. They then reoccupied older, civic buildings that had fewer religious associations, transformed the spaces into churches, and installed the spoliated temple elements there. Church builders did allow some elements of indigenous pagan religious tradition to continue, however, as the personifications of the seasons and civic deities like Tyche were routinely incorporated into the elaborate mosaics that adorned the new church floors. The temples, meanwhile, were not dismantled as was typical of other destroyed structures but left as standing ruins, seemingly as testimony to the Christian god’s condemnation of public pagan worship. The standing ruins may have served as a reminder that there was to be no toleration of pagan practices to the Christian population who, about a century later, carefully dismantled mosaic faces in churches and reinstalled the tesserae to obscure all recognizable pagan features.

**Timeline:**

63 BCE – The Roman general Pompey establishes an imperial stronghold in the Near East

30 BCE – Rome annexes Egypt

6 BCE – Judea is transformed from a Client Kingdom into a province

66-73 CE – First Jewish War

106 CE – Rome annexes Nabataea

313 CE – Edict of Milan

325 CE – First Council of Nicaea

337 CE – Death of Constantine

363 CE – An earthquake destroys much of the southern Levant

Later 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century CE – Construction of numerous churches in Arabia

636 CE – Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire fall under Islamic rule

8<sup>th</sup> century CE – Iconoclastic damage to churches across the southern Levant

### **Terms and Key Figures:**

Constantine – the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. He played a pivotal role in elevating the status of Christianity in Rome.

Cyril – the theologian and bishop of Jerusalem who may have authored a letter detailing the range of the destruction caused by the 363 CE earthquake, which facilitated the construction of numerous churches across Arabia.

Iconoclasm – a practice widespread across the southern Levant in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE that involved the destruction of human and figurative representations, presumably for religious reasons.

Julian – the last Pagan Roman emperor, under whose rule the devastating earthquake of 363 CE occurred.

Paganism – an overarching term applied to the varying imperial and indigenous polytheistic religious traditions practiced under the Roman Empire.

Tyche – the Greco-Roman goddess of Chance who became a routine figure in early Christian iconography.

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