

# A GRAECO-NABATAEAN SANCTUARY ON UMM EL BIYARA

by  
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Umm el Biyara is a great rock massif (Plate CXXXIV,1), which rises sheer above the Petra basin for almost a thousand feet or nearly three hundred and thirty metres. It is a natural, almost impregnable fortress, the only approach to the summit being from the south east, and though some effort was made during the writer's excavations to lessen the difficulties of the climb, it still remains a long and arduous one and should certainly not be attempted without a guide. From the western edge, the whole panorama of the Wadi Arabah lies before one and from the north-eastern, eastern and southern sides, all the approaches to Petra are over-looked and therefore easily controlled. (Pl. CXXXV)

This difficulty of approach casts grave doubts on the story in the Bible, (2nd. Chronicles XXV, 11-12 and 2nd Kings XIV,7.) in which ten thousand Edomites were cast down by King Amazias of Judah from the summit of an Edomite stronghold called Sela. For many years, Biblical scholars equated Umm el Biyara with the Biblical Sela. There is no archaeological evidence for such an equation and the writer prefers an equation to be made with a village not far from Tafilah which, to this day, is called Sela'.

In 1960, during the course of Mr. P. Parr's excavations at Petra, the writer did two weeks' exploratory work on the summit of Umm el Biyara and, as a result of her findings, spent a

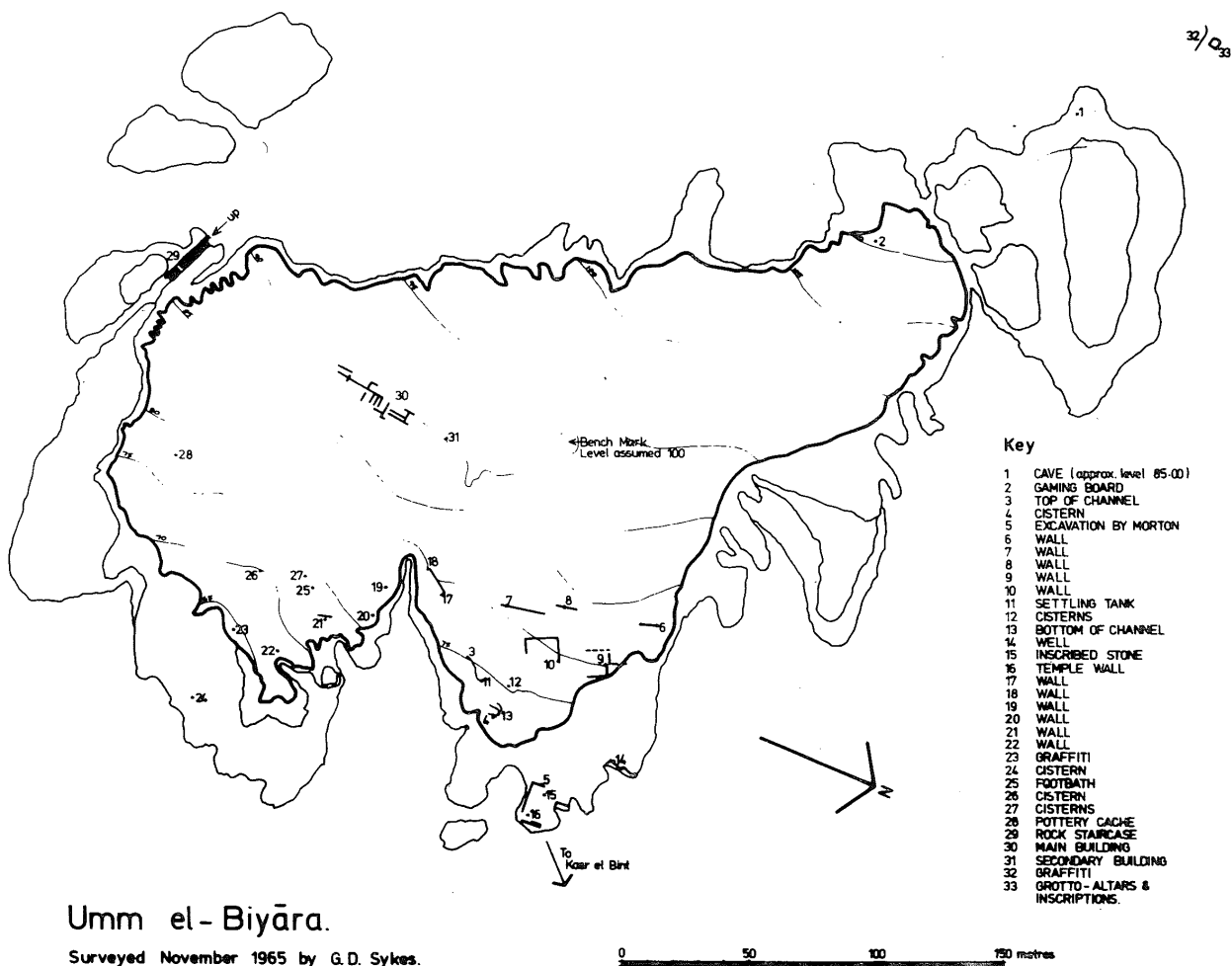
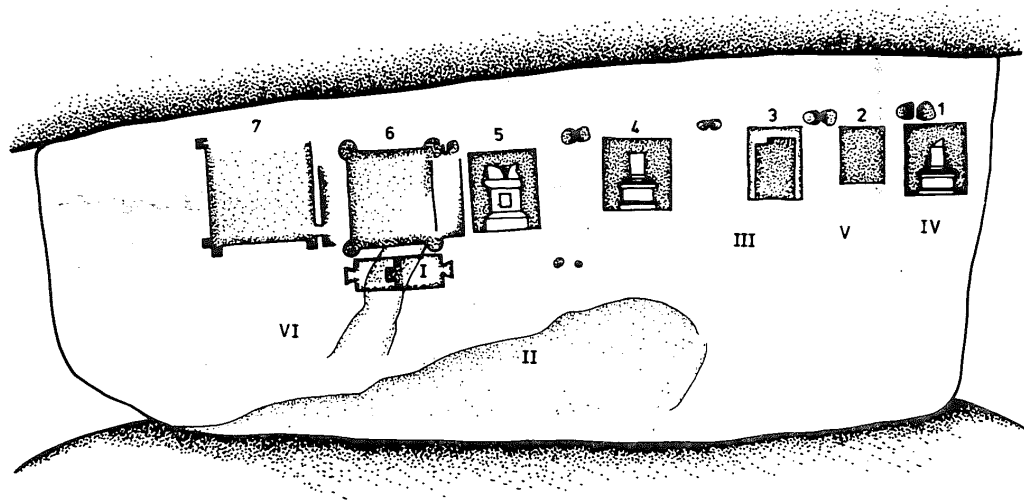


Fig. 1. General view of the summit of Umm el Biyara, with most of the buildings, etc. marked. No. 32/33 in the key marks the position of the grotto.

solitary seven weeks up there in 1963. In 1965, she received the help of the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

Although a very small settlement, Umm el Biyara has made its mark in Jordanian history because of the finding there of a seal impression in a well and truly sealed level. It was of a King of Edom, (Pl. CXXXIV,2), Qos Gabr, who is mentioned twice in the Assyrian Annals, once under the reign of Esarhaddon, (680-669) and later under the reign of Ashurbanipal (668-633). This find enabled us to give a much more exact dating to the pottery of the 7th - 6th C.B.C.<sup>2</sup>

During the writer's work on Umm el Biyara, one of the local B'dul drew her attention to some rock carvings on the north west of the Mountain. (Figs 1 and 2). They were not easy of access; one slid down some rather steep gullies and then clambered up into a crevice. Obviously, at one time the rock had been upright. The writer passed on the information to Abbé J. Starcky, one of the leading scholars in Nabataean, who, in turn alerted M. Milik. It had been intended to produce M. Milik's article as an Appendix to the final report on Umm el Biyara, but because of reasons outside the control of the writer, this will not now be published until 1981. It was then hoped that M. Milik's article would have been published, together with this short note



#### Umm el-Biyāra - Grotto

Altars nos. 1 - 7, Inscriptions nos. I - VI  
Drawn May 1980 by S. M. Balderstone.

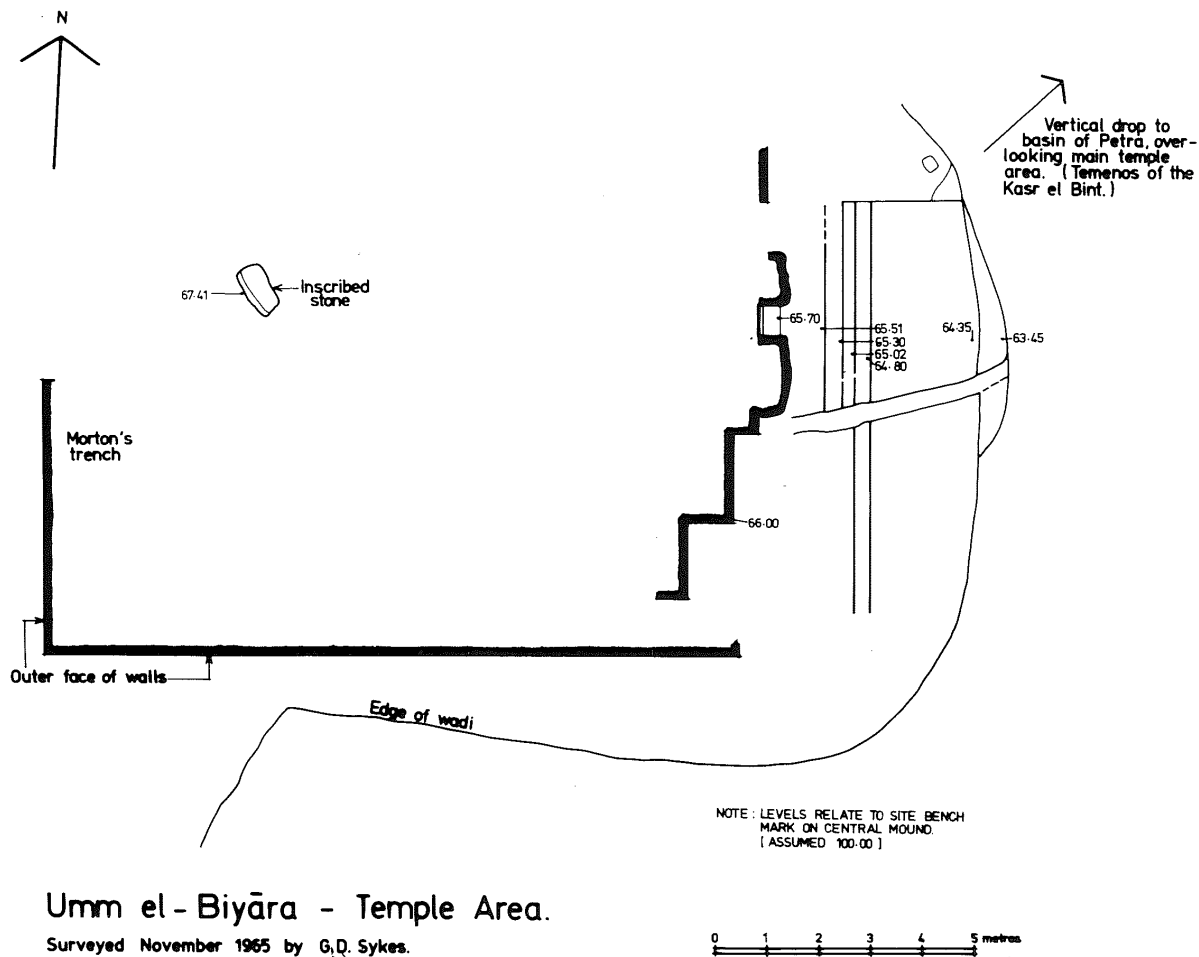
0 50 100 cm  
(true elevation)

Fig. 2. The grotto showing the position of the altars and inscriptions.

in the *ADAJ*, as part of a joint tribute to that much respected and recently deceased scholar, Mr. Gerald Lankester Harding, who played such an important role in unravelling the archaeological history of Jordan. It was not to be.

M. Milik is publishing the inscriptions and graffiti in "Revue Semitique" and the writer has excluded deliberately therefore any photographs of them in this article. At least, however, from Fig. 2, their position in relation to the altars can be seen. The graffiti were discovered on a rock face *in situ* immediately to the south of the fallen "Inscription and Altar" rock, on the other side of the gully.

The drawing of the grotto (Fig.2) was done by Mrs. Sue Balderstone with the help of Her Royal Highness Princess Alia; the two of them sat long hours in very cramped quarters, getting exact measurements.



### Umm el - Biyāra - Temple Area.

Surveyed November 1965 by G.D. Sykes.

Fig. 3. Location of a possible important Nabataean Temple overlooking the Petra basin.

M. Milik has ascribed this sanctuary to Saint Zeus Dousares, but as his article has not yet been published, the writer cannot make use of his very important interpretations. She can suggest, however, that the altars, Nos. 1, 4 and 5 bear a marked resemblance to many of the dedications to Dushara to be seen in the Siq on the way into Petra from Wadi Musa.

During the writer's excavations, a survey (Fig. 1) was done by Mr. Dennis Sykes of the mountain top and, as far as possible, we mapped everything that was visible on the surface. This included the foundations of a very large building with impressive steps leading up to it. (Fig. 3 and Fig. 1. No. 16 in key). The stones showed the typical diagonal tooling of the Nabataeans and what little pottery was found on the surface belonged to this period. Its dominating position, overlooking the main street of Petra and the Temenos of the Temple of the so-called Qasr el Bint, suggests that it might have had some connection with the latter, which was the major Graeco-Nabataean temple in Petra.

The little rupestrian sanctuary dedicated to Saint Zeus Dousares was probably an adjunct of the building overlooking Petra. What is its most interesting feature is the equation of Zeus with Dushara; a perfect example of syncretism of Hellenistic and Nabataean beliefs.

Crystal-M. Bennett.

19th September, 1980.

## NOTES

1. See a Preliminary Report in *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 73, (1966) pp. 372-403.
2. The late Dr. Nelson Glueck, who excavated Tell el Kheleifeh down dated his period IV. See *B.A.S.O.R.* No. 188, December 1967.
3. I am most grateful to Her Royal Highness Princess Alia for suggesting to His Majesty that we should go to Umm el Biyara by helicopter. I am also equally grateful to Her Royal Highness and Mrs. Sue Balderstone for the work they did. Mrs. Balderstone also brought up to date Mr. Sykes's original map (Fig. 1.)