

Petra

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

Of all places shaped by humans, Petra may claim the first rank in beauty. One dares to say this in the year 2007, now that millions have chosen it among the world's Seven Wonders (second only to the Great Wall of China). The components of Petra's beauty are the riot of color and the elegant precision of architectural line: wildness and control in harmony.

The Nabataean Arabs who sculpted the city started out as tent-dwelling caravaners with no homegrown architectural tradition. They borrowed from the styles of the people they traded with, adapting them boldly to their desert setting. The royal family and its entourage cut 34 tombs in the sandstone cliffs in the style of Roman temples. Elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, temples collapsed. The mountains, however, remained. Where today can you see full façades, roofs and all? In Petra.

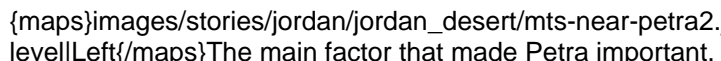
These temple-like tombs are the exception at Petra. The upper and middle classes, subroyal, stuck to forms passed down from the Ancient Near East through the Assyrian Empire and Persia. We find in Petra, therefore, an epitome of the best of the ancient world, west and east, a microcosm in sandstone.

Yet the Petra of 2000 years ago was not a city of tombs. It is estimated that at its height in the 1st century AD, 30,000 lived here - using between 600 and 700 caves hewn into the rock, as well as built houses. The houses fell long ago, leaving mere foundations and sometimes a finely painted bit of wall. But the caves remain. So do the rock-cut tombs, parts of temples, a theater, many so-called high places, and the magnificent presentation of it all. Yet if Hieronymus of Cardia, writing after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. (His works have not survived, but he is heavily quoted by Diodorus Siculus, Library of History XIX, 94-100. Loeb Classical Library 10, 88.) Hieronymus of Cardia is to be believed, at one time the Nabataeans outlawed building and insisted on living in tents:

"They live under the open sky and claim as fatherland a wilderness that contains neither rivers nor goodly springs from which a hostile army might draw water. They have a law forbidding them to sow grain, plant orchards, make wine or build houses. Anyone who does so will be executed. They follow this principle because they believe that anyone who possesses such things in order to get a use from them is vulnerable to powerful men, who can compel their obedience. Some raise camels, others sheep, which they pasture in the wilderness."

When they changed their life style, most retained a distinctive simplicity of form. Yet as a nation that lived from international trade, they had learned to be tolerant of other cultures. Side by side with conservative, imageless forms, therefore, we find others decked with images galore.

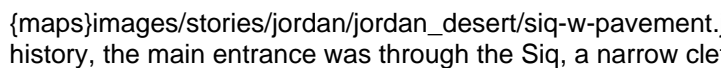
Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD), a Greek writer (although a proponent of Rome) wrote a 17-volume Geography, which is almost completely preserved. Strabo and Pliny the Elder (23 - 79 AD) wrote a Natural History in 37 volumes, based on his own investigations as well as information from 2000 books. The fifth volume concerns the lands of the Near East and depends entirely on external sources. Pliny describe the natural advantages that gave Petra its importance. Strabo writes: "It lies on a site which is otherwise smooth and level, but it is fortified all round by rock, the outside parts of the site being precipitous and sheer, and the inside parts having springs in abundance, both domestic purposes and for watering gardens" (Strabo 16.4.21, 26). Pliny seconds this: "it is surrounded by inaccessible mountains with a river flowing between them." The river is today called Wadi Musa.

The main factor that made Petra important, though, was that the Nabataeans chose to make it so. For the Nabataeans were important. What made them so was their mastery of the desert between Arabia and Gaza. This mastery depended on their ability to dig cisterns that collected large amounts of runoff and to keep them hidden from outsiders. Thanks to this water supply, they could ship goods on camels. Just south of Gaza lay Egypt. The Nabataeans had a near monopoly on the transport to Egypt of items they'd acquired from Arabia and India. From Arabia there were frankincense, myrrh and aloe. From India there were black pepper, precious gems, textiles, nard, Chinese silk and Malaysian cinammon. The routes to Egypt went through Petra.

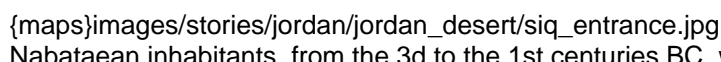
During this pre-Roman time, another factor also came into play. In the 2nd century BC and much of the 1st, the Alexander the Great's generals, Ptolemy and Seleucus, became rivals for the huge area he had conquered. Ptolemy had taken Egypt and the biblical land; Seleucus, Mesopotamia and Syria. The successors of Ptolemy are called the Ptolemies, those of Seleucus, Seleucids. Seleucids were confined to Syria, having lost Mesopotamia to the Parthians. (See map below.) Normally, the bulk of the India trade went by ship into the Persian Gulf. Much then crossed the desert to Petra, but another part continued up the Euphrates or the Tigris, reaching Antioch's harbor on the Syrian coast, whence it could be sent throughout the Mediterranean world. But the Seleucids and Parthians were enemies; the fighting started about 150 BC and lasted, off and on, for almost a century. When Rome conquered Syria, it too got into battles with the Parthians. For much of the period, then, between 150 and 30 BC, the routes from Mesopotamia to Antioch were blocked. As a result, Petra got an even bigger than usual piece of the action, and the Nabataeans accumulated their first great wealth. This is the situation pictured below. Note the centrality of Petra:

{mospagebreak title=The Siq}

The Siq

For the grander part of Petra's history, the main entrance was through the Siq, a narrow cleft in the rock. It is 1.2 kilometers long and overhung by cliffs 80 meters high. (You can get an impression of the effect by enlarging the picture on the right.) Within, at various points along the way, are about 60 representations of Standing stones, representing the divine, toward which certain ancient peoples directed their worship. Pronounced stee-la'ee. Stelae, a third of the total at Petra. (Article on stelae.) These indicate that the passage also functioned as a Via Sacra. The Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem provides a contemporary example every Friday afternoon. sacred way.

The Nabataeans could not have used the Siq safely in winter, however, until they made a system to divert flash floods. Petra gets just a few days of heavy rain, but even a 15-minute downpour can be lethal. Much water flows into natural basins that feed Wadi Musa (the Moses Riverbed). Unless protective measures are taken (as they are today), this water can roar through the Siq like an express train, killing anything in its path.

The early Nabataean inhabitants, from the 3d to the 1st centuries BC, would have used a different access, at least in winter (for example, the valley that comes in from the southwest, where a Snake Monument greeted them). They lived in modest dwellings on the banks of Wadi Musa, as well as in caves that they cut into the cliffs. Their water came from the Musa Spring, which is located 7 kilometers east of the present tourist village (which it still supplies). It flowed through the Siq in an open channel, 2 meters wide and 1 meter deep, which continued through the city center and drained out through a wadi in the mountains to the west.

This channel is no longer visible. It was buried when the Nabataeans raised the floor of the Siq, on it paving a road with a gentle descent (only 5% over a distance of 1.2 km.) and carving new water channels in the cliffs on both sides. (The ancient traveler would have heard the swish and lap of the water, as well as its echo from the towering cliffs.) In front of the entrance they built a dam to stop the floodwaters, which they diverted into a tunnel that led to another gorge. Over this dam they made a bridge into the Siq, 25 feet above the riverbed. The dam, the bridge, the tunnel and the elevated road formed a unified system. Each required the others in order to be effective, so they must have been made about the same time.

But when? We cannot be sure. Inscriptions were found beneath the retaining wall of the road, but according to McKenzie, Judith. *The Architecture of Petra*. Oxford University Press, 1990. McKenzie's book is so far the best work we have in the tricky business of dating the ruins at Petra. (Judith McKenzie (p. 37), they cannot be dated with certainty. Logically, though, the system must have coincided with the carving of the so-called Treasury (Khazneh), which appears as you emerge from the Siq at its elevated level. This ranks among the most dramatic visual effects in the world. Surely it was intended as such.

{mospagebreak title=The "Treasury"}

The "Treasury" ("Khazneh")

The so-called Treasury takes its name from a legend attached to it long after it was cut in the rock: the Pharaoh of Exodus, pursuing the Israelites through the desert, carried his gold with him, and he created this magnificent structure as a place to store it.

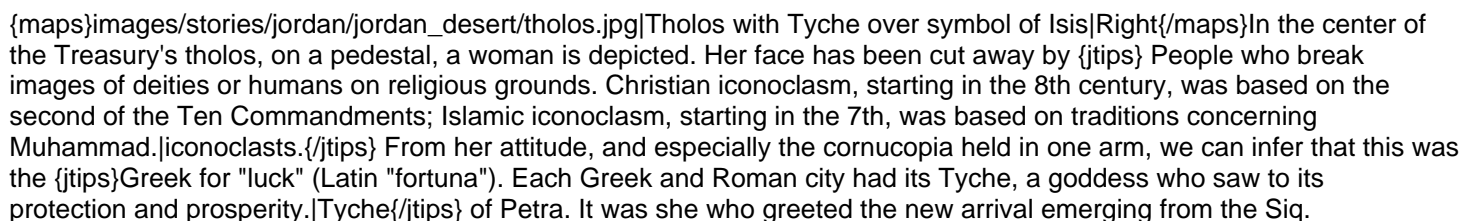
We do not know what purpose the "Treasury" really served, apart from its use as a breathtaking introduction to the city. Was it a tomb? Funerary motifs in the design suggest this, and there are chambers inside that could have held a sarcophagus (literally "flesh eater") is a stone coffin located above ground and often decorated with carved figures or designs. Yet no trace of a sarcophagus has been found in Petra (nor in any other Nabataean site until the 2nd century AD). Or was the Treasury some kind of memorial? A backdrop for rituals? We just don't know. It is the arch-enigma in a city of enigmas.

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Since 1862, scholars have noted how closely Petra's architecture resembles that depicted in the wall paintings of villas at a Roman city near Naples, buried under volcanic ash from Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD; such paintings of architecture belong to Pompeii's second style, which went out of fashion by 25 BC. McKenzie, Judith. *The Architecture of Petra*. Oxford University Press, 1990. McKenzie has discovered that both the Petra designs and the Pompeii murals had a common model in the architecture of Alexandria after the death of Alexander the Great in 323

BC, his empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy got Egypt, and the line that ruled there until Rome took over is called Ptolemaic Alexandria. Soon after its founding by Alexander in 331 BC, this city became the largest in the world; later it was second in importance only to Rome. One reason was position: it provided a gateway between the West, Arabia and India. The ancients described its beauty (now submerged beneath 12 feet of water) with awe. On the basis of segments on display in its museum, along with inscriptions from above-ground tombs nearby, McKenzie has been able to trace the styles that we see at Pompeii and Petra to Alexandria at the time of the Ptolemies (3d-1st centuries BC).

It is no wonder that the styles of Ptolemaic Alexandria influenced Petra's artisans. As nomadic caravaneers who originally lived in tents, the Nabataeans would not have had time or occasion to develop a unique artistic tradition in stone. On the other hand, they were in constant commercial contact with peoples who did have such traditions, especially the Ptolemies, who -- unlike others -- did not try to conquer or circumvent them. The Nabataeans brought to Alexandria incense and myrrh, asphalt from the Dead Sea (used to seal ships), plus the goods of the India trade. In exchange they took gold and manufactured goods - and they also got new architectural ideas. They may even have hired architects and stonemasons. In their temples, for example, the Alexandrians were the first to depart from the standard arrangement of pillars supporting a lintel and a pediment (as in the Parthenon of Athens or in the lower portion of the Treasury). They broke the pediment in two, placing a Tholos between the segments. We see this in the Treasury's upper portion (see the photo above).

 In the center of the Treasury's tholos, on a pedestal, a woman is depicted. Her face has been cut away by People who break images of deities or humans on religious grounds. Christian iconoclasm, starting in the 8th century, was based on the second of the Ten Commandments; Islamic iconoclasm, starting in the 7th, was based on traditions concerning Muhammad. From her attitude, and especially the cornucopia held in one arm, we can infer that this was the Greek for "luck" (Latin "fortuna"). Each Greek and Roman city had its Tyche, a goddess who saw to its protection and prosperity of Petra. It was she who greeted the new arrival emerging from the Siq.

Just below Tyche, at the top of the lower pediment, we find an Egyptian motif. It is the crown of Isis: two cow horns contain the sun. The symbol originally belonged to Hathor, the cow goddess. The Egyptians beheld the Milky Way embracing the night sky, and they thought it a river of milk flowing from cow teats. The god of the sky was Horus the falcon, his eyes composed of the sun and the moon, watching humankind as he flew across the heavens. So the Milky Way (Hathor) was seen as embracing Horus (the night sky), in the manner of mother and child.

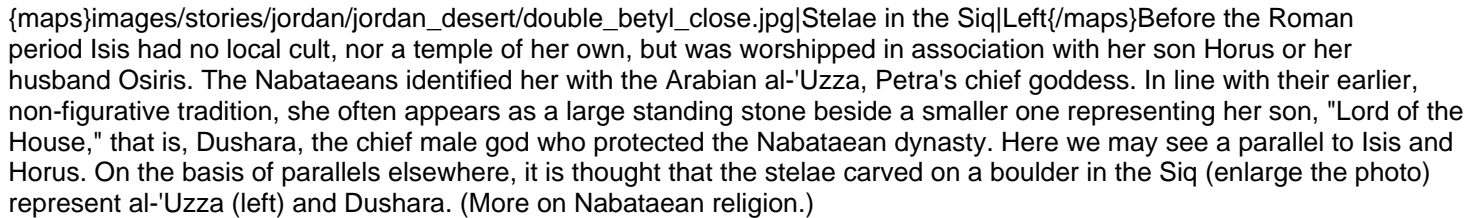
As for Isis, she may have originated - in very early Egypt - as the Pharaoh's Queen (originally Isis had a throne on her head), immolated with his corpse and protecting his organs in the tomb. In this way, perhaps, Isis got the role of protecting the dead. In time, she combined with Hathor. The name Isis prevailed, but so did Hathor's cow horns, which embraced her son Horus, the sun. She was the "Queen of Heaven" whose worshipers Jeremiah denounced (7:18):

"The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead the dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and to pour out drink offerings to other gods, that they may provoke me to anger."

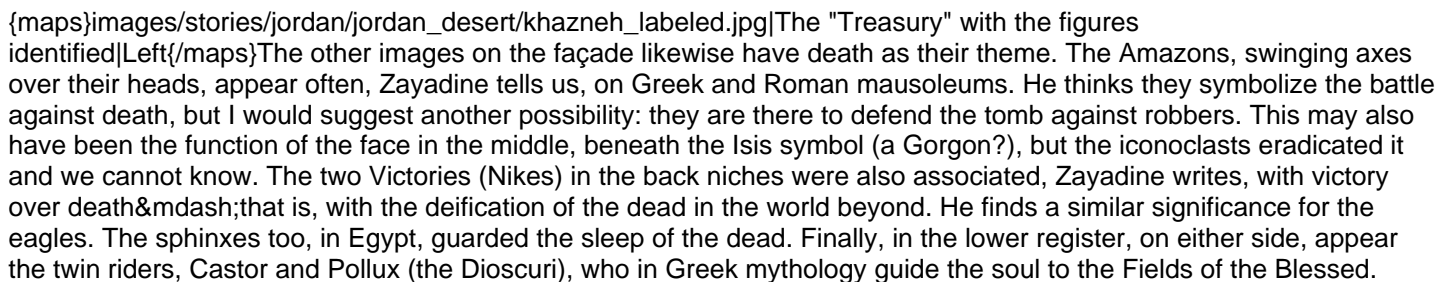
A Romanized Berber of the 2nd century AD, Apuleius, author of The Golden Ass, had a different view:

"You see me here, Lucius, in answer to your prayer. I am nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single

manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are.... Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names. . . some know me as Juno, some as Bellona . . . the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship call me by my true name..Queen Isis."

Stelae in the Siq|Before the Roman period Isis had no local cult, nor a temple of her own, but was worshipped in association with her son Horus or her husband Osiris. The Nabataeans identified her with the Arabian al-'Uzza, Petra's chief goddess. In line with their earlier, non-figurative tradition, she often appears as a large standing stone beside a smaller one representing her son, "Lord of the House," that is, Dushara, the chief male god who protected the Nabataean dynasty. Here we may see a parallel to Isis and Horus. On the basis of parallels elsewhere, it is thought that the stelae carved on a boulder in the Siq (enlarge the photo) represent al-'Uzza (left) and Dushara. (More on Nabataean religion.)

In the Treasury, the symbol of Isis beneath the image of Tyche is taken by some as an assertion of identification between them, at least for the purpose of this monument. "In the religious world-picture of the old Egyptians," writes ["Zwischen Siq und ad-Der,"](#) in Thomas Weber and Robert Wenning, eds., *Petra: Antike Felsstadt Zwischen Arabischer Tradition und Griechischer Norm*, Mainz am Rhein, Philipp von Zabern, 1997|[Fawzi Zayadine](#) (p. 44), "Isis, the wife of Osiris, was the patroness of the dead, guardian over the correct proceedings of the burial rites and the integrity of the dead person's rest, as well as guarantor of resurrection."

The "Treasury" with the figures identified|The other images on the façade likewise have death as their theme. The Amazons, swinging axes over their heads, appear often, Zayadine tells us, on Greek and Roman mausoleums. He thinks they symbolize the battle against death, but I would suggest another possibility: they are there to defend the tomb against robbers. This may also have been the function of the face in the middle, beneath the Isis symbol (a Gorgon?), but the iconoclasts eradicated it and we cannot know. The two Victories (Nikes) in the back niches were also associated, Zayadine writes, with victory over death—that is, with the deification of the dead in the world beyond. He finds a similar significance for the eagles. The sphinxes too, in Egypt, guarded the sleep of the dead. Finally, in the lower register, on either side, appear the twin riders, Castor and Pollux (the Dioscuri), who in Greek mythology guide the soul to the Fields of the Blessed.

It may seem strange to find such a glorious work of figurative art in the capital city of a people whose art - and religion - had begun as non-figurative. Yet we would expect a people that made its living from international commerce to develop a tolerance for cultural differences. The really remarkable thing, perhaps, is not that Nabataeans accepted figures in the royal monuments but rather that these passed over them like water off a duck's back: they never abandoned the powerful simplicity of mass and line that is distinctively theirs.

On the difficulty of determining dates at Petra

Our knowledge is hampered by a lack of inscriptions. Of the tombs at Petra, only two have them. It may be that, despite the beauty of the bare rock, most of the façades were stuccoed over and painted and the writing was done in paint. Traces of paint on several of the major monuments attest to this possibility. It is as if the Nabataeans were bored with the desert colors that so excite us today and preferred to overcome them with bright reds, yellows and blues.

At a city called [Today's Meda'in Saleh](#) in Saudi Arabia, 250 miles to the south|[Hegra](#), which the Nabataeans built up in the first century AD, they did not paint the façades. Of the 80 tombs there, 37 have inscriptions. Sixteen of these include precise dates and the names of the stonecutters. From this evidence, [McKenzie](#), Judith. *The Architecture of Petra*. Oxford University Press, 1990.|[McKenzie](#), (p. 40) deduces that the tombs' "[McKenzie](#) (p. 183) defines a moulding as "the continuous profile or contour of definite shape given to the edge of an architectural member."|[mouldings](#) are equivalent to the stone-cutter's finger print: the details of the combination of elements

present and their relative sizes were unique to an individual stone cutter." Applying this principle to Petra, she groups the monuments according to similarities in the mouldings. When it is possible to date one monument in a group, she then attributes the same date to its other members. On this basis, she groups the "Treasury" with three other creations: Qasr al-Bint, the latter's {tips}The word "temenos" is from the Greek temnein, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron.{/tips}, another sanctuary today called the Temple of the Winged Lions, and the so-called Baths. Except for the Treasury (carved to face the Siq), all members of this group are on the same axis, which differs from the axes of the other groups.

On the basis of an {tips}Adjoining the temenos wall of Qasr al-Bint, clearly later than this wall, and in its original position, a bench was found containing an inscription which dedicated a statue to the Nabataean king Aretas IV, who ruled from 9 BC until 40 AD{/tips}, we can say that the Qasr al-Bint must have been built by the beginning of the first century AD ({tips}McKenzie, Judith. The Architecture of Petra. Oxford University Press, 1990.{/tips}, p. 34). On the principle learned at Hegra, the same would apply to the other members of the group, including the Treasury.

This only gives us the {tips}The latest possible date.{/tips}, not the {tips}The earliest possible date.{/tips}. But a little east and north of the entrance to the Siq there is a {tips}Three benches or couches arranged in a U-shape formed the typical dining arrangement of aristocrats in the Roman period. At Petra, most triclinia are associated with tombs; they are carved into the bedrock without decoration.{/tips}, numbered 21, which contains an inscription that dates it to the first year of the Nabataean king Obodas I. That would have been between 96 and 92 BC. The fine pecked chiseling inside this triclinium is indistinguishable, says McKenzie, from the tooling inside the Treasury. The latter, therefore, as well as the other members of its group, could go back this far.

{mospagebreak title="Qasr al-Bint"}

"Qasr al-Bint" ("The Palace of Pharaoh's Daughter")

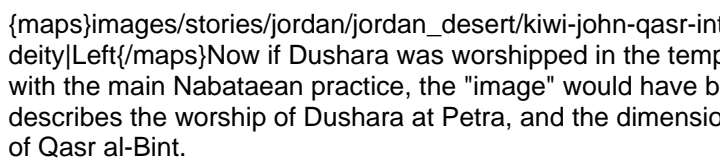
The "Qasr al-Bint" was a temple. Its present name adhered to it as a result of {tips}The legend is related to the name Ein Musa, the Spring of Moses, source of Wadi Musa: here the local people identified the spring that emerged when Moses struck the rock. It was this identification, probably, that attracted later legends about the wicked Pharaoh and his daughter{/tips}. We know its real function because of its similarity, in ground plan, to known temples in southern Syria: at the rear is the inner sanctufary, divided in three, with a square {tips} The inner sanctum, or holy of holies, in which a representation of the god was kept.{/tips} in the middle; in front of this was a vestibule, and beyond it, outside, an altar. The roof, on the other hand, was pitched like that of Greek temples (the Parthenon's for instance). Fragments of stucco and paint testify that the building was plastered and brightly colored.

{maps}images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/qasr-position.jpg{Left{/maps}Satellite photo showing the position of Qasr al-Bint{Left{/maps}The axis is not quite north-south. Rather, the temple is angled in such a way that its length is parallel to the scarp of a high rock to its west (al-Habis). Its front is parallel to Wadi Musa, just before this turns and drains out of the city through another wadi on the west. (Enlarge the satellite photo.) We have seen the reasons for dating Qasr al-Bint to a time before 25 BC.

We do not know which god the Nabataeans worshipped here. A large marble hand was found in the ruins, but it may

have belonged to the statue of a Roman emperor. Also from the Roman period are Greek inscriptions mentioning Zeus and Aphrodite. The ancients had a strong tendency to identify Isis with Aphrodite probably reflects another identification, that of Isis with Hathor. A millennium before we hear of Nabataeans, Hathor accompanied Egyptian miners to the turquoise mines in Sinai and consequently took over the realm of cosmetics. With this as a basis, she took on features of the Greek Aphrodite. But the Nabataeans, in particular, identified Isis with the chief goddess of Petra, al-'Uzza. The Oxyrhynchus papyri of the 2nd century AD Egyptian documents attest to a major cult of Isis at Petra, but only a few direct representations of her have turned up there. More frequent are the standing stones used by certain ancient peoples in worship. Pronounced steel-lahy. stelae of al-'Uzza. The apparent contradictions disappear if we assume that the Nabataeans understood Aphrodite, Isis and al-'Uzza to be one and the same.

The appearance of Aphrodite's name in the Temple may echo an earlier time when al-'Uzza was worshipped here. But we often find al-'Uzza together with her son Dushara, the chief Nabataean god. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the Roman worship of Zeus and Aphrodite in this temple reflects the earlier Nabataean worship of Dushara and al-'Uzza here.

The recess (cella) that held the image or stele of a deity. Now if Dushara was worshipped in the temple, his image would have been in the cella. But in keeping with the main Nabataean practice, the "image" would have been a standing stone. We have, in fact, a text that describes the worship of Dushara at Petra, and the dimensions it gives for the stone would enable it to fit well into the cella of Qasr al-Bint.

I refer to a 10th-century document called the Lexicon of Suidas, or Souda, which preserves material from earlier sources, includes a heading for "Theus Ares," (a corruption of Dous Ares, i.e., Dousares, the Greek form of Dushara). Thus it mistakenly finds the war god Ares (Mars) at Petra. But what follows the mistake is interesting:

That is the god Ares at Petra in Arabia. The god Ares is worshiped by them, for they venerate him above all others. The image is a black stone, rectangular and unshaped, measuring four feet in height by two feet in width. It is set on a base worked in gold. To this they burn incense and against it they pour the blood of the sacrificial animals. And that is their form of libation. The whole building abounds in gold and many dedications.

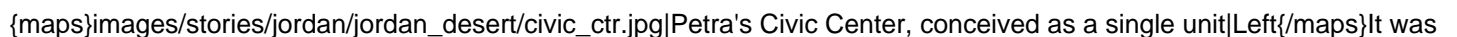
After quoting this passage, Wenning, Robert. "The Betyls of Petra." Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 324, Nabataean Petra. (Nov., 2001) p. 84 Robert Wenning writes: "It is commonly held that the entry describes the cultic image of Dushara at Petra, possibly in the Qasr al-Bint. At the rear of the central adyton is a recess of approximately the same size as the cultic image described in the Souda, which may indicate the place of that image. Molded stucco fragments from that temple coated with a gold leaf seem to illustrate the above passage."

{mospagebreak title=Civic Center}


The Civic Center

The alignment of Petra's main street shifts direction at one point. Qasr al-Bint, its temenos and the Temple of the Winged Lions are all on one axis. The so-called Great Temple, the Garden, the Pool and the Colonnaded Street are on a slightly different line. At the point where the axes met was a gate (the Temenos Gate), so angled as to minimize the feeling of a change at ground level.

We can understand the shift if we recall a few things. Of all these buildings, Qasr al-Bint came first. It was positioned parallel to the scarp on its west and faced the point where Wadi Musa left the city, entering the mountains. Qasr al-Bint marked the end of Wadi Musa, just as the Treasury marked its inner-city beginning. These two were contemporaries, fashioned (if we follow McKenzie's logic based on inscriptions at Hegra) by the same masons in the 1st century BC. Between the two were the Temple of the Winged Lions, the "Baths" (perhaps part of a palace), and Petra's first well-built houses, containing sandstone walls and stone floors. These replaced the rough dwellings of uncut limestone that had been here since the third century BC.

 Petra's Civic Center, conceived as a single unit. It was King Aretas IV (9 BC - 40 AD) who, using data gleaned from earlier excavations, Leigh-Ann Bedal gives this date in "A Pool Complex in Petra's City Center," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 324, Nabataean Petra, Nov. 2001, pp. 30-31. Bedal's article is also the source for information in the map on the left. Early in his reign, conceived the plan that included the "Great Temple," the pool and the garden. If you enlarge the map on the left, you will see that they form a unit. The "Temple's" lower platform was built on walls and arches to match the level of the garden, and there was ready access between them through the (eastern) colonnade. The portico wall spans both. Aretas wanted the complex to front on a grand street. The course of the street was determined by its glorious end points: the Treasury and Qasr al-Bint, as seen in the map above. The course, in other words, was determined by the bed of Wadi Musa, whose water was channeled and whose flash floods were tamed by numerous dams.

The "Great Temple"

 Petra's "Great Temple". The "Great Temple" was indeed great, but what was it? No one knows. The archaeologists of Brown University, who have been digging it out of a heap of rubble since 1993, found cultic objects (two stelae, a horned altar, a figure incised in stone, a head of Tyche), but these are so tiny compared to the size of the whole, and were found in such odd corners, that they do not seem directly related to its main function. One would expect an altar. One would expect dedicatory inscriptions (but see below for one possibility). To those who gave the structure its present name, its form resembled that of a Hellenistic temple with a colonnade surrounding a cella, but the Brown excavations later revealed "that the columns stand inside the building" (Jane Taylor, *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 109). Such an arrangement is typical not of a temple, rather of the secular, royal audience halls that the Greeks called basilicas.

A hint of such use may be found in Strabo (*Geography*, Book XVI, Chapter 4, Pars. 21 and 26):

The [Nabataean] king is so democratic that, in addition to serving himself, he sometimes even serves the rest himself in his turn. He often renders an account of his kingship in the popular assembly; and sometimes his mode of life is examined.

This is the approximate date given by Leigh-Ann Bedal, "A Pool Complex in Petra's City Center," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 324, Nabataean Petra, Nov. 2001. Archaeologist Martha Joukowsky, however, gives an earlier date: "More Pieces in the Petra Great Temple Puzzle," *Bulletin of the American Schools of*

Oriental Research, No. 324, Nabataean Petra, Nov. 2001. Around 106 AD, when Rome annexed the Nabataean kingdom, the cella was transformed into a theater. Where once (if it ever was a temple) stood the image of a god, now sat 640 Nabataeans! A god, one would think, might resent being thus displaced. However, if the structure had originally functioned not as a temple, rather as the audience hall of King Aretas IV, the transformation into a theater makes sense. For, in keeping with Roman policy, Petra no longer had a king. Instead, it had a municipal and regional council.

We know that Petra had a council around this time. An ancient, well-preserved legal document, one of 35 belonging to a Jewish woman named Babatha. During the Bar Kokhba revolt of the Jews against Rome in 135 AD, Babatha took refuge in a cave of the Judean desert, where she hid a leather pouch containing 35 papyrus documents. These were found in 1961. One of them mentions that in the year 124 AD, after the death of her last husband, the Petra council appointed guardians for her son. Babatha, tells us so. We find no other building in Petra that would have been suitable for a council.

We cannot entirely rule out the possibility, however, that the structure might have been a temple. "More Pieces in the Petra Great Temple Puzzle," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 324, Nabataean Petra, Nov. 2001, p. 53. Martha Sharp Joukowsky and Joseph J. Basile cite Arthur Segal, *Theatres in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia*, Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava, Supplement 140, 1995, Leiden: Brill. Arthur Segal, who finds small sacred or ritual theaters at several places in Roman Palestine and Provincia Arabia. Like the theater in the upper building, these are often too small to seat a large city audience; they lack stage buildings; and they command a good view. Moreover, in the Petra church, whose builders used decorative pieces from the "Great Temple" and other monuments, fragments of an inscription presented here in the reconstruction by G. Bowersock, as cited by Joukowsky and Basile on p. 54, note 19, were found:

[This is the...], which Halpa'la, [son of...], made, and these are the theatron to Dushara {and the ...}, in the month Tebet in the year eleven of Haretat (Aretas), king of the Nabataeans, who loved his people.

If the words "theatron to Dushara" refer to the small theater in our edifice, then the cella was transformed into a ritual theater dedicated to the same god. No blasphemy. But the inscription gives a date. The eleventh year of Aretas IV (often said to "love his people") would have been 2 or 3 AD, whereas the small theater is usually dated later.

If the "Great Temple" was a temple nonetheless, what was its relation to Qasr al-Bint? We should recall the brand new Herodian temple in Jerusalem, the largest building ever built at a single go; it featured a huge lower platform for the hundreds of thousands who visited during pilgrimage festivals. Aretas IV was influenced by Herod's architecture in a major way. (We shall see this in the adjoining pool.) Although the design of the "Great Temple" more closely resembles that of Herod's Temples to Augustus in Caesarea Maritima and Sebastia, the idea of a huge platform for the people may have come from the one in Jerusalem. The word "temenos" is from the Greek temnein, meaning "to cut off." It is an area set apart for religious rites. Often it is enclosed by a wall and open to the heavens. Examples are the Temple area in Jerusalem and the Herodian structure at Hebron. The temenos of the Qasr al-Bint could not accommodate a crowd, whereas the lower platform of the new temple could. Also, Qasr al-Bint may have been built many decades before the new temple. In that case, the population would have grown, necessitating a larger temenos.

A temple, then, after all? We must leave the question undecided.


The whole structure was covered with stucco and brightly painted in red and yellow. The lower platform included something uniquely Nabataean. The Ionic capitals of its 120 columns had elephant heads instead of the usual volutes. "Sculpted from limestone and covered with a light plaster film," writes Martha Sharp Joukowsky, "The Petra Great Temple: A Nabataean Architectural Miracle," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65:4, 2002, pp. 245-46. Joukowsky, "their wrinkled skins, their provocative eyes, their

small well-defined veined ears, their tusk openings (no tusks have been recovered), and their curving trunks are remarkable in that each elephant face has a character, a personality of its own. Some elephants appear to be pacific while others reflect anger or anxiety; some appear to be more feminine while others are more 'macho' and larger in appearance - their poses are often remarkable in their expression."

The elephants on these columns were of the Asian sort, such as the Persians had used against Alexander the Great in 331 BC. The Seleucids later used them against the Ptolemies at Baniyas (Paneas), and the Ptolemies went into a panic. The god of panic was Pan, and so the Seleucids worshipped Pan at the battle site. Hence the name of the place, Paneas, which became Baniyas. Having taken over the Holy Land, the Seleucids later used elephants against the Maccabees. Meanwhile, the Ptolemies of Egypt were so impressed that they began importing and training elephants from southern Africa. This led to the development of harbors on the east African coast that later competed with Petra.

Pool and Garden

It is always a surprise to find a spring when hiking in the desert. At Petra the Nabataeans exploited this effect. They had a big swimming pool and a garden. They could make the city dance with water. Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD), a Greek writer (although a proponent of Rome) wrote a 17-volume Geography, which is almost completely preserved. Strabo heard about this from his friend Athenodorus, who stayed in Petra in the late first century BC: "Within there are abundant springs of water both for domestic purposes and for watering gardens." (Book XVI, Chapter 4, Par. 21.)

Most of the water came from seven springs, of which 'Ain Musa was the chief. Channeled through the Siq, it supplied not only basic needs but also water for the monumental public fountain, a "must" for a Hellenistic city, often ornamented with statues of nymphs holding vessels from which the water poured. Nymphaeum, the pool and the garden. The supply could be supplemented when necessary by a large reservoir called Zurraba. Located just east of the Siq, Zurraba collected runoff. This flowed five miles in a pipeline around the mountain called al-Khubta, cascading down a 60-foot-high chute to fill cisterns by the Royal Tombs. Any overflow went to the nymphaeum, the garden, the swimming pool and the "Great Temple," which contained an intricate underground system of canals. (Enlarge the map, which is based on an article by Charles R. Ortloff, "The Water Supply and Distribution System of the Nabataean City of Petra (Jordan), 300 BC-AD 300," Cambridge Archaeological Journal, 15:1, pp. 93-109|Charles R. Ortloff.)

Zurraba was not alone. As the map indicates, dozens of dams and cisterns have been found in the hills around Petra.

When King Aretas IV built the "Great Temple," his concept included a large swimming pool and a garden beside it. (The "temple" and the pool share the same style of masonry in the first phase of their construction.) He had models. The Hasmonaeans: family of Juda Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, who revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC. They ruled until 63 BC. Hasmonaeans had built recreational swimming pools surrounded by gardens in the desert beside Jericho, channeling water from Wadi Qilt. When Herod built his Winter Palace there, he included a pool measuring 90 by 42 meters! But the model that seems to have been foremost in Aretas' mind was Herod's pool at Herodium on the edge of the desert near Bethlehem. Water was channeled in from "Solomon's Pools," a reservoir. The Herodium pool also had an island pavilion (circular, though), as well as surrounding gardens and colonnades.

The relations between the Nabataeans and Herod (whose mother was Nabataean) were chequered. Around 31 BC they erupted briefly in war. The first five years of Aretas' reign (9-4 BC) were the last five of Herod's life, and the new king must have been impressed by the architectural wonders that the old man had accomplished. With the exception of Jerusalem, all of Herod's many palaces had swimming pools and gardens. Such projects spelled majesty and

power. Given Nabataean wealth and the general peace, Aretas poured his energies into achieving similar things.

Where the pool was concerned, he didn't have the space to out-Herod Herod, but he ordered his laborers (the Nabataeans, according to Strabo, had few slaves) to perform a special feat. Beside the planned "Great Temple" or "Royal Hall" rose a hill of rock. They chiseled the pool into this, leaving escarpments 55 feet high on the southeast corner. These form the deep shadow in the map below.

Anyone acquainted with the desert heat can imagine how cruel it must have been, on the part of a king, to restrict the use of a pool to the royal entourage. Perhaps a nympheaum already existed to spray all comers. Or perhaps Aretas was generous with his pool. The inscriptions describe him as he "who loves his people."

Love played no great role in the family relations between Aretas and the Herodian line. His daughter married Herod's son {jtips}Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. "That fox," Jesus calls him in Luke |Herod Antipas{/jtips}. At some point in the 20's AD, Antipas fell in love with Herodias, the wife of his half-brother Philip. He divorced the Nabataean woman, much to her father's rage, and married Herodias. John the Baptist pronounced the marriage illegal. Antipas imprisoned John, and at the request of Herodias' daughter had him beheaded.

Aretas' domain extended, at one time, all the way to Damascus, as we hear from the Apostle Paul: "In Damascus the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of the Damascenes desiring to arrest me.

cb(11,33); Through a window I was let down in a basket by the wall and escaped his hands." (2nd Corinthians 11: 32-33.)

The Theater

{maps}images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/theater.jpg|The theatre, shielded by cliffs from the sun|Left{/maps}Herod was the first to build theaters in the land. Aretas IV had these before his eyes as well - for example, the one at Caesarea Maritima, whose {jtips}The auditorium, in early examples ex-cav-ated from the slope of a hill|cavea{/jtips} was carved into a ridge. Petra's theater is difficult to date, but on the basis of the masons' marks on the segments of its pillars, scholars put it in Aretas' reign. His workers carved it out of the rock face at a place where the towering cliffs on the East, West and South would shield the spectators' eyes from the sun. To maximize the acoustics, they followed the instructions of {jtips}A Roman engineer whose book On Architecture, published during the reign of Augustus, is a treasury for understanding Roman construction techniques.|Vitruvius{/jtips}. It is thought that 3000 people (in a city of about 30,000) could have watched a show. There are three tiers of seats. The topmost is more roughly cut than the others, leading some to think that it may have been added later. What is more, it interferes with some tombs. The descendants of the interred, who were slated to join their ancestors there, may not have been happy about this. One can imagine the discussions in the royal audience hall or city council (depending on the date), when the idea of expanding the theatre was broached.

The theatre would have been vulnerable to runoff from the mountain into which it was carved. The designers installed an elaborate underground drainage system to keep the orchestra from flooding.

{mospagebreak title="Deir" ("Monastery")}

The "Deir" ("Monastery")

The Treasury is easy to reach, but Petra's second great monument, the "Deir" or "Monastery" (so called because it was used as a chapel in the Byzantine period) requires an uphill walk of about an hour, much of it on steps carved into the rock. To judge from the cult niches en route, these steps belonged to a Nabataean processional way, a *via sacra*. At first, as the Deir comes into sight, the similarity to the Treasury is striking, especially in the upper portion: it has the {tips}A pediment is the triangular part that crowns the front of a classical building, as in the Parthenon of Athens. In Alexandria, for the first time, architects broke this form into two sections, putting a tholos in the middle. |broken pediment{/tips}, the {tips}A circular structure with columns|tholos{/tips}, and the urn on top. On a closer look, however, differences emerge. In the lower part of the "Treasury" you can walk around the pillars, but the Deir's are engaged in the wall, making it seem flatter. The designs in the Deir lack the delicate grace of those in the Treasury, and there are no figures - no Tyche or Dioscuri.

Given the absence of figures, one might suppose that the Deir is older, on the theory that the Nabataeans started out with simple forms, bare stelae for example, and that later, influenced by the Hellenistic world, they added figures to their repertoire. It is not quite so. There may indeed have been a period of simple forms at Petra, extending from the 3d century BC until the 1st. But according to {tips}McKenzie, Judith. The Architecture of Petra. Oxford University Press, 1990. |McKenzie's dating,{/tips} when the façades and monuments appear at Petra they do so with the full Hellenistic fittings, figures and all. After this initial absorption, the simpler forms reassert themselves. She writes (p. 117): "It is possible that the fine decoration on the early monuments, such as the Khasneh [Treasury], was done by imported craftsmen from Alexandria who trained Nabataean labour to do the blocking out. The Nabataeans then preferred the blocked out form as the finished form on their later monuments, such as the Deir." McKenzie dates the Deir to the latter half of the first century AD.

The Deir may have had figures, however: the niches, which resemble blocked windows, seem designed to hold statues. As ever in Petra, enigma prevails.

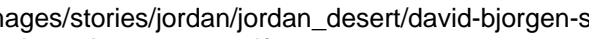
{maps}images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/kiwi-john-deir-corner.jpg|Scale of the "Deir"|Left{/maps}Both the Treasury and the Deir are about 120 feet high, but the Deir is 150 feet wide compared to the Treasury's 90. You can get an idea of its size from the photo on the left, showing one corner.

What was the function of this immense rock carving high above the city? It does not seem to have been a tomb: there are no burial chambers inside. This lack makes sense. An inscription chiseled above a niche near the Deir asks people to remember one Ubaydu "and his associates of the symposium of Obodat the god." The grave of the king-god Obodat or Obodas was not in Petra: a historian named Uranios (century unknown) wrote that the city of Oboda (Avdat) in the Negev was the place "where King Obodas, whom they deified, is buried." The Deir was the place in Petra where Obodas' symposium met, held a banquet and worshipped him, but his grave was in Avdat.

Obodas the God

The name Obodas belonged to three Nabataean kings. Whoever was the one to be deified, he was apparently the only Nabataean king to receive this honor and the only Nabataean divinity to have a personal name. He appears as a god in


several inscriptions, some of which mention of statues of him. (If the niches of the Deir contained statues, his was probably among them.) After the Romans annexed the Nabataean kingdom in 106 AD, Obodas' name was combined with that of Zeus. Avdat has a well-preserved Roman building over whose door is a dedication to Zeus Obodas.

Steps to the "Deir"
Which of the three Obodases became a god?

At first glance, the most likely candidate is Obodas III, who reigned from 30 – 9 BC. Before his time, the future Avdat was a mere camel station, not a fit place for a royal grave. At his death, however, it was probably a city, for his successor, Aretas IV, extended it with an artificial platform and furnished it with a temple.

Obodas III was "an inactive and slothful man in his nature…" according to [Antiquities of the Jews, Book XVI, Chapter 7, Par. 6.](#) [Josephus](#). It does seem, indeed, that he left a great deal of diplomatic work to his clever, scheming, ambitious advisor Syllaeus (for whom Herod's sister Salome conceived a fruitless passion). Around the time when this Obodas started his reign, Augustus became emperor in Rome. About seven years later, casting his eye on the spice trade from Arabia, Augustus dispatched an army. Obodas III and Syllaeus had little inclination to give up the Nabataean monopoly, but they did not want to collide head on with the powerful emperor. They pretended to cooperate. Syllaeus undertook the delicate task of guiding the Romans toward the incense groves in southern Arabia while sapping their strength in the desert. He succeeded, and those Romans who survived went home.

The contact with Augustus bears on the question of deification. Augustus allowed the provincials to worship him as a god. Herod built temples to him, for example, in Caesarea Maritima, Sebastia and Banias. In fact, there were plenty of precedents: Alexander the Great had been deified in Egypt and Asia during his lifetime, and later the Ptolemies (chief trading partners of the Nabataeans) had been deified post mortem. But the deification of Obodas III would have made a political statement. Unlike Herod and other client kings of Rome, Obodas III was formally independent. One way to affirm this independence would have been to claim an equal footing with Augustus.

Approach with "Deir" in distance
On a closer look, however, another good candidate arises: Obodas I (ca. 96-85 BC). [Josephus Flavius, The Jewish War, Book I, Chapter 4, Par. 4.](#) [Josephus](#) tells us that he defeated the most ruthless of the [The Hasmoneans](#): family of Judah Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC and established a Jewish dynasty for about a century. [Hasmonean](#) kings, Alexander Jannaeus. The latter had conquered much of the area between Petra and Damascus. Obodas I vanquished him near the Golan Heights, massing his camels to drive the Hasmonean army into a deep gorge (Jannaeus barely escaped). The victory expanded Nabataean power to such an extent that the Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus XII, felt threatened. He marched southward in 88-87 BC. Near Jaffa he crossed a trench that the Hasmoneans had dug to stop him, but then, [Josephus Flavius, The Jewish War, Book I, Chapter 4, Par. 7.](#) [writes Josephus](#), he veered off to fight the Nabataeans instead. Their army was probably nearby. They pretended to retreat, drawing Antiochus into an area they found conducive. This may have been the Negev. In the battle that followed, Antiochus was killed. Since Obodas' reign comes to an end at this time, it seems that he too was killed. If these things happened in the Negev, as appears likely, then his soldiers might have buried him at the nearest camel station, which would have taken his name. (Petra was not yet established as the burial place of Nabataean kings.) His victories, which rescued and enriched the Nabataeans as a people, followed by his untimely death, may have led them to recognize him as a god.

If the Deir was a temple to Obodas I, how do we explain the gap between his death in 87 BC and its carving more than a century later? It is possible that the "Treasury" was the first temple to Obodas. On this theory, the Treasury gradually attracted other traditions as well, leading a group of Obodan purists to commission the Deir up away from the hurly burly; they ordered that it be carved along the general lines of the Treasury below.

The only other King Obodas, the Second, came to power in old age and ruled very briefly (62-59 BC), leaving a few coins with his image.

Whichever Obodas was the god, the Nabataeans appear to have taken his deification quite seriously. The symposium mentioned in the inscription near the Deir would have met regularly to feast and perform ceremonies. There is an area that seems to have been set aside for this: a large oval of stones in front of the "Deir" at a slight remove. Beyond that are benches carved in the rock for the congregation.

{mospagebreak title=Tombs}

The Tombs

The Nabataean royal family and its entourage cut 34 tombs in the sandstone cliffs in the style of Roman temples. J. W. Burgon had these before his mind's eye in 1840, in a poem called "Petra," when he called the place: "A rose-red city half as old as Time."

But these tombs are exceptions in Petra. The upper and middle classes, subroyal, stuck to forms passed down from the Assyrian Empire (7th century BC) through Persia. And so we find rows of beautiful lesser tombs, more than 600 in number, each like a tower carved into the rock, "topped by jagged, stepped crenelations" (Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and Eugenia Equini Schneider, *Petra*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002. [Guzzo and Schneider{/tips}, p. 133). Some still have traces of stucco covered with bright red and yellow paint.

At first we might be tempted to think that the tombs evolved from the simpler, eastern style to the elaborate Hellenistic. If we only had Petra it would be hard to know, because just one tomb there has a date. In the Nabataean city of Hegra, however (today's Meda'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia, 250 miles to the south), there are plenty of rock-cut tombs with inscriptions and dates. From these it appears that differences in size and elaboration are due to social class, not to time. Applying this finding to Petra, most scholars conclude that there was no evolution of styles: side by side with the grand Hellenistic temple-like tombs, those of the simpler eastern style continued to be carved throughout the life of the city.

As for the lower classes, they made do with rectangular pits in the earth, or they dug shafts, to a series of pits. There are many such in the hills around Petra, especially near the beginning of the Siq. Occasionally the nails of a coffin are found.

{maps}images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/urn-tomb-close.jpg|The Urn Tomb, showing Hellenistic influence|Right{/maps}|If you want to see the contrast with a royal tomb, enlarge the photo on the right.

Every society has its way of facing or avoiding death, both the deaths of the people one loves and the prospect of one's own. The Nabataean arrangements give us an inkling of their way. The surviving façades and the chambers behind them

were only part of the story. A tomb complex included parts in front of the façade, but erosion and earthquake have wiped most of these away, and others may be hidden beneath later coverings of soil or debris. One tomb, however, called the Turkmaniyah, contains a long inscription indicating what there was:

This tomb and the large burial-chamber within it and the small burial-chamber beyond it, in which are burial-places, niche-arrangements, and the enclosure in front of them and the porticos and rooms within it and the gardens (? or seats) and triclinium-garden (?) and the wells of water and the cisterns (?) and walls and all the rest of the property which is in these places are sacred and dedicated to Dushara, the god of our lord [i.e., the god of the reigning king], and his sacred throne and all the gods, (as) in the documents of consecration according to their contents. And it is the responsibility of Dushara and his throne and all the gods that it should be done as in these documents of consecration and nothing of all that is in them shall be changed or removed and none shall be buried in this tomb except whoever has written for him an authorization for burial in these documents of consecration forever.

The "enclosure" would have been a courtyard in front of the tomb in which rituals were performed, observed by people on the seats that are mentioned. The triclinium was a U-shaped triple bench on which people would sit (or recline) and feast. (The upper-class Roman dining room, for example, was typically a triclinium. We have a splendid example at Sepphoris.) It is clear from several Nabataean inscriptions, write Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and Eugenia Equini Schneider, Petra, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2002. (Guzzo and Schneider (p. 148), that an annual feast was part of the ceremony at the tomb.

Time has erased the structures outside the Turkmaniyah tomb as it has in most cases elsewhere. An exception is the misnamed "Tomb of the Roman Soldier" (it is pure Nabataean). When you stand facing it, you are in its courtyard, and its triclinium is behind you. This triclinium is an exception among the several still extant at Petra, because it includes architectural decoration.

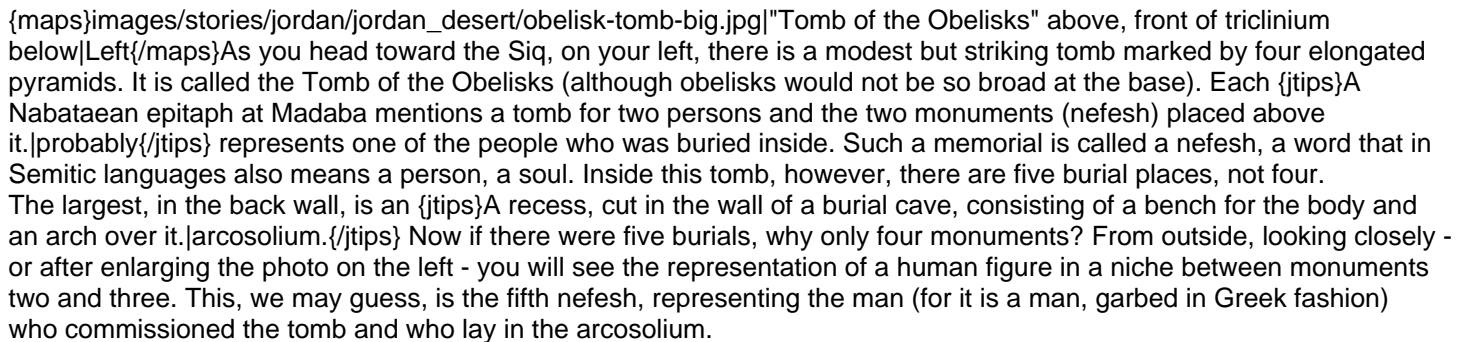
The funeral feast is a widespread custom. This act of eating may be interpreted as a way of affirming that despite the loss, life must go on. But part of this affirmation concerns the relationship with the one who has died. It is as if one were saying, "Just as I take this food into me, so I take you into me and perpetuate your life in me." We do not know whether the Nabataeans conceived immortality in this way, or whether, on the contrary, they thought in terms of an independent afterlife of the particular soul. A few graves at Petra were found undisturbed, and the objects discovered in them do not seem directed toward a future life. They seem rather more like this-worldly mementos belonging to everyday existence. The kinds of things found (utensils, a bit of jewelry) also turned up among the ruins of houses. None were specially made for a cult of the dead. (Jürgen Zangenberg in Thomas Weber and Robert Wenning, eds., Petra: Antike Felsstadt Zwischen Arabischer Tradition und Griechischer Norm, Mainz am Rhein, Philipp von Zabern, 1997 (Zangenberg, p. 98.)

The rites of mourning afford an opportunity to vent grief. Given the complexity of human relations, however, mourning can also be a lengthy process of making peace with the one who has died, in order that the perpetuation of that life in one's own does not put one at war with oneself. Such peacemaking requires support from the community.

We may imagine that this was going on at Petra, in the courtyard and triclinium before the façade of the tomb. Such interpretations are very general, though, and there were probably much more specific beliefs associated with the tombs. We shall discuss one possibility later, in connection with the "High Place of Sacrifice."

Because the carving of a tomb required time and art, we may also imagine that the one who commissioned it intended to lie in it. After his death his family members, who gathered periodically at the tomb to renew the perpetuation of his life in their own, did so in the consciousness that they would rest here too, and the same would be done for them.

From the many tombs at Petra, we shall concentrate on a few.

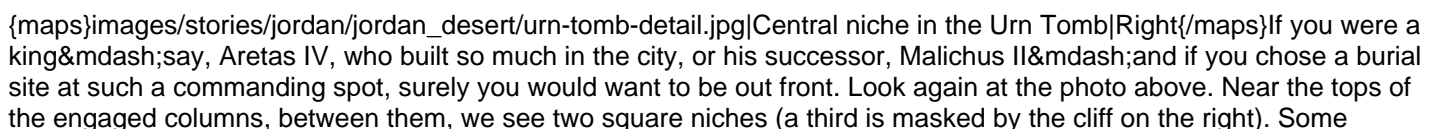
 "Tomb of the Obelisks" above, front of triclinium below|Left|As you head toward the Siq, on your left, there is a modest but striking tomb marked by four elongated pyramids. It is called the Tomb of the Obelisks (although obelisks would not be so broad at the base). Each Nabataean epitaph at Madaba mentions a tomb for two persons and the two monuments (nefesh) placed above it. probably represents one of the people who was buried inside. Such a memorial is called a nefesh, a word that in Semitic languages also means a person, a soul. Inside this tomb, however, there are five burial places, not four. The largest, in the back wall, is a recess, cut in the wall of a burial cave, consisting of a bench for the body and an arch over it. arcosolium. Now if there were five burials, why only four monuments? From outside, looking closely - or after enlarging the photo on the left - you will see the representation of a human figure in a niche between monuments two and three. This, we may guess, is the fifth nefesh, representing the man (for it is a man, garbed in Greek fashion) who commissioned the tomb and who lay in the arcosolium.

Beneath the Obelisk Tomb is a façade in a different style and at a slight angle to it. Its design includes a "broken" triangular front of a pitched roof, topping a portico. pediment, like the one that appears on the Treasury and the Deir. Inside is a triclinium, barren of decoration as these usually are. One would think the triclinium belonged to the tomb above, for what is a triclinium in Petra without a tomb (or a fancy tomb without a triclinium)? Yet the difference in style and angle is disturbing.

After the "Treasury," whose function is unclear, the great tombs of Petra unfold themselves in the side of the mountain known as al-Khubta. Together they are called the Royal Tombs. One very grand specimen is angled to overlook the city center. At its top is the form of an urn, and so it bears the name Urn Tomb.

As it appears today, the Urn Tomb requires a little sorting out. In 446/7 AD, according to an inscription inside, it was transformed into a church. Its outer courtyard was then extended and supported by vaults. The Doric colonnade on the courtyard's north side belonged, however, to the original tomb, and there was a corresponding colonnade on the south as well. Here then we have the courtyard that the Turkmaniyah inscription would lead us to expect, but there is no trace of a triclinium.

What distinguishes the Urn Tomb is its scale. Surely this was the resting place of a king. Yet there are no burial chambers in this hall. There are indeed arched alcoves, as in the other royal tombs (also in the Treasury and the Deir). We might suppose that a sarcophagus (literally "flesh eater") is a stone coffin located above ground and often decorated with carved figures or designs. Sarcophagi were placed in these alcoves, but not a trace of one has been found in Petra. (Also, the three in the east wall of the Urn Tomb look as though they were cut to suggest apses for the later church.) Where then were the bodies buried?

 Central niche in the Urn Tomb|Right|If you were a king—say, Aretas IV, who built so much in the city, or his successor, Malichus II—and if you chose a burial site at such a commanding spot, surely you would want to be out front. Look again at the photo above. Near the tops of the engaged columns, between them, we see two square niches (a third is masked by the cliff on the right). Some

scholars interpret these as the burial chambers. Judging from their size, they could have been chambers for secondary burial, that is, repositories for the bones after the flesh was gone. The niches were closed by slabs. The central one still has part of its slab. On it, in relief, is a man in a toga—the king is watching.

There are five more niches in the side wall above the colonnade of the Urn Tomb (again, see photo above). These may have been cut later to receive the bones of the king's relatives or officials.

[images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/palace-tomb-kay.jpg](#)The Palace Tomb|[Left](#){/maps}To the north of the Urn Tomb is the Silk Tomb, pictured at the start of this article. North of that is the (mis)called Corinthian. It is so badly eroded that one cannot tell whether it had niches, but we find them again in the last of the series, called the Palace Tomb (see photo on left). Again they are curiously high up, between the engaged columns. In 1967 an intrepid and curious mountaineer named Joe Brown climbed into the third niche from the left and discovered a vertical shaft that led him to the cliff above. A water system there leads runoff, as well as water from the Khubta aqueduct, into an apse-like chute cut north of the tomb. When we look at the royal tombs, therefore, we should imagine a grand waterfall in the chute, which filled the cisterns below. The overflow went to the nymphaeum, garden and swimming pool in the civic center.

If the niches high up in the royal tombs contained the royal bones, there is still the question: where were the bodies before the flesh disappeared? This question leads us to the site called the High Place of Sacrifice.

{mospagebreak title=High Place}

High Place of Sacrifice

The ancients sought their gods in the sky, linking them to the sun, the moon, the stars and the weather (though they also found gods in the earth). Often they worshipped on mountain tops. For example, Zebulon and Issachar called the tribes to their mountain and made offerings there {jtips}"They shall call the peoples to the mountain./There they will offer sacrifices of righteousness."|(Deuteronomy 33:19){/jtips}. We read that Joshua built an altar to the Lord on Mt. Ebal above Shechem {jtips}|Joshua 8:30){/jtips}. The Greeks looked to Olympus. On the mountains surrounding Petra, then, it is not surprising to find special places cut in the rock. Most of these, writes {jtips} Taylor, Jane. Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.|Jane Taylor{/jtips} (p. 138), are small and intimate, probably intended for family use. By "family" we should probably understand the extended family, the clan. But three larger high places stand out. One, on al-Khubta, is quite extensive, with courtyards, altars, feasting areas, water basins and a big vaulted cistern. It is to be reached, writes Taylor, by "a long and tortuous flight of rock-cut steps." A second is on al-Habis, the massif overshadowing Qasr al-Bint. A third, the best known to modern visitors, is the High Place of Sacrifice on Mount Madhbah. This is the one we shall visit here.

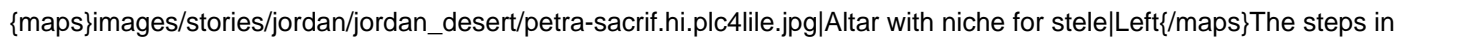
[images/stories/jordan/jordan_desert/piglet44_hp_propyl.jpg](#)Ruin of entrance to the High Place|[Left](#){/maps}There are two ways up. You can use the steps that begin on the south side of the theater, or you can take a trail that

starts between the "Great Temple" and Qasr al-Bint. This leads through Wadi Farasa, enabling you to visit the "Tomb of the Roman Soldier" and its triclinium on the way. Steps then lead up from this (west) side. I prefer to use Wadi Farasa going up and later to descend with the steps to the theater. If you make the descent toward day's end, you may be accompanied by the music of the women who sell wares at various points and sing in response to one another.

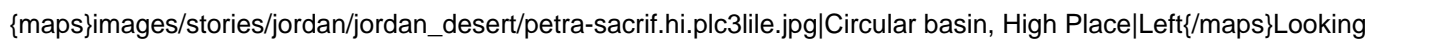
The climb takes about an hour without side visits, and of course one must have plenty of water, best carried in the belly.

According to Taylor (p. 138), the Nabataeans had about eight processional staircases leading up. Cutting the steps into the rock must have been an enormous labor, undertaken for an important purpose. Near the top two obelisks come into view. The rock around them has been cut into a terrace. Then the remains of a structure appear (see photo, left). It probably belonged to the propylaeum, the ornamental entrance. For now we enter the high place itself, pictured here (looking south):

Here is a frontal view:

Altar with niche for stele|Left|The steps in the center of the photo above lead to a platform with a niche that held a standing stone toward which some ancient peoples focused their prayer. Pronounced stee-lee. Scholars also use the term betyl.|stele|. The steps on the left lead to a shallow circular basin that is cut in the rock (see photo, below); it has a narrow drainage channel. This may have been used in ritual washing, but it could have been for sacrifice. In that case, the blood would have been collected and sprinkled over the stele. To this we may relate the words from the Suidas about a large stele representing the god Dushara: "To this they burn incense and against it they pour the blood of the sacrificial animals. And that is their form of libation."

Was there human sacrifice?|. Browning, Petra, 3d. edition, London, 1989, p. 214|Browning| cites one Nabataean inscription from Hegra that refers to a young man being consecrated "to be immolated" to a god. But that is all we have on the subject.

Circular basin, High Place|Left|Looking again at the picture including the group above, we note that the high place is arranged as a Three benches or couches arranged in a U-shape formed the typical dining arrangement of aristocrats in the Roman period. Each diner lay on his/her left side, eating with the right hand. At Petra, most triclinia are associated with tombs; they are carved into the bedrock without decoration.|triclinium|. Could this be related to the absence of triclinia in the royal tombs? The question leads to a hypothesis, debated by scholars since the late 1960's, concerning the main use of the high places. It is suggested that this one, as well as the other two major examples with their processional staircases, were appointed for the exposure of dead kings.

The Nabataeans, writes McKenzie, Judith. The Architecture of Petra. Oxford University Press, 1990.|Judith McKenzie| (p. 114) "appear to have included almost every variation in the treatment of the body, including ordinary

burial, burial with lime, possibly burial after exposure, partial cremation, and cremation." Warwick Ball, Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire, London and New York, Routledge, 2000 (Warwick Ball (p. 69) has suggested that the corpses of the kings, as well as other royalty, were carried up to high places on the surrounding mountains and there exposed until the flesh was gone. The bones would then have been placed in the niches that we noted in the royal tombs.

Ball's suggestion receives support from a curious statement in Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD), a Greek writer (although a proponent of Rome) wrote a 17-volume Geography, which is almost completely preserved. Strabo (Geography, Book XVI, Chapter 4, Par. 26). The ancient geographer's informant was a friend who had lived for a time in Petra: "They have the same regard for the dead as for dung...and therefore they bury even their kings beside dung-heaps." Nothing could be less true, as we know from the tombs. It has been proposed that Strabo confused a Semitic word for tomb with the Greek for dung, because the two have a similar sound. But it is also conceivable that his friend reported a Nabataean custom of exposing their kings on mountains, and Strabo, horrified, interpreted this as if they were disposing of the corpses like dung.

A possible Zoroastrian connection

We have already noted the Persian influence among the simpler rock-cut tombs at Petra. The Nabataeans had close contact with the Parthians, who had taken over the Persian realm. The religion of the Persians was Zoroastrianism, which was very strong in Mesopotamia and Iran during Petra's heyday. Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra) viewed reality in terms of a battle between good and evil, light and darkness. He saw such strife in the composition of the human body as well. The sacred text of this religion, the Avesta, was already in existence. Its purity laws forbid burial in the earth, for it holds that the earth is sacred and that burial would contaminate it. It ordains instead that the dead should be exposed on mountain tops. The flesh is to be eaten by birds and dogs. The mourners should fasten the corpse with stones or other means, so that the beasts cannot drag pieces to rivers or towns, for this would sully them. The idea is to attain the quickest possible separation of the flesh, which is considered evil, from the bones, because the bones are permanent and retain the person's spiritual goodness. Having heard this instruction, the Zoroastrians ask their god, Ahura Mazda, what they should then do with the bones. He tells them to make a receptacle out of stone, plaster or clay, beyond the reach of animals and in which rainwater cannot gather.

A later Zoroastrian text, from the 9th century AD (which preserves ancient practices) describes the receptacles in greater detail, and here we seem to come close to the niches in Petra's royal tombs. The mourners are to elevate the bone-receptacle to a place high enough so that the animals cannot reach it, and they are to put a roof over it so that rain will not enter. Even better, says this source, the bone-receptacle should be a vault of solid stone, and it is to be covered by a single stone with a hole in it to allow light in.

Since the people of Petra buried most of their dead in the earth, we cannot suppose that they were Zoroastrians. It is possible, though, that the kings, whose tomb styles were so different from those of hoi polloi, may have adopted the Persian custom.

This may also help explain the fact that we find such large rooms behind the façades - but without burial chambers. We read in the Zoroastrian texts that the spirit of the dead remains on earth for three days, after which it must cross a bridge to reach the realm of the blessed. During those three days, the person's past sins attack in the form of demons, and if they prevail he will fall from the bridge into hell. The mourners (some no doubt victims of the dead man's sins) keep a vigil during these three days and bake cakes, offering them to guardian angels whose task is to expel the demons. These are three days of trial for the dead. It is hard to picture people doing such a thing for three days and nights on a mountain top in nasty weather. But perhaps they kept the body in the large room of the tomb (in an alcove?) during the days of trial, baking cakes for the angels, burning frankincense and carrying out the requisite ceremonies to help the dead king in his passage. On the fourth day they would have borne the body to the peak and held a ceremony, including sacrifice, there.

{mospagebreak title=Twilight}

Twilight

Petra's main growth occurred in the 1st century AD, but before that an event occurred which was destined to cause its decline. This was the rise of Octavian (later called Augustus) to exclusive power in Rome. Augustus made peace with the Parthians. The more northerly trade route via the Euphrates was back in action.

With regard to goods that were destined for Rome, it no longer made sense to send them south to Petra and then north again. Why not just go straight across via the Euphrates-Aleppo-Antioch connection? This was roughly what happened to much of the India-Rome trade. ("Roughly," I say, because the desert city of Palmyra, newly developed by Arab tribes, proved powerful enough to divert the traffic its way.) The northerly route attracted more and more commerce. Wadi Sirhan, a well-watered north-south passage through the desert, came into greater use. Its traffic bypassed Petra. (See map below.)

That was one factor in Petra's decline. There was another. Shortly after Augustus' death in 14 AD, the Romans discovered a secret that Arab mariners had probably kept for centuries. Suppose that, between May and October, you sail from Egypt through the Red Sea straits. If you then put out for the open sea (instead of hugging the south Arabian shore as sailors were wont to do), the monsoon winds will carry you to India in about three months. They will carry you back between November and April. Using this principle, the Romans took control of the maritime trade with Indian cities. They could also stop at the entrance to the Red Sea, picking up frankincense and myrrh. Although there were pirates to contend with near the coast (each merchant vessel had security guards), this method was much more efficient than overland shipment by camel. A single ship could hold the equivalent of many camel loads.

What really hurt the Nabataeans, however, was this: The Romans used harbors on the western shore of the Red Sea. From here they shipped the goods on a short overland journey to the Nile, whence they continued to Alexandria by boat. Thus Petra lost much of the vital Egyptian trade. {jtips}Strabo (64 BC - 24 AD), a Greek writer (although a proponent of Rome) wrote a 17-volume Geography, which is almost completely preserved. |Strabo{/jtips} records the change:

The loads of aromatics are conveyed from Leuke Kome [on the east coast of the Red Sea - see map below] to Petra, and thence to Rhinocolura [near Gaza]…and thence to the other peoples; but at the present time they are for the most part transported by the Nile to Alexandria; and they are landed from Arabia and India at Myus Harbour [Myos Hormos on the map]; and then they are conveyed by camels over to Coptus in Thebaïs [Thebes], which is situated on a canal of the Nile, and then [north] to Alexandria (Geography, Book 16, Ch. 4, 24).

The situation is indicated by the map. In line with {jtips}Warwick Ball, Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire, London and New York, Routledge, 2000|Ball{/jtips}, I have not included a "Silk Road" from China.

Given the general northward shift of commerce and, in the south, the Roman diversion of trade to the Nile, Petra lost much of its importance. Commercially, it must have become something of a backwater. In 70 AD or soon thereafter, the last Nabataean king, Rabel II, moved north to Bostra at the outlet of Wadi Sirhan. Here he could be closer to the action. What's more, the Nabataeans owned much land in the area, which was (and is) superb for viticulture. To Rabel's name, in inscriptions, is added the epithet: "who brings life and deliverance to his people." What he appears to have done, indeed, was to lead a transition to agriculture in the former trading cities on the Petra-Gaza route, including Petra itself. At this time, for instance, Avdat got its ingenious runoff-collection system, enabling it to grow crops in the desert. But no one farms the desert unless there is another good reason for being there, and Avdat had lost this. By 150 AD it was defunct, along with the other cities in the central Negev. (Nabataean [Mampsis \(Mamshit, Kurnub\)](#) was on a route from the Red Sea to a Roman city called Aelia Capitolina, earlier and later known as Jerusalem. In the Byzantine period, Avdat and the other Negev cities would have a rebirth, thanks to the flow of Christian pilgrims between the Holy Land and Sinai, as well as a general surge in population. [Mampsis](#) thrived at this time, however.)

Petra survived without interruption, for it was still the major city in its area. In 106 AD, upon Rabel's death, Trajan annexed the Nabataean realm to Rome, apparently without need for a conquest. (Roman coins called Arabia *adquisita*, not *capta*.) He incorporated it into the new Provincia Arabia, whose capital he set at Bostra. A few years later Trajan paved a road 250 miles long from Bostra through Petra to Aela (Aqaba) on the Red Sea. This Via Nova Traiana kept Petra in the picture, but close to the margin. The big money was being made elsewhere.

Little is known about Petra in the following centuries. The emperor Diocletian (284-305), who reorganized the Roman Empire (and persecuted Christians) lopped off the southern part of Provincia Arabia, including Petra, and attached it to the province of Syria Palaestina. Under Byzantine rule the city had its own bishop, who attended the Sardis conference of 343 on the [Arian controversy](#). Arius, a deacon in Alexandria, held that Jesus, as the son of God, must be considered subordinate to his Father. At Nicaea in 325 it was decided otherwise: that he is "of one substance" with his father. The Arian controversy, nevertheless, continued to disturb the Christian world. [Arian controversy](#). Twenty years later, in 363, an [earthquake](#) hit the region very hard. The columns of the "Great Temple" fell and were not restored.

When the land was again reorganized, toward the end of the 4th century, Petra was included in Palaestina Tertia (Third Palestine), of which it may have been the capital. The question is debated.

[Baptistry of the Petra Church](#) Christianity had recently become the Byzantine imperial religion, but it does not seem to have penetrated Petra in a major way until the mid-5th century, when the city was visited by the monk [Bar Sauma](#). In 438, after the Empress Eudocia allowed Jews to pray in Jerusalem on other occasions than the anniversary of the Temple's destruction, Bar Sauma arranged a shower of stones that killed them on the former Temple Mount. He also directed the systematic destruction of synagogues and pagan temples. His followers venerated him, we are told, because he never sat or lay down. He wore an iron tunic, which must have stoked his rage in summer, and he confined his diet to fruits and roots. [Bar Sauma](#). The story goes that Petra had suffered from drought for four years, but on his arrival, Bar Sauma prophesied rain. At once the heavens opened and the population converted.

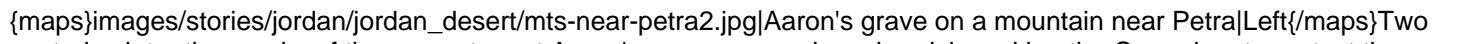
The Urn Tomb became a church. But Petra's new Christians could also build their own, for there were plenty of materials still lying around from the earthquake of 363. Some of the stones from the "Great Temple" and other toppled buildings were used. The ruins of a large church may be viewed today on the hill just north of the colonnaded street. It had (in its initial version) a single apse on the east and an atrium on the west, beyond which was a baptistry in the form of a cross. Each arm of the cross that we see today has steps, and there is a small basin embedded nearby. Jane Taylor interprets this as follows. The convert descended the steps and stood in the font. A priest took water from the basin and poured it over his or her head. The convert then ascended to the other side as a Christian.

In a storeroom beside this church, in 1993, about 140 papyri were found, dating from the 6th century AD. They had been carbonized in a fire, and the decipherment has been an enormous labor of reading black on black. So far they appear to be legal documents in Greek concerning property transactions, taxes, dowries and resolutions of disputes. Those deciphered range in date from 513 to 594, "portraying three generations of an affluent land-owning Petra family" (Taylor, p. 208). One gets the impression, Taylor writes (p. 207), of a city that has "a rich economic and social life with flourishing agriculture and active institutions." The papyri do not mention trade.

And then the record goes blank. During the next three hundred years, much of the scavenging and grave robbing occurs. An Arab historian of the 10th century mentions that Christian monks are living on nearby Haroun Mountain, which a tradition identifies as Mount Hor of Numbers 20:27-29:

Moses did as the Lord commanded: and they went up into Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation.

Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them on Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain: and Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. When all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, they wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel.

 Aaron's grave on a mountain near Petra|Two centuries later the monks of the monastery at Aaron's grave appear in a chronicle, asking the Crusaders to protect them from Saracen raids. The Crusaders built a castle east of the Siq. It fell to Saladin's army in 1189. A pilgrim, in 1217, saw no one in Petra, but he found two monks still living by the grave on Haroun. The Mamluke Sultan Baibars passed through in 1276. The account of his journey makes no mention of inhabitants.

After this, total silence. Petra was lost to the western world. Those who had read the ancient historians knew that a place of this name had once existed, but they did not know where. The clergy of Jerusalem told a young Swiss explorer named Johann Ludwig Burckhardt that Petra was the place which we today know as Karak. But then Burckhardt went looking. One day in 1812, a man from the village of Wadi Musa guided him through the Siq.