



# Construction, Performance, and Interpretation of a Shared Holy Place

## The Case of Late Antique Mamre (Rāmat al-Khalīl)

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**ABSTRACT** Multi-religious places of worship are a continuous phenomenon in the history of religions from Antiquity to the present day, despite all concrete differences. Analysing a very well-documented example from late Antiquity, Mamre (today Rāmat al-Khalīl) in Palestine (Hebron/al-Khalīl), this article discusses and refines the theoretical concept of “spiritual convergence” developed by Benjamin Z. Kedar. By applying differentiated analysis criteria recommended by Dorothea Weltecke, it also examines the influence of economic interests, political power, concepts of purity, and aspects of time, as well as symbolic and narrative interpretations of the place, in order to explain why spiritual convergence took place at this location for at least five hundred years. The thesis is put forward that it is not only the peripheral location or lower symbolic importance that favoured the side-by-side cult at Mamre, as Ora Limor stated. Even more important for the successful sharing of that holy place was the limit of festivals to one per year and the narrative and symbolism linking the place of Mamre with the virtue of philoxeny and hospitality. This enabled the religious authorities to tolerate and perhaps even promote multireligious coexistence—especially as this was to the economic benefit of the region and thus of all ethnic and religious groups. Based on the detailed case study on late antique Mamre, the article also inquires which methodological findings and questions can be applied to other shared holy places. The emphasis lies on the interplay between building activities, ritual performance, and symbolic interpretation in constructing and sharing holy spaces.

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**KEYWORDS** holy place, spiritual convergence, Mamre, Abraham, hospitality, philoxeny, purity

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## Introduction: The Concept of “Spiritual Convergence” and the Case of Mamre

“Once holy, always holy”—this is a somewhat casual formula to describe a phenomenon of religious history that has been known and studied for a long time: Holy places often show [1]

an astonishing continuity and power of integration. This applies both diachronically and synchronously. Diachronically in the sense that once places are considered—or constituted as—sacred, they often remain so through time and beyond changes of religion and rule. A similar tenacity, however, also applies synchronously in the sense that in religiously plural areas a holy place is often used by several religious communities at the same time. Thus, the formula could be adapted and supplemented by: “Sacred for one, sacred for all.”

Historical research on simultaneously shared holy places has increased over the last 20 years, especially concerning the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> In 2001, Benjamin Kedar proposed a typology by introducing the concept of “spiritual convergence,” which was accepted by many scholars and applied to various cases (e.g., Limor 2007; Weltecke 2012). Kedar (2001) distinguishes three types of spiritual convergence at multi-religious places:

1. a spatial convergence, meaning that interaction at the sacred site by the members of different denominations is restricted to physical encounter and that joint services do not take place;
2. inegalitarian convergence, meaning that the liturgy at the sacred site is dominated by members of one denomination while others merely attend the service;
3. egalitarian convergence, meaning that ceremonies are arranged by members of different denominations and that a joint service takes place (Kedar 2001, 59–63; see also Limor 2007).

In recent times, Dorothea Weltecke adopted Kedar’s typology in an article on multireligious *loca sancta* in medieval Palestine and proposed a further development of the concept of “spiritual convergence” (Weltecke 2012). Since sources on multireligious places have been disparate in the past, she rightly claims that researchers should concentrate on the precise description of particular cases. For such detailed case studies, Weltecke proposes a differentiation of Kedar’s typology on the basis of five analysis criteria: (1) objects and (2) time of veneration, (3) the stakeholders, (4) their intentions and (5) questions of power.

Both Kedar and Weltecke, as well as other scholars dealing with the phenomenon of shared holy places, focus on the use of already existing holy places.<sup>2</sup> However, we must take into account that a holy place is not simply given, but it is constructed.<sup>3</sup> This applies in two respects: The holiness of a place is—like that of people, times, and objects—an attribution by people (see Van Uytfanghe 1988; Gemeinhardt and Heyden 2012). And not only holiness is constructed, but also, in a more concrete sense, the place itself. This happens in the mutual interaction and interweaving of the five factors Weltecke pointed out: object and time of veneration, actors and their intentions of worship and, last but not least, questions of power in the shaping of holy places. Both the sacredness and the space itself are constantly

1 Research on (shared) sacred places has increased considerably with the spatial turn since the 1990s. Among the numerous case studies of shared holy places in the antique and medieval Mediterranean in the last 20 years, see Kedar (2001); Limor (2007); Albera and Couroucli (2012); Sack (2015); Guidetti (2016); Hobart and Zarcone (2017); Drbal (2018); Verstegen (2018) and Verstegen (forthcoming). A religious studies approach to historical and contemporary multireligious shared places is presented in the volume by Beinbauer-Köhler, Schwarz-Boenneke, and Roth (2015).

2 Marginally, I would like to note that Kedar’s typology actually mixes two categories, the spatial and the liturgical, with each other: The basic distinction is between a merely spatial (1) and an additional liturgical (2 and 3) common use. Types 2 and 3 then distinguish the type of liturgical use in which one is described as non-egalitarian and the other as egalitarian.

3 Therefore, Verstegen (2018) rightly stresses the importance of architectural and media aspects for research on shared holy places.

re-constructed and re-performed in a dynamic process (see Zangenberg 2012). Juliette Day and her co-authors have therefore fittingly emphasized in their introduction to the volume “Spaces in Late Antiquity” that one must differentiate between the construction and the performance of spaces (Day et al. 2016, 3 in their introduction). Applied to holy places, one could say that we have to differentiate between the physical construction and the liturgical performance of holiness—and we have to examine how both interact with each other.

A third aspect, which in my estimation was not sufficiently considered in the previous research on shared holy places, is the aspect of the symbolic interpretation of the places—be it through explicit or symbolic explanations of meaning or through narrations of events that (possibly) happened in that place. This aspect is essential for the construction of sacred places insofar as interpretations and narratives establish, multiply, and, as it were, immaterially make the sanctity of a place “transportable” (Gemeinhardt and Heyden 2012, 431–32). This, in turn, contributes to the attractiveness of the physical space, so that the symbolic interpretation can also have an immediate impact on the place itself as a pilgrim destination. However, some religiously important places also have an ideal or symbolic existence that can exist alongside reality and sometimes even as an alternative to the reality of the physical place. The best-known example in the Mediterranean is most likely Jerusalem, of which a heavenly existence (beside an earthly one) is claimed (see Heyden 2014; Kühnel 1995). [6]

Holy places thus emerge through the linking and mutual influence of structural construction, cultic-liturgical performance, and symbolic-narrative interpretation. But what about the interaction of sacred places that are shared by several religious communities simultaneously or even used jointly? How does the spiritual convergence affect the construction, the performance, and the interpretation of a place—and what are the repercussions of these three aspects with regards to spiritual convergence? What role does the last, but by no means least, important aspect mentioned by Dorothea Weltecke play: the power factor? [7]

Late Antiquity, in general, is a particularly interesting period to investigate the dynamic and interrelated processes of constructing, performing, and interpreting holy places and spiritual convergence, especially with regard to issues concerning power. Studying this epoch, we can observe how, in the multi-religious world of the Hellenistic Roman Empire, one religion—namely Christianity—increasingly claimed public space for itself exclusively.<sup>4</sup> That this endeavour was by far not always successful, despite the aspiring political power of the Christian Church, was shown by Frank R. Trombley in his impressive survey on “Hellenic Religion and Christianization” (Trombley 1993).<sup>5</sup> [8]

The following case study is devoted to Mamre in Palestine, a place that is not covered by Trombley (1993), although it also shows how vibrant non-Christian cults remained until the seventh century, despite or even against the exclusive claims of Christian rulers. According to the biblical book of Genesis (ch. 18:1–12), Abraham and Sarah hosted three unknown men under an oak tree<sup>6</sup> in the grove of Mamre, who revealed themselves as messengers of God. In late Antiquity, the grove of Mamre was located 3.5 km northeast of the center of modern [9]

4 The volume recently published by Diarte-Balsco (2018) is dedicated to these spatial aspects; on religious diversity in late Antiquity in general, see Gwynn and Bangert (2010), especially the editor’s Introduction (1–12) and the excellent Bibliographic Essay by David M. Gwynn (18–132); furthermore North (2011) and Boin (2018).

5 For concepts and approaches relating to spatial issues in late Antiquity, see the volume “Spaces in Late Antiquity. Cultural, Theological and Archeological Perspectives,” edited by Juliette Day et al. (2016).

6 The Hebrew Masoretic Texts speaks of “oaks” in the plural (Gen 13:18 and 18:1: אֵלֵי מַמְרֵי—*elonei Mamrei*), while the Septuaginta has the singular form (Gen 13:18 LXX: παρά τὴν δρυὶν τὴν Μαμβρη—*para ten dryn ten Mambre* bzw. Gen 18:1 LXX: πρὸς τῇ δρυὶ τῇ Μαμβρη—*pros te dryi te Mambre*). Later Christian texts

Hebron, at a place which is today called Rāmat al-Khalīl (Hill of the Friend) in Arabic.<sup>7</sup> Jewish, pagan,<sup>8</sup> and Christian rulers—namely Herod, Hadrian, and Constantine—recognized the symbolic importance of the place and tried to take advantage of it with prestigious building projects. Some archeological and literary sources reflect the religious policy goals in constructing the holy grove of Mamre, while others testify to a holy site which was used and performed conjointly by various religious groups through at least six centuries. Moreover, the place also rhetorically became a place (topos) of hospitality. Late antique Mamre, one could say, was not only a physical but—at least in Jewish and Christian sources—also a metaphorical place of shared holiness and hospitality. It is therefore not surprising that late antique Mamre is increasingly cited as a successful example of shared holy places (Taylor 1993; Limor 2007; Heyden 2016; Drbal 2017). What factors made cultic coexistence possible at this place? Using the analysis criteria of Kedar and Weltecke, I aim to show how exactly convergence can be imagined in this place, how it is that it worked and what measures were taken by the authorities to regulate it, whether these means were successful or not—and why.

As in many other cases of lived religiosity, in this case, too, we can observe conflicts between practiced piety and the normative ideals of religious authorities. While the latter often strove for religious and ritual uniqueness, the reality was marked by diversity. This fact is reflected in the bias between literary and archeological evidence. In many cases material research—archaeology and epigraphy—show that literary sources often do not *reflect* historical reality, but *react* critically to it. In order to reconstruct reality from literary sources, we therefore have to apply a hermeneutic that reads the texts ‘between the lines’ and ‘against the grain.’ In many cases it can be shown that a separation and religious unambiguity is a rhetorical demand and a reaction of rulers and theologians, which reflects just the opposite of the reality on the ground: “The rhetoric of difference is often just rhetoric and we find cultural assimilation and boundary crossing to be much more prevalent,” as Day et. al. state it (2016, 3). This seems to also be true in the case of late antique Mamre. However, this bias is particularly revealing for the investigation of power issues that are in question.

In the following, based on a synopsis of material and literary sources on the shrine of Mamre, I intend to show how the aspects of construction, performance, and interpretation of this shared sacred place interact with each other. This will be done, firstly, by reconstructing in detail two events in the history of Mamre which are well-documented in both literal and material sources: on the one hand, the attempt of the imperial family to ‘purify’ the pagan cultic site and turn it into a Christian one by building a Christian basilica in the fourth century; and on the other, the annual multireligious cultic festival that is described by Christian histo-

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have also “the therebint(s) of Mamre,” e.g. Julius Africanus (see fn. 10), Eusebius (fn. 14), Jerome (fn. 12), Egeria (fn. 25), Adomnanus (fn. 31), and even the sixth-century Madaba Mosaic.

7 The place name goes back to the designation of Abraham as “friend of/loved by God,” as it is documented in the Bible’s First Testament (Is 41:8: אַבְרָהָם אֱהָבִי—*Avraham ohavi*, LXX: Ἀβραὰμ ὃν ἠγάπησα—*Abraham hon egapesa*; 2 Chr 20:7: אַבְרָהָם אֱהָבִיךָ—*Avraham ahavejcha*; LXX: Ἀβραὰμ ὃ ἠγαπημένος σου—*Abraham ho egapemenos sou*), the New Testament (James 2:23: φίλος θεοῦ—*philos theou*), and the Qur’an (4:125: خَلِيلٌ—*khalīl allāh*). Proponents of the concepts of the “three Abrahamic religions”—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and “Abrahamic ecumenism,” which was developed by French Orientalist Louis Massignon (1883–1962) and became popular especially among Christians in the second half of the twentieth century, refer to this common veneration of Abraham (see Böttrich, Ego, and Eißler 2009). On the discussion of the localization of the biblical Mamre, see Jericke (2003, 156–235).

8 The term “pagan” is controversial today because of its pejorative use. I use it here as a collective term for all cults of Antiquity that were neither Jewish nor Christian—without, however, implying the negative connotation that Jews and Christians (and also modern academics) have associated with the term since Antiquity.

rian Sozomen one hundred years later (section ‘Building and Performing a Shared Holy Site’ below). In a second step, I will examine the relation between the physical place of Mamre and its symbolic interpretation in literature and iconography, and indicate the impact the symbolic place may have had on the perception of the physical one (section ‘Interpretation of a Holy Place’). Finally, based on the example of Mamre, I will provide some synthesizing reflections on the interweaving of the relevant aspects, which could also contribute to the further development of the concept of spiritual convergence (section ‘The Impact and Interplay of Economics, Power, Time, and Symbolic Interpretation’).

## Building and Performing a Shared Holy Site: The Grove of Mamre in Late Antiquity

### Enclosing the Holy Site to Integrate the ‘Others’: The Walls of Herod and Hadrian

The first constructions in Mamre occurred in the first century BC under the direction of the Jewish king Herod (Lichtenberger 2007). The Herodian areal had an extent of 49.3 x 65.1 meters and was used as such until the Crusader period. It seems that the site was part of a larger, threefold building project of Jewish King Herod’s that included embellishing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Abrahamic Grove of Mamre, and the patriarchal tombs at the Machpelah cave in Hebron as holy sites. The monumental stones with which the walls were built came from the same Jerusalem workshop in all three places (see Ovadiah and Turnheim 2011, 85–101). Therefore, some scholars suppose that Herod expanded all three sites nearly simultaneously, with the two sanctuaries built in honor of Abraham, possibly serving to integrate the Edomite population as a counterweight to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem (see Jericke 2003; Lichtenberger 2007; Drbal 2017). However, the spatial separation of dwelling place and the tomb of Abraham is interesting. Do local traditions underlie them, or can religious-political goals also be discerned here? Was there competition between the two places—for example, the Jewish population worshipping Abraham in Machpelah and the Edomite population in Mamre? In my opinion, the sources do not provide a clear answer to this question. [12]

Be this as it may, a connection between the three shrines (Jerusalem, Machpelah and Mamre) continued to exist in the period that followed—although this connection was not always performed as a complement, as in Herod’s case, but sometimes also as an antithesis. So it was in the case of emperor Hadrian, who destroyed the Jerusalem Temple after the suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt and began construction activities in Mamre, including reconstructing the wall.<sup>9</sup> Was it to strengthen the non-Jewish cults in the surroundings of Jerusalem? Or was it an act of revenge by the victorious emperor with which he wanted to turn a place of Jewish resistance into a place of shame? For Jewish apocalypics in the time of the Jewish-Roman wars, such as Pseudo-Baruch or Pseudo-Esra, an oak tree, probably that of [13]

9 According to Mader (1957, 81–82), Hadrian first destroyed the sanctuary of Mamre as “a suspicious rallying point for Jewish revolutionary elements” during the Bar Kochba revolt and then rebuilt it as a sanctuary of “no longer Hellenistic-Jewish, but Roman-Pagan character.” All translations of ancient source texts are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Mamre,<sup>10</sup> was a place of refuge where God could lament the suffering of the people and hope for visions of the future as Abraham had once received them.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the sources do not reveal Hadrian's intentions. They only tell us that the emperor established a fair at the sanctuary of Mamre where he sold Jewish prisoners as slaves.<sup>12</sup> Rabbinic sources called it the "market of pagans" and prohibited Jews to attend<sup>13</sup>—which, read against the grain, is evidence of Jewish involvement in the cult of Mamre.

In fact, sculptural remnants of Hermes/Mercury, Dionysos/Bacchus, and Eros, as well as a lion's head belonging to a statue of Hercules, prove a vivid cultic use of the site (see Belayche 2001, 96–104; with references to the excavation report of Mader 1957). The discovery of numerous oil lamps from Roman and Byzantine times, decorated with various symbols like palmettes, doves, fish, peacocks, the menorah, the XP-monogram, and the cross in front of a well, indicates a ritual of lighting lamps that has Jewish origins and was widely dispersed in the Near East since the second and third centuries (Belayche 2001, 97–100). Coins from the Roman and late antique period up to Justinian I. bear witness to the economic importance of the site and indicate its flourishing throughout the centuries (see Mader 1957, 151–64, fig. 167–180; Drbal 2017, 256). [14]

In the fourth century, the Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea reported that the place was venerated by the residents of these regions, and he also mentioned a picture that shows the three visitors sitting around a table: [15]

This place is even today honoured by those who live in the neighbourhood as if it were a divine place (ὡς ἄν θεῖος ὁ τόπος) in honour of those who appeared to Abraham, and the terebinth can still be seen there. For they who were hosted by Abraham, as represented in the picture, sit one on each side, and he in the midst surpasses them in honour.<sup>14</sup> [16]

There are no preserved material remains of this picture. However, the composition of the picture is most likely represented in a mold of limestone which was found in the surroundings of Jerusalem and is dated to the fourth century Fig. 1; (Frazer 1979, Nr. 522, 583–584).<sup>15</sup> Most probably, it was used to stamp cakes or pilgrim souvenirs of soft metal. One side shows three persons sitting in front of a tree around a three-legged table in the upper register. The figure in the middle is raising the left hand in a gesture of greeting, speaking, or even pointing,<sup>16</sup> while [17]

10 On the tree and ancestor worship of Mamre in the Roman Empire, see Julius Africanus, Frgm. F 30b (in Wallraff 2011b): Apparently, the idea of a tree in flames but not one burning up (Ex 3,2) is transferred to the Terebinth of Mamre here.

11 SyrBar 6:1–2; cf. 55:1; 77:1–17. In the texts themselves, the name Mamre is not mentioned explicitly. In accordance with Mader (1957, 271–85), however, it can be assumed that Mamre, namely Rāmat al-Khalīl, is meant.

12 See Jerome, *Commentarius in Hieremiam* 6,18,6 (in Glorie 1964, 307) and *Commentarius In Zachariam* 3,11,4–5 (in Adriaen 1964, 851), where he reports that Hadrian led a multitude of Jewish captives to the market of the Terebinth after the Bar Kochba revolt and sold them as slaves. See also *Chronicon Paschale annum* 119 (in Dindorf 1832, 474): "When the Jews had broken out in revolt, Hadrian came to Jerusalem and reduced the Jews to captivity. And having gone to the so-called Terebinth, he instituted a public fair (πανήγυρις) and sold them for the price of a horse each."

13 See *Talmud Aboda Zara* 1:4; *Midrasch Bereschit Rabba* 47:10–12, *Midrasch Sifre Deut* 32:2. See, in more detail, Mader (1957, 298–97); Kofsky (1998).

14 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Demonstratio evangelica* 5,9 (in Heikel 1913, 232).

15 A detailed study with alternative interpretations was published by Cline (2014).

16 Frazer interprets it as "a gesture of imperial benevolent proclamation" (1979, 137) that identifies the central person as the pre-incarnate Christ, as described by Eusebius. In contrast, Cline refers to the other



**Figure 1** Two-sided mould, fourth to fifth century, limestone, 13.8 cm diameter. Malcove Collection M82.271, Gift of Dr. Lillian Malcove, 1981. Courtesy Art Museum University of Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

the other two point with staffs to the lower register, specifically to a stove and a calf. In the small exergue below, two persons are preparing a meal. The Greek inscription says: ΕΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΟΙ ΟΙ ΑΓΓΕΛΟΙ (*EILEŌS MOI OI ANGELOI*)—"may the angels be benevolent to me." It is difficult to say whether this image represents Jewish, pagan, or Christian content. It simply seems to belong to the local tradition of the visit of three angels and Abraham and Sarah's hospitality, which is neutral in terms of religious affiliation.

Things get even more complicated when looking at the other side of the mold. It shows a female goddess on a throne in the midst of four cypress trees. She is bearing a mantle and a veil, both decorated with stars, and has a crown on her head. The inscription—ΔΕΧΟΜΕ ΧΑΙΡΩΝ ΤΗΝ ΟΥΡΑΝΙΑΝ (*DECHOME CHAIRŌN TĒN OURANIAN*)—"I joyfully receive the heavenly one"—identifies her with Urania, the heavenly queen, an epithet that was attributed to various oriental goddesses, such as Isis, Aphrodite, Astargatis, or Astarte, at that time. Obviously, the veneration of such a goddess took place at Mamre beneath the commemoration of Abraham, Sarah, and their mysterious visitors.<sup>17</sup> However, it cannot be ruled out that Christians would recognize Mary in this depiction, who was venerated by certain groups in the region as the Queen of Heaven, as we know from Epiphany of Salamis.<sup>18</sup>

Researchers dispute whether the place had a "multi-religious" or a "syncretistic" character in Roman times: Achim Lichtenberger and Vlastimil Drbal suspect that Herod established a

two persons, each of them pointing to a central detail: the right one to the well, the left one to the calf—and, accordingly, the middle one to the oak (2014, 41).

17 Cline (2014) dates the mold to the middle of the fourth century and identifies the goddess as Aphrodite Ourania of Aphaka in Lebanon. He suspects that the mold was used to imprint pilgrim memorials at two different places. Consequently, the goddess would not have been worshipped in Mamre. However, there is no parallel piece that also represents two holy places. Thus, the question must remain open whether a goddess was worshipped besides Abraham and his holy visitors in Mamre.

18 Epiphany of Salamis, *Panarion omnium haeresium* 79,1 (in Dummer and Holl 1985, 475–76); Isidore of Pelusium, *Epistula* 56 (in Migne 1864, 215–18). With reference to these, Frazer also interprets the woman on the mold as the Virgin assimilated with Atargatis/Hera and Aphrodite Ourania (1979, 142).

syncretistic cult in order to integrate the Idumaeans into his larger state by building “a bridge between the two faiths” (Lichtenberger 2007; Drbal 2017, 251). Nicole Belayche denies a syncretistic character and rather assumes a coexistence of different cultic traditions that meet in the veneration of angels.<sup>19</sup>

The terminological distinction between syncretism and coexistence was most probably alien [20] to the contemporaries. And certainly the intentions of the builders and the cult participants did not always have to be identical. However, there are clear indications in the sources that the cultic confusion at Mamre became an annoyance for the members of Constantine’s imperial family shortly after Eusebius had described the place.

### A Powerful but Failed Attempt of Cultic ‘Purification’: The Interventions of Constantine

Even for Emperor Constantine, Mamre was part of a larger building programme. He included [21] Mamre in his project to promote the most important Christian places in Palestine as the third place besides Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In all three cases, Constantine’s activities were staged—or at least interpreted by Eusebius—as a great ritual cleansing action.<sup>20</sup>

Yet it was not the emperor himself, but his mother-in-law Eutropia who, on her journey [22] through Palestine in the year 326, became aware of this place, its symbolic importance, and the cultic confusion there (as she obviously perceived it). This is testified by a letter addressed by Constantine to the Palestinian bishops and cited by the same Eusebius who was also the Christian bio- and hagiographer of Constantine.<sup>21</sup> In this letter, the emperor refers to the report of Eutropia and accuses the Christian authorities of neglecting their duties:

She assures me, then, that the place which takes its name from the oak of Mamre, [23] where we find that Abraham dwelt, is defiled by certain of the slaves of superstition in every possible way (παντοίως ὑπό τινων δεισιδαιμόνων μιαινέσθαι—*pantoiōs hypo tinōn deisidaimonōn miainesthai*). She declares that idols which should be utterly destroyed have been erected on the site of that tree; that an altar is near the spot; and that impure sacrifices are continually performed (θυσίας ἀκαθάρτους συνεχῶς ἐπιτελεῖσθαι—*thysias akathartus sunechōs epiteleisthai*). Now since it is evident that these practices are equally inconsistent with the character of our times, and unworthy of the sanctity of the place itself (τῆς τοῦ τόπου ἀγιότητος ἀνάξιον—*tēs tu topu hagiōtētos anaxion*), I wish your Gravities to be informed that the illustrious Count Acacius, our friend, has received instructions by letter from me, to the effect that every idol which shall be found in the place above-mentioned shall immediately be consigned to the flames; that the altar be utterly demolished; and, to say it in one word, after all such things have disappeared from there, that he hastily cleanses the whole environment (ὅλον ἐκκαθᾶραι—*holon ekkatharai*) with all his might and in every way (...) The place itself we have directed to be adorned with

19 “We are not seeing a syncretistic cult but a meeting, in the same holy place, of devotees from different traditions, but which all, in their way of thinking, respond to the same question of a means of communicating with divinity” (Belayche 2001, 104). In Greek and Roman pagan literary sources, Abraham was praised above all for his astronomic knowledge (Siker 1987), whereas no ritual veneration is mentioned.

20 See Eusebius, *De vita Constantini* 3,25–44 and 51–53 (in Schneider 2007, 342–62 and 372–376) and Wallraff (2011a).

21 On Eusebius’ tendentious portrait of Constantine as a “Christian emperor,” see the classical studies of Barnes (1981, 1989) and Wallraff (2013, 35–51, 2011a).

an unpolluted structure of a basilica (καθαρῶ βασιλικῆς οἰκοδομήματι κοσμεῖσθαι—*katharō basilikēs oikodomēmati kosmeisthai*), in order that it may become a fitting place of assembly for holy men.<sup>22</sup>

This letter is very enlightening with regard to the interaction between local stakeholders, political power and religious authorities in building projects as well as regarding the symbolic dimension of holy places. The local authorities of Palestine seem to have arranged, or tolerated, the multi-religious coexistence at Mamre in a very pragmatic way. Participants were free to venerate Abraham and to commemorate his hospitality in their own way. In contrast, for the imperial family, Palestine and particularly the holy places at Jerusalem and Mamre, were a prestigious and symbolic project of not only theological but also political interest: Mamre was to represent the new times which had begun with the reign of Constantine. Therefore, the emperor gave orders to the political—not the religious—authorities to “clean” the place and make it a “pure” site, whereas he accused the Christian bishops of not taking care of religious life in their zone of influence. The letter also contains justification which indicates, in my view, the core of the conflict (as of many conflicts with religious dimensions). Constantine—or his theological advisers—attribute a strong symbolic value to the place: For him, at Mamre “the observance of the Divine law first began.” Therefore, it seems to him “right that this place should not only be kept pure through your diligence from all defilement, but restored also to its pristine sanctity.” It is of interest that in his report, Eusebius clearly highlights the personal engagement of the emperor although this might cast a damning light on himself as one of the responsible bishops. Obviously, Eusebius does not try to conceal the fact that the incentive of purifying Mamre and converting it from a multi-religious place to a Christian, or at least monotheistic, one was not initiated by the local bishops but by the ruler himself. Thus we can suppose a conflict between a pragmatical perception and treatment of public space on part of the local stakeholders, on the one hand, and a symbolical supercharging on part of the political power, on the other. What was successful at the end? [24]

At first, Constantine seems to have prevailed. The basilica was built, and relics of pagan statues of Mamre found under the basement show that the imperial order of ritual purification was carried out: The pagan gods of Mamre were literally “buried” under the Christian basilica (Mader 1957, 135). Christian pilgrims came and were impressed. In the year 333, the pilgrim of Bordeaux praises the “basilica of wonderful beauty built according to the order of Constantine.”<sup>23</sup> Yet the excavations have revealed that the church was comparatively modest in its dimensions, occupying only 3,6 percent of the entire area.<sup>24</sup> It did not cover the holy place of the well itself, but was erected nearby. In contrast to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the Constantinian basilica of Mamre did not really hinder the cultic side-by-side of [25]

22 Letter of Constantine to the Bishops of Palestine, ca. 326 AD, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, *De vita Constantini* 3,52f. (in Schneider 2007, 374). This letter is also mentioned a hundred years later by Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1,18,5–6 (in Hansen 1995, 58–59).

23 *Itinerarium Burdigalense* 599,3.4 (in Geyer et al. 1965, 20): *ibi basilica facta est iussu Constantini mirae pulchritudinis*.

24 Magen designates it a “large church” with a “large plastered apse” (1993, 942). Mader is ambivalent when he speaks of “modest dimensions” on the one hand, but stresses “how impressive the Basilica, despite its modest dimensions, was in its organic connection with the Temenos” (1957, 111: “wie imposant die Basilika trotz ihrer bescheidenen Abmessungen in ihrer organischen Verbindung mit dem Temenos wirkte”, translated by author). His hypothetical attempt at reconstruction (see vol. II, fig. 38; reprinted here as Fig. 2) apparently shaped the minds of subsequent scientists. But the numbers speak against it: The Herodian wall enclosed ca. 3160 m<sup>2</sup> (65,10m x 49,35m), the Christian basilica only 114 m<sup>2</sup> (12,80m x 8,90m).

various religious groups and behaviour. Maybe this architectural solution was a compromise the Christian bishops found with other authorities involved in the cult of Mamre.

In any case, the archaeological evidence suggests that the basilica had a rather modest effect on visitors. The western noblewoman Egeria, who visited the place at the end of the 380s, was obviously much more impressed by the altar, the well, and the caves of Abraham than by Constantine's basilica.<sup>25</sup> Her report may also indicate that the cult at the altar was already intact half a century after the cleansing actions ordered by Constantine and the construction of the Christian basilica. Perhaps it had never stopped existing. [26]

### Cultic Convergence and Sexual Abstinence: The Testimony of Sozomen

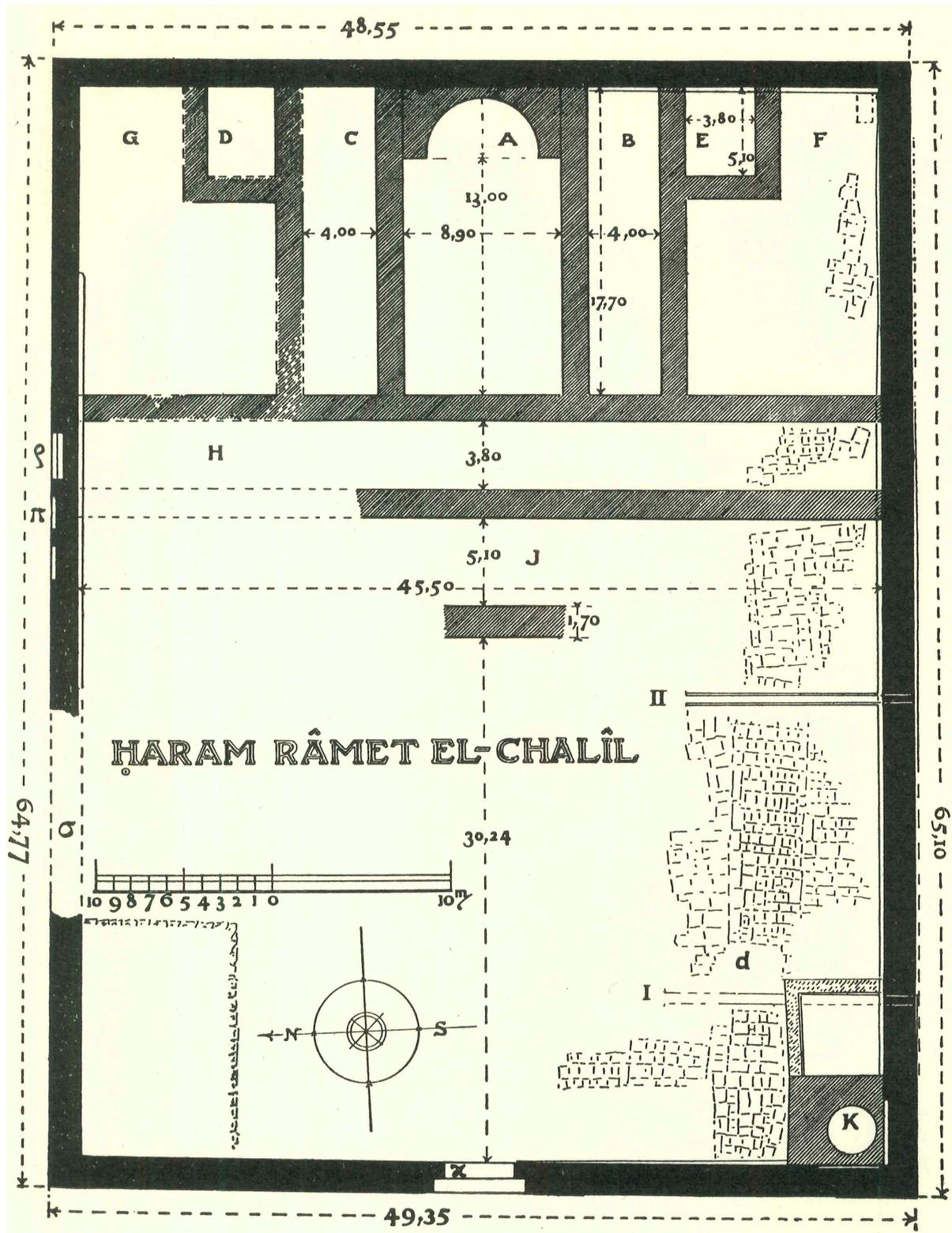
In fact, the multireligious use of the site did not end with the erection of the basilica by Constantine. The Grove of Mamre flourished as a shared holy site for another hundred years at least. This is testified by the historian Sozomen who was born in Gaza, and certainly knew the site of Mamre personally. In his *Church History*, finished in 439, Sozomen describes it as follows: [27]

Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phoenicians, and the Arabians, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast (ἐτήσιον πανήγυριν—*etēsion panēgyrin*); and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort there on account of the fair (συνίασι δὲ πλείστοι καὶ ἐμπορείας ἕνεκα πωλήσοντες καὶ ἀγοράσοντες—*synisai de pleistoi kai emporeias heveka pōlēsontes kai agorasontes*). Indeed, this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the Pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians, because He who for the salvation of mankind was born of a virgin afterwards manifested Himself there to a godly man. They honor this place fittingly with religious exercises (προσφόρως δὲ ταῖς θρησκευταῖς τιμῶσι τοῦτον τὸν χόρον—*prospchorōs de tais thrēskeutais timōsi touton ton choron*): some (οἱ μὲν—*hoi men*) pray to the God of all; some (οἱ δὲ—*hoi de*) call upon the angels, pour out wine, burn incense, or offer an ox or he-goat, a sheep or a cock. Each one (ὁ γὰρ ἕκαστος—*ho gar hekastos*) made some beautiful product of his labor, and after carefully husbanding it through the entire year, he offers it according to promise as provision for that feast, both for himself and his dependents.<sup>26</sup> [28]

What Sozomen is describing here cannot simply be classified by one of the types of spiritual convergence proposed by Benjamin Kedar. Ora Limor interpreted Mamre as an example for [29]

25 Itinerarium Egeriae (according to Petrus Diaconus): *In loco vero, qui appellatur Terebinthus, ubi aparuerunt tres angeli Abrahae, est puteus Abrahae optimus et speluncae duae lucidissimae, ubi habitavit; nam et altarium ibi positum est et ante se ecclesiam habet* ("In a place called Terebinthus, where three angels appeared to Abraham, there is the big well of Abraham and two very nice caverns, where he lived. There is also an altar, and behind it there is a church"; see Mader 1957, 314). "Living rooms" are also mentioned by Jerome, Epistula 104,11, where he describes how the pilgrim Paula "entered Sarah's cells and saw Isaac's birthplace and the remains of Abraham's oak tree, under which he foresaw the day Christ would come, and rejoiced" (*intravit Sarrae cellulas videns incunabula Isaac et vestigia quercus Abraham sub qua vidit diem Christi et laetatus est*, in Geyer et al. 1965, 110.20–24). The designation of the rooms as "cells" (*cellulae*) may indicate that at the time this letter was written (ca. 404 A.D.), a monastery existed next to the Basilica of Mamre.

26 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2,4 (in Hansen 2004, 214).



**Figure 2** Plan of the enclosure in the fourth century (Mader 1957, sketch 38). Legend: A—Main nave of the Constantinian Basilica, B and C—Side Naves, D-F—Adjoining Rooms (sometimes considered the living rooms of Abraham and Sarah by pilgrims), H—Narthex, J—Altar, K—Well; d—Place of the tree (oak or terebinth)

an egalitarian convergence,<sup>27</sup> but Sozomen does not really mention a *common* ritual of all participants. Nor does his report give the impression of a solely spatial convergence of various religious groups. He rather describes a medley of various *individual* religious actions which were practised side by side, on the one hand, and common rituals, like processions, on the other. The archaeological findings complete the picture of a very diverse cult scenery: images of gods, animal remains (mainly cock feet at the large altar), small altars for wine libations, oil lamps made of clay and decorated with various religious symbols, and coins (Mader 1957, 151–64). Sozomen also reports that the water in Abraham’s well was not drinkable because of the many natural substances (wine, ointment, and cake leftovers) thrown into it by the pilgrims.

It is significant that Sozomen does not assign specific ritual acts to certain religious groups [30] but to individuals and their housemates: “some, each one, for himself and his dependents....” By mentioning “Jews, Pagans and Christians,” he only indicates the religious affiliation of the present persons but not “Jewish,” “Pagan,” or “Christian” communities acting together. It seems that religious affiliation was not constituted by clearly defined groups during the feast of Mamre, but more by personal relation to the place. For all participants, however, the economic aspect of the feast seems to have been of great relevance (“they resort there on account of the fair”); this was probably the most important motivation to attend the festival.

Furthermore, it is interesting that Sozomen mentions certain attitudes that all participants [31] respected during the feast:

Because all of them honour the place, or from fear of Divine wrath, they all ab- [32] staine from coming near their wives, although during the feast these are more than ordinarily studious of their beauty and adornment. Nor, if they chance to appear and to take part in the public processions, do they act all licentiously. Nor do they behave impudently in any other respect (οὔτε ἄλλως ἀκολασταίνουσι—*ute allōs akolastainusi*), although the tents are contiguous to each other, and they all lay promiscuously together.<sup>28</sup>

Sozomen’s testimony is revealing in terms of the concept of purity associated with Mamre: [33] While Constantine’s attempt to purify the place through cleansing rituals and the suppression of non-Christian cults failed, the observance of sexual purity apparently was consensual among all participants of the festival. Or did Sozomen emphasize this aspect contrary to reality because he wanted to avert false suspicion of the cult participants in Mamre? Did he maybe want to enforce sexual abstinence during the festival? Whether Sozomen wanted to *describe* or rather to *prescribe* sexual purity cannot be clarified with absolute certainty for lack of other sources. But since Sozomen generally cultivated a very observant and descriptive style in his historiography (see Hansen 2004 in his introduction to Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica*; Van Nuffelen 2004), it is likely that he also credibly reported the real conditions at the festival of Mamre. Apparently, certain rules had been agreed upon in order to be able to trade and celebrate side by side despite the lack of space, without there being any undesirable sexual contacts. The sexual aspect of purity was apparently capable of consensus across religious affiliation, while Constantine had used ritual purity as a concept of struggle against diversity.

27 “This was probably a regional egalitarian ritual, a festival for inhabitants of the region of all faiths, which at this time began to attract people from far as well. The common veneration of Abraham, the local saint, the open-air ceremony, and the distance from Jerusalem, the centre of the establishment, created the proper conditions for the syncretistic performed cult at the site“ (Limor 2007, 221).

28 Sozomen, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2,4 (in Hansen 2004, 214).

In short, economic benefit and sexual abstinence were apparently two essential factors that made cultic coexistence in Mamre possible. In addition to the cultic activities, they also belong to the aspect of the “performance” of the place. [34]

Unfortunately, we do not know when, how, and why the site of Mamre declined both in terms of spiritual convergence and physical space. One might suspect that it lost its attraction in the sixth century when Justinian restored and decorated the nearby tombs of the patriarchs<sup>29</sup> that are venerated—and contested—until today by Muslims, Jews, and Christians.<sup>30</sup> But at the same time, the place was prominently represented on the Madaba mosaic; and even in the seventh century, after the conquest of the region by the Arabs, the abbot Adomnanus, in his work *De locis sanctis*, designed the picture of a magnificent basilica whose walls include Abraham’s oak.<sup>31</sup> This contradicts the archaeological evidence (see Figs. 3 and 4) and can only be explained by the fact that the author himself was either not present or counted the walls of Herod and Hadrian among the basilica walls. Adomnanus also tends to exaggerate in other respects: With reference to Jerome, he claims that the tree was visible from the beginning of the world until the time of Constantine.<sup>32</sup> At the time of Adomnanus himself, however, only a stump hewn with axes and scarred with scars could be seen. During the centuries, parts of the “Oak of Abraham” were taken all over the world as relics to worship and commemorate the visit of the three angels to Abraham at Mamre under the tree, according to Adomnanus. He also mentions some cells of nuns (*pauca religiosarum habitacula*), and in fact the archaeological findings also suggest a further, modest use of the site.<sup>33</sup> [35]

It cannot be conclusively clarified, therefore, whether the basilica of Constantine was destroyed by human violence, or by an earthquake, or whether it simply decayed over time. The market and the annual festival apparently existed at least until the seventh century, when the author of the *Chronicon Paschale* noted that the festival introduced by Hadrian and named after him was celebrated “up to the present day” (in Dindorf 1832, 614). The archaeological evidence indicates that the area was used for settlement purposes by Byzantines and Arabs at least until the eleventh century (Mader 1957, 115–22). And at least the memory of the cultic past of the place must have still been preserved during this time, because the Crusaders, namely Godfrey of Bouillon, who showed a keen interest in Hebron as the “Castellum Saint Abraham,” made efforts to rebuild the Church of Mamre (Pringle 1998, 201–4). With regard to the following centuries that saw the region under the rule of Mamluks (1250–1517) and [36]

29 According to Drbal, “the two sites (Mamre and Hebron) should always be seen as a unit: Hebron (with its cenotaphs of Abraham) was the burial site, Mamre (with its hypaethral area) a cultic open place” (Drbal 2017, 246).

30 About 570, the pilgrim of Piacenza seems to confuse Mamre and the nearby patriarchal tombs when he says: “From Bethlehem to the oak of Mamre it is 24 miles. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah are buried there, as are the bones of Joseph. The basilica has four porticoes and no roof over the central court. Down the middle runs a screen (*per medio discurrit cancellus*), and Christians come in on one side and Jews on the other (*ex uno latere intrant christiani et ex alio latere Iudaei*), and they use much incense” (Antoninus Placentinus, *Itinerarium* 30, in Geyer et al. 1965, 144). Drbal seems to be subject to the same confusion (2017). On the multireligious use of the Tomb of the Patriarchs (and other holy places) in the Middle Ages, see Kedar (2005).

31 Adomnanus, *De locis sanctis* 2,11 (Bieler in Geyer et al. 1965, 210–11).

32 Adomnanus, *De locis sanctis* 2,11,3 (Bieler in Geyer et al. 1965, 211). The author does not quote correctly in this case. In fact, in his revision of the Eusebean *Onomasticon*, Jerome writes that the oak of Mamre was visible “until the time of my childhood and the reign of Constantius”—not Constantine!—and he does not date the origin of the tree to the beginning of the world (in Schwartz 1952, 77: *quercus Mambre iuxta Chebron, quae usque ad aetatem infantiae meae et Constantii regis imperium terebinthus monstrabatur peruetus*).

33 Adomnanus, *De locis sanctis* II,11,4–6 (Bieler in Geyer et al. 1965, 211).



**Figure 3** View from northeastern corner over the Constantinian structures. In the foreground, the “living rooms” of Abraham and Sarah. The large cubes of the enclosure wall at the lower edge of the picture are typically Herodian (photo: Katharina Heyden 09/2019).



**Figure 4** Remains of late antique columns and architectural ornaments, small altars, and vessels for libation sacrifices (and some modern rubbish), as now presented in the formerly open area of the sanctuary (photo: Katharina Heyden, 09/2019).

Ottomans (1517–1917), there is no evidence for any ritual activity in Rāmat al-Khalīl. For the Muslim rulers, the grove of Mamre was undoubtedly of less importance than the nearby tomb of Ibrahim and Sara. Perhaps the disinterest in Mamre can also be explained by the fact that the idea propagated by the Christians that (the Trinitarian) God appeared in human form at that place was a blasphemous anthropomorphism in Muslim (as well as Jewish) understanding. Interestingly, Ibrahim’s encounter with unknown visitors is mentioned several times in the Qur’an (51:24–30, 15:51–53, 11:69–76), but without indicating the number of the visitors nor naming the place of this encounter. In view of the fact that the Kaaba was—and is until today—worshipped in Mecca as the house of Abraham (cf. Qur’an 2:125: *مَقَامَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ*—*maqām Ibrāhīm*), readers of the Qur’an would probably imagine the visit of the unknown men in Mecca, and worshipping Rāmat al-Khalīl would have meant unnecessary duplication or even problematic competition with Mecca. But it is all the more noteworthy that, according to Bertram Schmitz (2009), there are parallels between the traditions about Mamre and the Qur’anic report on how Muhammad established Mecca as the main sanctuary of Islam (Sura 2). For example, an annual sacrificial festival is said to have been celebrated in both places before the introduction of the Christian or Islamic cults. In both cases the authorities ordered a ritual cleansing from idolatry before the new, pure cult was solemnly introduced. Furthermore, Schmitz finds in Sura 2 a “structurally parallel Kaaba argument” for the identification of one of the visitors of Mamre with the Logos-Christ by Christians (2009, 204). Can we conclude from this that in Islam, biblical (‘Jewish’) and late antique (Christian) traditions in Mamre were transferred to Mecca? If so, then Rāmat al-Khalīl would not only be an example of centuries of cult continuity, but also of the transferability of local traditions from one sacred place to another. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, in its competitive relation to Mecca, is another, much more prominent example for that transfer of local traditions about Abraham from Palestine to the homeland of Islam (see Neuwirth *forthcoming*). However, the Abrahamic tradition concerning the holy rock on the Temple Mount was preserved despite the doubling with Mecca, while Mamre lost its importance for Islam, both physically and symbolically. The Christian Mamre tradition translocated two kilometres southwest, to Khirbet es-Sibte, where a Russian Orthodox nunnery was built on the site of an ancient and huge oak tree in the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

What has survived the times, however, is the symbolic-metaphorical interpretation of Mamre as a place of knowledge of God, hospitality, and encounter, in Judaism and Christianity. This aspect is documented in both literary and iconographic sources and also influenced the physical shaping and re-shaping of that holy site in Antiquity. Within the Islamic tradition, in contrast to Judaism and Christianity, Abraham’s hospitality was not longer associated with the concrete site or even the mere place name of Mamre. But, just as in Judaism and Christianity, Abraham himself was, and is to date, considered the father and the model of hospitality par excellence also in Islam. This, too, had and still has an impact on the shaping—or rather: non shaping, but neglecting—of the physical place. [37]

## Interpretations of a Holy Place: Theophany and Philoxeny

Two complementary symbolic interpretations for Mamre can be found in the sources: Mamre [38]

34 The tree, which was supposed to be about 5000 years old but had been dead since 1996, was felled in 2019, according to a Russian report: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190210161740/https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/2152121/> (accessed March 25, 2020).

as a place of theophany and therefore knowledge of God, and Mamre as a place of hospitality and philoxeny of Abraham.

## Theophany

The first interpretation is etymologically based on the name of the place. Thus, the Jewish-Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria and Christian authors following in his footsteps derive the name Mamre from the Hebrew root *r'h* “to see” and interpret it as a place of knowledge (Latin: visio) and sharp-sightedness (Latin: perspicacia).<sup>35</sup> This etymology is wrong philologically, as the place name “Mamre” is actually derived from the root *mrh* “fattening”. But precisely this incorrect derivation points to the intention to charge the place Mamre symbolically and theologically as a place of knowledge of God. This interpretation was handed down by Jews and Christians and points to a common understanding of the place in view of theophany. How exactly theophany is understood may vary, but the variations are not caused by religious affiliation. [39]

The already cited Eusebius of Caesarea describes the theological dilemma inherent in the text: “No rational man can suppose that the unedited and unchangeable nature of God, the All-ruler, has changed into the form of a man, or in the guise of a creature deceive the eyes or that the writing here reports something wrong.”<sup>36</sup> For Eusebius, under these assumptions, Genesis 18 can only be interpreted as a manifestation of the Logos emanating from God, which in Abraham assumed human form only for a short time, and later for a longer time in Jesus Christ. This interpretation was very popular among Christians, especially in the second and third centuries: it is extensively found in Justin’s dialogue with the Jews Tryphon and Irenaeus, and then with Tertullian, Novatian, Origen, and Eusebius. Constantine also justified the sanctity of Mamre in the letter quoted above in this way. This interpretation remained popular among Christians until the sixth century,<sup>37</sup> but it was not the only interpretation. [40]

Equally popular among Jewish and Christian exegetes was the interpretation that was also expressed on the embossing form shown above: that it concerned three angels, with many Jewish interpreters highlighting one of these three, namely the one referred to as “Kyrie,” and identified as Archangel Michael or associated with the idea of the Shekhinah of God.<sup>38</sup> The Christian interpretation of the Logos is basically a continuation of the angelological interpretation. Finally, since the fourth century, some Christian theologians have favoured the trinitarian meaning of the number of men.<sup>39</sup> Augustine, for example, points to Genesis 18 as a locus (in the Ciceronian sense of the proof) in his argument with Maximian: [41]

God appeared to him by the oak of Mamre (*uisus est autem illi deus ad quercum Mamre*). But it is not expressed here whether the father or the son appeared to him. But since the Scripture relates how God appeared to him, namely in the form of three men, one can recognize in them rather the Trinity itself—the one God. [42]

35 Philo, *De migratione Abrahami* 165 (in Cadiou 1957, 67); Origen, *Homilia 43 in Genesim* (in Doutreleau 1976, 150–52) and *Canticum Canticorum* 2,4,29 (in Brésard and Crouzel 1992, 375); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 83,4 (in Morin 1953, 342). For all references on Genesis 18, see Heither and Reemts (2005, 116–32).

36 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1,2,8 (in Schwartz 1952, 14–15).

37 Later authors who receive the interpretation on the Logos with two angels are: Athanasius of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Baradotus; among the Latin authors: Hilarius of Poitiers, Jerome, Maximus of Turin, Evagrius of Gaul, Isidor of Seville. Gregory of Illiberia offers a special interpretation according to which Jesus appears with two angels symbolizing Moses and Elijah, who also accompany Jesus during

For finally he sees three; He does not call them masters, but lords, for the Trinity is three persons, but one Lord and God.<sup>40</sup>

But it is by no means the case that the Trinitarian interpretation would have displaced the others or even had become dominant among Christian interpreters. As late as the sixth century, Procopius of Gaza simply juxtaposes the inter-Christian variety of interpretation: [43]

Of the three men, some think they are angels; but the ‘Judaizers’ say that one of the three is God, the other two angels; others say that they are a type of the Trinity, because they are addressed with ‘Lord’ in the singular.<sup>41</sup> [44]

The decisive factor for Procopius in the interpretation of the variety of interpretations of this theophany is the idea that the intractable and indescribable God, who has no appearance of his own, adapts himself to man’s limited possibilities of knowledge through his appearance in human form. Peter Chrysologus also emphasizes this aspect in a sermon on Genesis 18: [45]

Often times, God shows himself to man in a human form, he draws his enormous size to the small measure of the shape of our body, so that our weak eye can see the presence of God, our little field of vision can take him in. In such a manner God came to Abraham in human form, in the form of a stranger (*sic ad Abraham deus uenit hominis in formam, succedit hospitis in figuram*).<sup>42</sup> [46]

Agreement on the precise interpretation of theophany was reached among neither Jews nor Christians in late Antiquity. Apparently, it was not even intended. [47]

On the other hand, the second motif has been treated with surprising uniformity—Abraham’s hospitality. [48]

### Promoting a Virtue: The Piloxyeny of Abraham

Hospitality is a cultural virtue in the Hellenistic world that transcends religious boundaries.<sup>43</sup> [49] At “Mamre,” one can see how this cultural asset undergoes religious or rather theological interpretations. Hardly any ancient author who deals with the biblical figure does not praise it—the hospitality of Abraham.<sup>44</sup> The Greek term used for this is φιλοξενία, literally most likely “love of strangers.” This somewhat bulky translation meets the essentials better than the usual rendering of “hospitality.” For φιλοξενία is not just about an act or a moral command, but about the attitude of mind that underlies and promotes the reception and hospitality of strangers. Abraham, sitting in the midday heat under the oak tree of Mamre and waiting for

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the Transfiguration. On the different interpretations of the three men, see Miller (1984, 43–95), as well as Heither and Reemts (2005, 116–32).

38 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates* 1,11,2; Targumim *Neofiti* and *Ps.-Jonathan V. 3*; *Genesis Rabbah* 48,9; *Tanhuma B Bereschit* §4; *Canticum Rabbah* 1,13.

39 Ambrose, Augustine, Vigilius of Thapsus, Gregory the Great, Caesarius of Arles, Avitus of Vienne (see Heither and Reemts 2005, 120–22).

40 Augustine, *Contra Maximinianum* 2 (in Migne 1865b, 806).

41 Procopius of Gaza, *Kephalaia* 18 (in Migne 1865a, 363).

42 Petrus Chrysologus, *Sermo* 131,2 (in Olivar 1982, 247).

43 See Homer, *Odyssee* 17.485–87; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.613–715. For an overview of hospitality as a cultural, cross-religious virtue in Antiquity, see O’Gorman (2010).

44 See the list of patristic and rabbinic evidence given by Allison (2003, 68–69).

passing strangers, is the symbolic image of this attitude of mind used by Jewish and Christian authors.<sup>45</sup> As John Chrysostom emphasizes:

So much did Abraham make Philoxeny his business (Οὕτως ἔργον ἐποεῖτο τὴν φιλοξενίαν—*houtos ergon epoieito ten philoxenian*) that he did not want to entrust any of his relatives with the hunt for guests. He had 318 house slaves, he was an old man and he reached old age, as he was 100 years old, and yet he was sitting at the entrance. This man accomplished such work, and age was no obstacle for him. He did not devote himself to his own rest, he was not lying on his bed indoors, but he sat in front of the door.<sup>46</sup> [50]

According to Ambrose, theophany is a reward of God's Abraham's hospitality: [51]

Abraham sat outside the door, he sat there at noon. While others were resting, he awaited the arrival of guests (*iste hospitem exploravat adventur*). God appeared to him deservedly (*merito*) by the oak of Mamre (*merito illi deus ad quercum apparuit Mambrae*), because he was so eager to enjoy the hospitality (*quia fructum hospitalitatis studiosissime requirebat*)... A good thing, hospitality, it has its reward, first the favour with people, then, which is more, the divine reward.<sup>47</sup> [52]

Even Philo of Alexandria points out that philoxeny is an “accessory” (πάρεργον) of the greater virtue of the fear of God.<sup>48</sup> And even in the Babylonian Talmud, philoxeny is valued more highly than theophany when it states: “hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shekinah” (B.Sabb. 127a). [53]

The rabbis address Abraham's love for strangers in different contexts. Some say that Abraham was reluctant to comply with the command for circumcision because being circumcised, he feared that he would no longer be visited by uncircumcised guests (Genesis Rabbah 47,10). It is recorded that R. Judah interpreted the reference in Gen. 18:3 in such a way that Abraham asked the Lord to wait until the three men had eaten, as it was more important to entertain strangers than to receive the Shekhinah of God. And Rabbi Levi of Palestine taught that one of the men looked like a Saracen, the other like a Nabataean, and the third like an Arab (Genesis Rabbah 48,9). Among the Christian authors, it is above all Origen, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, and Caesarius of Arles who emphasize the value of Abraham's love for strangers.<sup>49</sup> [54] The recurring basic idea is that actually all people are strangers in this world and that the friendly one receives more than he gives. Once again John Chrysostom: “Abraham says: You give grace, not: you receive it. This is the way he conducts himself with hospitality in reality. The one who practices it with joy receives rather than gives.”<sup>50</sup>

Jerome ties the theophany directly to the philoxeny which Abraham practiced all his life. [55]

45 The Rabbis interpret Abraham's request to the one visitor—whom he calls “Lord”—to wait until the others have eaten as a sign of his love for strangers: Shabbath 127a; Leviticus Rabbah 11,5; Yalkut, 2 Samuel 161. Others emphasize Abraham's generosity: Baba Mezia 87a; Aboth de Rabbi Nathan 13.

46 John Chrysostom, *Homilia* 41 in *Genesin* (Migne 1862, 378).

47 Ambrose, *De Abrahamo* 1,5 (in Schenkl 1896, 527–28). In a very similar way, Yalkut, Genesis 82 offers an interpretation of Abraham sitting as persistently waiting for strangers.

48 Philo, *De Abrahamo* § 114 (in Gorez 1966, 70): “As for the man's (Abraham's) love of foreigners, this is an addition to a greater virtue. This virtue is the devotion to God that we have spoken about before, for which this narrative is a sure indication, even if we think of strangers as men.”

49 On the Christian interpretation of this pericope, see Heither and Reemts (2005, 116–32) and Miller (1984, 43–95). For an overview of the Christian sources of hospitality and their pagan roots, see Hiltbrunner (1972).

50 John Chrysostom, *Homilia* 41 in *Genesin* (Migne 1862, 380).

In a letter to the Roman aristocrat Pammachius, who had built a hostel (*xenodochium*) in Portus near Rome, Jerome uses the oak tree of Mamre as a cipher for the attitude towards the love for strangers:

I hear you built a stranger's hostel (*xenodochium*) in the Roman port and transplanted a branch from the tree of Abraham to the Ausonian shore (*uirgam de arbore Abraham in Ausonio plantasse litore*). (...) First among the monks in the first city, you follow the first patriarch. (...) Having practiced the duty of loving strangers (*hospitalitatis officio*) so often and not having rejected people, he was considered worthy to receive God.<sup>51</sup> [56]

In other words, Abraham unknowingly prepared himself for encountering God in his dealings with strangers. Loving strangers appears here as a prerequisite for an encounter with God, and Mamre—here symbolically represented by the “tree of Abraham”—is the place where this connection is symbolically condensed. [57]

The link between theophany and philoxeny with the place Mamre was completed not only in literature, but also iconographically. Thus, we find the motive of Abraham and Sarah's hosting of the three men in Jewish and Christian contexts since the fourth century on an Egyptian tapestry and a Roman cut-glass (fourth century), on the floor mosaic of the Sephoris synagogue in Palestine (fifth century), in mosaics of the Christian basilicas of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (about 430, here in connection with the theophany) and San Vitale in Ravenna (mid-sixth century), in Byzantine sound lamps and belt buckles, and in the icon type of Abraham's Philoxeny, whose most famous version is the “Trinity” by Andrej Rubljov from the year 1411 (see Bunge 1994; Gernhöfer 2009; Heyden 2016, 37–45). That the motif—three identical people at a table, served by a man and a woman, in the background a tree and usually a stove—is already antique and dates from the time of the greatest flowering of the shared holy site of Mamre, is evidenced by the mold found in Palestine in the fourth century (see Fig. 1 above). [58]

### Narrating Mamre as a Place of Philoxeny: The Testament of Abraham

The link between the place Mamre and the motif of philoxeny is documented in literature in the apocryphal *Testament of Abraham*, which was received and repeatedly edited by Jews and Christians.<sup>52</sup> The longer Greek version, which is relevant to Mamre, was written in the second century, according to research. Some researchers also work with an original version from the first century BC.<sup>53</sup> In addition to a Greek short version from the third century, Coptic, Ethiopian, Arabic, Slavic, and Romanian translations have survived, testifying to the great popularity of this book.<sup>54</sup> The *Testament of Abraham* was handed down and updated in both Jewish and Christian circles. Here is told—in a quite humorous way (see Ludlow 2002)—how Abraham is confronted at the end of his life with his imminent death—and agrees to it even after lengthy negotiations. One could say that the theme of the theophany in Mamre in the [59]

51 Jerome, *Epistula* 66,11 to Pammachius (in Hilberg 1996, 661).

52 Critical edition of the Greek texts with French translation: Schmidt (1986, 96–169); Greek text with English translations: Stone (1972); synoptic texts of the two Greek recensions, with commentary: Allison (2003).

53 The questions of dating and priority of one of the two Greek versions are discussed in detail by Allison (2003, 12–40). He argues for a lost hypothetic Jewish-Greek original that underlines both Christian recensions.

54 See Schmidt (1986, 33–44), who lists 23 manuscripts of the long recension and 9 of the shorter one as well as 5 manuscripts of uncertain content.

*Testament of Abraham* is extended to the story of a thanatophany. The mindset of philoxeny plays a decisive role here.

The most probable original long Greek review locates the story in Mamre. Accordingly, the 99-year-old Abraham sat ‘under the oak’ (2:1) in Mamre, as usual in anticipation of passing strangers, when the archangel Michael haunted him—initially incognito—to prepare him for death: [60]

The just man was altogether very kind to strangers. (1.2) For he pitched his tent at the crossroads of the Oak of Mamre, where he welcomed all—rich and poor, kings and rulers, the crippled and the helpless, friends and strangers, neighbours and travelers. These the pious and all-holy, righteous, and hospitable Abraham welcomed equally.<sup>55</sup> [61]

The indication in the singular, “the oak of Mamre” (τῆς δρυὸς τῆς Μαμβρηῆς), follows the text of the Septuagint. In the Masoretic Hebrew text, there are many references to “oaks” in the plural (Genesis 13:18, 14:13 and 18:1). The singular, however, also coincides with the local conditions, as according to the consistent testimony of the sources, only one Abraham tree was shown and worshiped in the grove of Mamre. [62]

One of the countless guests in Mamre, first unrecognized by Abraham and later identified by Sarah (!), is the Archangel Michael, whom Abraham entertains according to all the rules of hospitality. This raises considerable questions of identity for Michael, because, first, as an angel he is not accustomed to dining,<sup>56</sup> and, secondly, recalling Abraham’s philoxeny, he refuses to announce death to his host. A talking cypress in the grove of Mamre then enigmatically announces death, but is ignored by Abraham, which is why God sends death to Mamre himself to persuade Abraham of this inevitability. However, God commands Thanatos to show himself to Abraham in his most beautiful form. When Abraham asks death whether he “will come to all men in such well-being and glory and youthful beauty,” he replies: “No, my lord Abraham, your righteous deeds and the immeasurable sea of your philoxeny and the greatness of your love for God became a wreath on my head.”<sup>57</sup> As proof, death also shows him his terrible faces. Finally, Abraham, now privy to all the secrets of life and death, is buried under the oak in Mamre:<sup>58</sup> [63]

And immediately Michael the archangel stood nearby with a host of angels, and they took his precious soul in their hands in a divinely woven linen shroud. And they tended the body of the righteous Abraham with divinely-smelling ointments and perfumes until the third day after his death. And they buried him in the promised land by the Oak of Mamre.<sup>59</sup> [64]

Other versions, recorded in Coptic, Arabic, and Ethiopian, tell the story of Abraham’s encounter with the Archangel Michael and death without any reference to Mamre and without [65]

55 *Testamentum Abrahæ* RecLNg. 1:1–1:3 (in Allison 2003, 63).

56 The question of whether the angels in Mamre actually ate (or could have eaten) is intensively discussed, especially in Jewish literature: Targumim Neofiti and Ps.-Jonathan; Baba Mezia 86b; R. Tanhum; Genesis Rabbah 48,11.14; Pesikta Rabbati 25,3; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 12.

57 *Testamentum Abrahæ* Rez. A, XVII (in Allison 2003, 333).

58 *Testamentum Abrahæ* Rez. A, XX (in Allison 2003, 381). On the tradition of the Abraham’s tomb at the oak of Mamre, see Lied (2008, 154–57).

59 *Testamentum Abrahæ* RecLNg. 20:10–11 (in Allison 2003, 382).

any mention of Abraham's philoxeny.<sup>60</sup> For the editors of the Greek version, however, the place Mamre and Abraham's philoxeny were apparently closely related. That there is no consensus in the research on whether this version of the Testament of Abraham is Jewish or Christian is hardly surprising when one considers the multi-religious sanctuary of Mamre. It seems that the lengthy review of Abraham's testimony, with its emphasis on philoxeny, takes up literarily what was culturally practiced in the sanctuary of Mamre: Philoxeny as a prerequisite for the encounter with God and friendship with God. It is therefore reasonable to assume that this version has a relation to the sanctuary of Mamre.

However, the author of the long Greek recension does not seem to know the local situation, since he locates Abraham's tent and tomb in the same place, Mamre. Already since Herodian times there were two veneration sites: the grave at the Machpelah and the grove in Mamre. This corresponds to statements in the Bible: According to Genesis 23:17 and Jub. 23:7, the grave of Abraham was located in the cave of Machpelah, "east of Mamre." In fact, research suggests that the creation of the Greek version of the Testament of Abraham was not formed in Palestine but in Egypt, where it was widely adopted, due to other reasons as well (Allison 2003, 32–33). The addition "in the promised land" indicates that the author himself is not in the country. All the more amazing is the effort to locate the story of Abraham's hospitality and his encounter with death at the place of Mamre. For this is obviously not about a narrative with which local actors want to strengthen the importance of the place (as it seems to be the case with the cross-finding legend by Helena in Jerusalem). Rather, the place name Mamre becomes a symbol that can also be of importance in physical distance. "Mamre" is a term for Abraham's attitude of philoxeny. In this respect, the Testament of Abraham is a good example of the "transportability" of sacred places through narration and the symbolic interpretation of a holy place. [66]

## Synthesis: The Impact and Interplay of Economics, Power, Time, and Symbolic Interpretation

Why was spiritual convergence possible in the sanctuary of Mamre for many centuries? The question as to why spiritual convergence in Mamre worked for centuries has so far only been provided by Ora Limor. She interprets Mamre in Kedar's terminology as an example of egalitarian convergence and suspected that sharing religious places is easier on the periphery than in central sanctuaries of high symbolic value, as in Jerusalem.<sup>61</sup> Based on the analysis presented, this explanatory approach can be clarified, further developed, and corrected in some places. Which conditions and factors favored the co-existence of different cultic communities in this place? [67]

Using the five criteria which Dorothea Weltecke has proposed in order to promote a differentiated analysis of spiritual convergence at shared holy places and combining it with evidence from the sources, the following conclusions can be drawn for the case of Mamre: [68]

Firstly, the objects of veneration were religiously neutral: a tree, a well, and an oven, symbols of Abraham's and Sarah's hospitality that was commemorated at the site. The three mys- [69]

60 Edition of the Coptic version: Guidi (1900). Edition and German translation of the Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopic versions: Heide (2012). In these versions, which are based on the Greek or Coptic short version, the story is not localized in Mamre.

61 "This was probably a regional egalitarian ritual, a festival for inhabitants of the region of all faiths, which at this time began to attract people from far as well. The common veneration of Abraham, the local saint, the

terious persons in the image that Eusebius described and that was reproduced (and reproducible) by the mold could be—and actually were—interpreted in different ways: as human visitors, angels, or as the Trinity.<sup>62</sup> Maybe the various narratives and interpretations behind the polyvalent objects of veneration shaped the spirituality of that place and encouraged mutual multi-religious hospitality.

Secondly, the factor of time: At least from the first to the sixth century, the grove of Mamre was a liturgically active holy site. On the one hand, it was permanently visited by pilgrims; on the other, a big festival took place there every summer and was mainly attended by the inhabitants of the area, according to Sozomen. So it seems that we have a combination of what Kedar calls a spatial convergence and an egalitarian convergence. Egalitarian convergence at Mamre was temporally limited to the summer festival. For the rest of the year, we can assume a spatial convergence.<sup>63</sup> [70]

Even after the construction of the Constantinian Basilica, Mamre was primarily an open-air sanctuary. The pilgrims entered the Herodian enclosure via an entrance in the west. On the right, they could admire the tree and make wine libations or cake donations in the well of Abraham or light oil lamps. In the middle of the courtyard stood the altar for animal sacrifices. Some, like the Christian visitors Egeria and Paula, might have had an interest in the basilica and Sarah's "living rooms." But in its exterior areas, Abraham's grove was not clearly Christian. Visitors came to venerate Abraham and his encounter with the three mysterious men. They were free to perform in the sanctuary according to their respective cultic traditions. [71]

The festival, on the other hand, took place only once a year for some days in summer and was attended mainly by the local inhabitants. According to Sozomen, people came to Mamre as Arabs, Phoenicians, Jews, or Christians, but during the days of the festival, these group identities receded into the background and the participants experienced themselves primarily as worshippers of Mamre. The only agreement—or rather the only condition from the point of view of Sozomen — was that this temporary cult community should not result in sexual acts. Most probably, this temporally limited experience did not affect religious identities in a long-lasting way—and therefore did not provoke the resistance of religious authorities. [72]

The main intention or motivation to come to the summer festival, however, was not a religious but an economic one. The market—or, most likely, not the market alone but the link between trade and cult—obviously attracted people. In light of this common interest, religious interpretations of the place and cultic actions could remain different and exist side-by-side without enforcing common rituals. In terms of cohabitation and sexual behaviour, however, a general agreement of chastity seems to have existed. This consensus regarding ways of living together enabled religious individualism and plurality and proved to be more suitable for the use of the place than the attempt by Emperor Constantine to cleanse it ritually. [73]

Last but not least: the question of power. The most astonishing aspect is, perhaps, that Christian authorities obviously did not impede this side-by-side of various religious rituals, even after the intervention of the emperor. On the basis of the source material, it is difficult [74]

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open-air ceremony, and the distance from Jerusalem, the centre of the establishment, created the proper conditions for the syncretistic performed cult at the site" (Limor 2007, 221).

62 On the different interpretations of the three men, see Miller (1984, 43–95), and Heither and Reemts (2005, 116–32).

63 If this is true also for other places, one could perhaps further develop Kedar's typology by associating it with the temporal aspect and therefore distinguishing between places with (1) no liturgical convergence, (2) occasional liturgical convergence, (3) periodic/perennial liturgical convergence, and (4) permanent liturgical convergence.

to say whether they were not able or not willing to do so. But maybe the location and the small size of the Constantinian basilica indicate that even the Christian bishops in Palestine did not have a real interest in converting the place to a mono-religious one. The case of Mamre shows that a pragmatic handling of local power was beneficial for multi-religious places, whereas symbolic actions of authorities from afar tended to threaten coexistence. Again, considerations regarding economic benefit but also peaceful coexistence in the region could have played a role. But the sources are silent concerning that issue.

What the sources clearly indicate, however, are two aspects that were not taken into account in previous research on Mamre and could also be important for an understanding of other shared holy places: On the one hand, this concerns the terms and agreements of cultists, who regulate the conditions for a spiritual convergence; on the other, the connection between the construction and performance of the physical place with narrative and symbolic interpretations. In the case of Mamre, both aspects connect with the question of purity. While Constantine failed in an attempt to cultivate the place, the authorities in Sozomen's times obviously were able to establish a common idea of personal sexual purity locally, at least for the time of the festival, i.e. during egalitarian convergence. [75]

Connecting elements were the story that Abraham himself had built the well and the altar, but above all the emphasis on the patriarch's hospitality, the explanation of the spirit of love for strangers (philoxeny) underlying this active virtue, and the connection of this attitude with theophany and knowledge. These elements were apparently so strong that the different and divisive interpretations of theophany, specifically the identification of the three men, moved to the background. The popular Testament of Abraham and the iconographic evidence confirm the widespread dissemination of the link between theophany and philoxeny and the grove of Mamre. Therefore, one may ask whether Mamre, in its symbolic meaning, was actually so far behind other sacred places in late Antiquity, such as Jerusalem, as assumed by Ora Limor. Perhaps it is also an anachronistic misjudgment that emanates more strongly from the current state of affairs than from the former. After all, of all three emperors relevant to Mamre—Herod, Hadrian, Constantine—the connection between the two sites of Jerusalem and Mamre was constructed structurally and performatively, and in the case of Constantine it was explicitly emphasized in literary terms. The question seems to be less *whether* a place is symbolically charged, but more *what meaning* is it endowed with. This was in the case of Mamre from the beginning, the encounter with God and the love for strangers—content that evidently favored a concrete interreligious hospitality in the place itself. If one can speak in other places of “throwntogetherness” (a term invented by Massey 2005, 149–61), with which theologians had their struggles, then it is exactly the other way around here: It seems as if in this milieu, the juxtaposition has become quite normal and narrative-symbolic increased in value with the Hellenistic virtue of hospitality—in the figure of Abraham, whose highest virtue was philoxeny. [76]

This holds true for the Islamic tradition as well, where Ibrahim/Abraham is also venerated as the father of hospitality (see Bauschke 2014; Athamina 2004). However, the roots of his hospitality and philoxeny have been “de-localized” in a way: Since Muslims worship Abraham's house in Mecca, the tradition of his hospitality was—and is to date—also connected with that place. This translocation of Abraham's hospitality from Mamre to Mecca was not made explicitly in the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition; it worked rather via a “silencing Mamre.”<sup>64</sup> This shift can probably explain why, despite the great importance Abraham/Ibrahim has in Ju- [77]

64 For the treatment of biblical Abraham traditions in the Qur'an, see Reynolds (2010, 71–96).



**Figure 5** View from the east. In the foreground, the foundations of the apse and the adjoining rooms of the fourth-century Constantinian Basilica; in the upper left corner, the well and in front of it the area where the tree was located. At the back right, outside of the antique enclosure, the “Centre of Encounter”, built in 2015 but never put into operation (photo: Katharina Heyden, 09/2019).

daism, Islam, and Christianity (see Böttrich, Ego, and Eißler 2009), the place of Mamre/Rāmat al-Khalil is no longer a place of cultural memory and inter-religious hospitality. In fact, the once vibrant shared holy place decayed under Muslim rule, and after it was excavated by Christian and Jewish scholars in the twentieth century, the site is now threatened with being deserted again. In 2015, the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism, together with the UN and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim young people, made efforts to restore the site and revive it as a meeting place of historical importance.<sup>65</sup> But the newly built “meeting centre” was never put into operation.

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65 See <http://visitpalestine.ps/de/where-to-go/listing/bethlehem-de/sites-attractions-bethlehem-de/archaeological-sites-bethlehem-de/mamre-haram-ramat-al-khalil/> (accessed March 25, 2020).

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