

Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar
Conversion in Late Antiquity: Christianity, Islam, and Beyond
Session on 'Converting Environments'
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"Landscape and asceticism: The role of the environment in changing religious allegiances"

Abstract

Literary evidence for the conversion to Christianity of the diverse Arab communities of late antique Greater Syria includes historical, ecclesiastical and hagiographical writers as varied in purpose and background as Ammianus and Maruta, the seventh-century metropolitan of Takrit. If we are to make some sense of this tremendous variety of authors as well as the converts they describe, I suggest we turn again to the physical landscape in which the Arabs lived. The written sources highlight the role of the ascetic in conversion and the material evidence confirms a prominent monastic presence in both settled and steppe landscapes. By looking at the *practice* of religion both before and after Christianization, and after the Islamic conquest, I hope to offer some suggestions concerning how we might profitably think about convergence, confusion and conversion in Greater Syria.