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Sculptures from the Apsidal Monument at the Qaşr al-Bint: Religious Iconography and Political Propaganda in Roman Petra

Abstract

Since 1999 excavations undertaken by the French mission in the Qaşr al-Bint area at Petra have concentrated on the apsidal monument situated adjacent to the temple. The monument was erected bafter the Roman annexation and completed during the reign of the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161-169 AD). The building collapsed in Late Roman times, probably in an earthquake, and as a result a great part of its abundant sculpted decoration has been preserved under the mass of fallen blocks, escaping defacement in later periods of iconoclasm. These objects include marble statues positioned near the monument, the oversize images of the two rulers displayed in the central apse, and several groups of sculpture in local sandstone, mostly depicting deities, which were positioned at different levels of the façade. Thanks to the meticulous research work on the architecture there is now

a plausible hypothesis for the reconstruction of the building, including reasonable assumptions for the location of these sculptures and their identification. The study raises specific points about the decorative programme for imperial monuments and for possible continuity with the decoration of the Nabataean temple.

The Excavation of the Monument

An etching published in 1830 by Léon de Laborde (FIG. 1)³ (Laborde and Linant de Bellefonds 1994: 160 Pl.10) shows that the upper courses of the apsidal monument could always be seen emerging above the ground in front of the temple of the Qaşr al-Bint and some 18 m to the west of its main altar at the western limit of the sacred area or 'temenos' (FIG. 2, plan: Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 22 fig.0.3, 88 Fig.1). Excavation of the monument began in 1999 at the request of the Department

1. Petra Museum, DoA, PAP.

2. French Mission, CNRS, IFPO.

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1. Laborde's view of the Qasr al-Bint (1830).

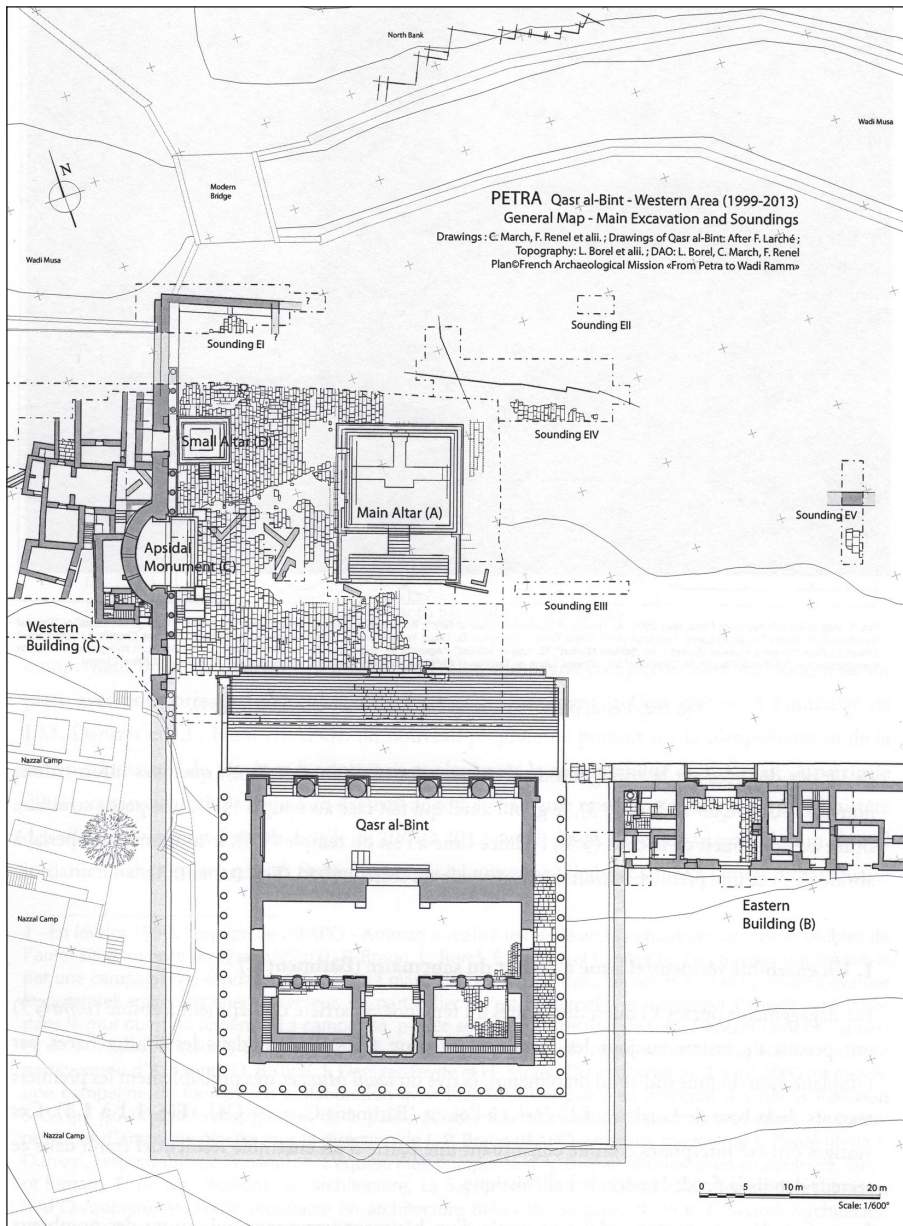


2. View of the apsidal monument from the top of the Qasr al-Bint (L.Borel, 2002).

of Antiquities of Jordan and under the direction of Dr Fawzi Zayadine and with the help of IFAPO (Dentzer and Renel 2000; Augé, Renel, Borel, March 2002; Augé 2005).

The fieldwork was initiated by Dr François Renel and from 2001 onwards as part of the

new French archaeological mission 'From Petra to Wadi Rum'. Excavations ceased in 2006 when the monument was almost totally cleared out and from that date on, other parts of the area have been investigated (FIG. 3). Our team, especially the architects Laurent Borel,



3. General plan of the western area of the sanctuary (F. Renel, L. Borel, C. March *et al.*).

Chrystelle March and Dr Jacqueline Dentzer-Feydy, is currently involved in preparing a detailed publication of the monument, including a study of the excavated material (Renel in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 87-89 Fig. 1-2; Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 22 Fig. 0.3; Dentzer-Feydy in print).

From the beginning, the apsidal monument (wrongly named ‘exedra’ in our first reports) was identified as a building of Roman date. All epigraphical and archeological data from the excavations confirm that it was erected during the 2nd century AD and finished, as it

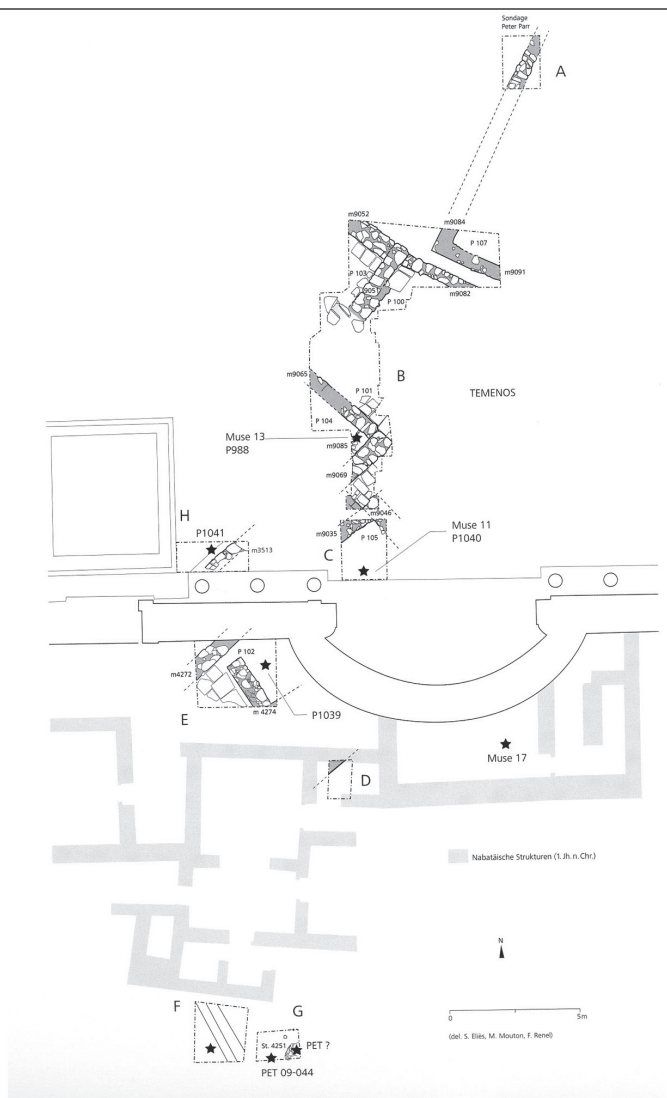
will be shown below, towards the end of the common reign of emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161-169 AD). It collapsed in Late Roman times, following a period of abandonment, probably due to an earthquake in the 4th century AD.

Our team also investigated a large complex extending immediately to the west of the apsidal monument. This complex was constructed first in the Nabataean period and is therefore probably earlier than the temple. It was at times occupied after the Roman annexation, and finally in the Late Roman period, when a work-

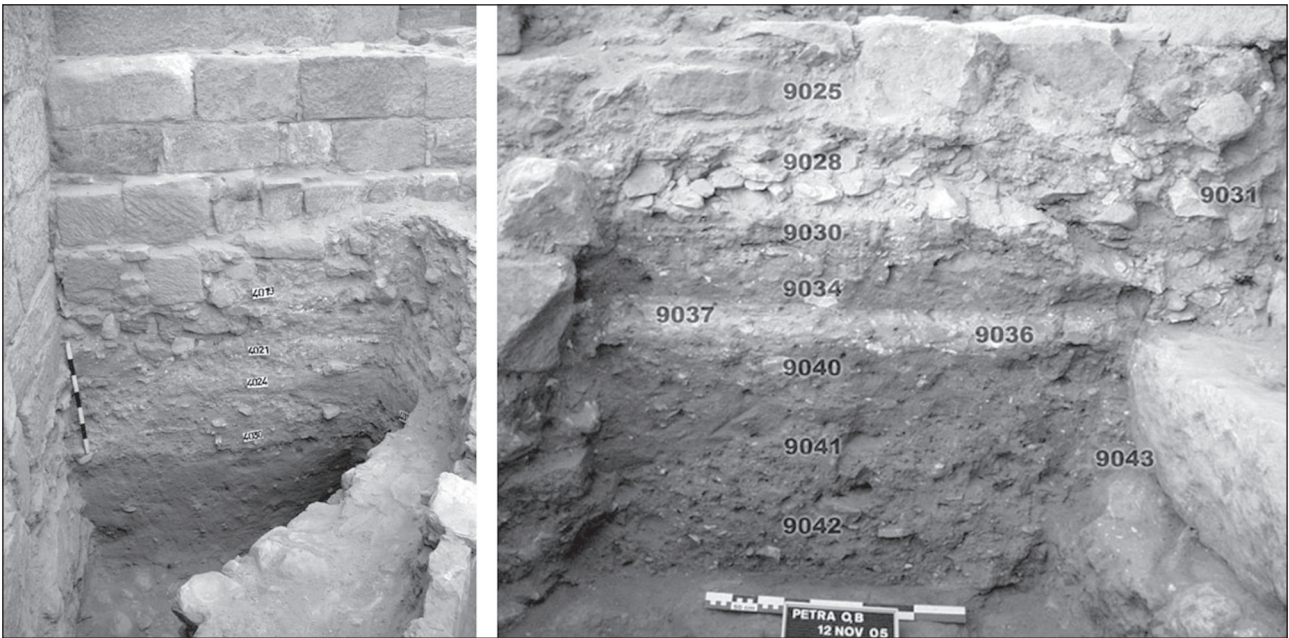
shop for bone artefacts was established in a part of it (Khan in Tholbecq (ed.). 2013: 115-116; Khan in Tholbecq (ed.). 2014: 127-130; +reference of Khan B. in *SHAJ* 12: ?). On the eastern side of the apsidal monument, a row of earlier houses of the Hellenistic period (3rd to 2nd centuries BC) was excavated by Andreas Kropp, Michel Mouton and François Renel (FIG. 4) (Mouton *et al.* 2010; Mouton 2012). The two parallel excavations provide us with a continuous stratigraphy from the Hellenistic period to the Byzantine period (FIG. 5). To the east of the temple, the excavation of a large and lavishly decorated building, also of Nabataean date and probably linked to the sanctuary, began in 2000 and was resumed in our last seasons of work.

The Structure and Façade of the Apsidal Monument

The apsidal monument faces east. Its length is approximately 35 m and its elevation is preserved to a height of nearly 4.50 m to the south and 0.70 m to the north. The main surviving structure is a wall, *ca.* 1.70 m thick, built directly onto a broader foundation *ca.* 2.75m thick, which was a former Nabataean limit wall, levelled and widened for the construction of the new building (FIG. 6). In the middle of the façade, the wall is interrupted by a broad apse surrounding a high podium. Both sides of the apse were pierced by a lateral opening, probably doors leading to a rear chamber. The southern opening is much better



4. Structures of Hellenistic date under the paved area (M. Mouton, F. Renel).



5. Parallel stratigraphies in trenches to the west and to the east of the apsidal building (M. Mouton, F. Renel).



6. Foundation of the façade: the former Nabataean limit wall.

preserved than the northern one, but damaged during the Late Roman occupation and also later. On either side of the openings the façade wall is strengthened by protruding engaged pedestals bearing applied orders.

The façade of the monument collapsed in one event entirely towards the east. This collapse was probably the effect of an earthquake in the 4th century AD, the well-known 363 seism being the most likely cause of its destruction. The excavation of the mass of fallen material slowly advanced from north to south (FIG. 7). Season after season, an enormous amount of



7. Fallen blocks seen from the top of the temple (L. Borel, 2002).

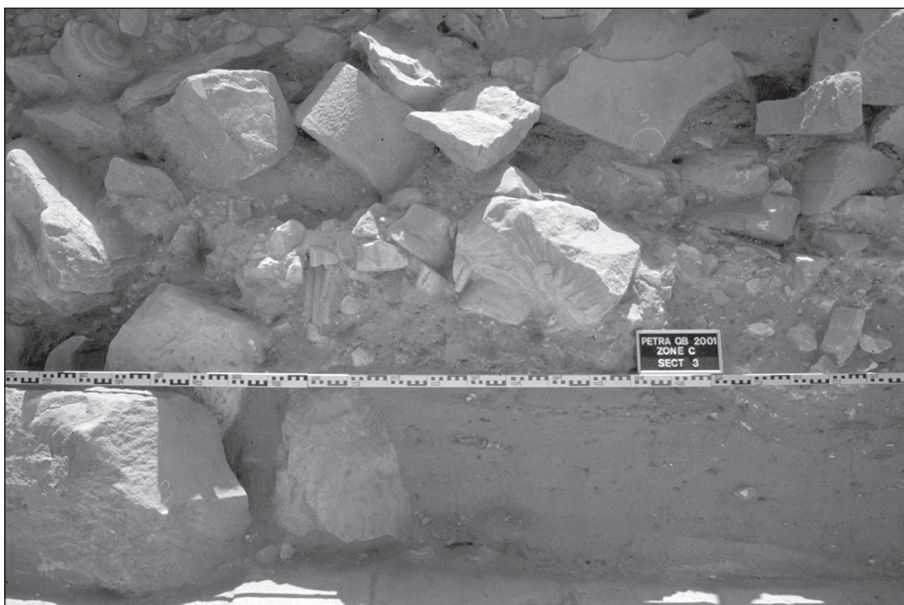
archaeological material came to light, predominantly architectural fragments and a number of sculpted elements, including heads and busts, such as the one (Inv. Nr. C302) identified as Isis (FIG. 8). Almost all pieces were discovered in front of the central apse and the southern half of the façade, as the northern half had been re-occupied in later times and nothing there survived. Every piece was recorded and drawn *in situ* before being removed.

Some sandstone blocks were particularly friable due to seeping water erosion and needed conservation *in situ* including a pediment piece showing the face of Dionysos (Inv. Nr.

C316) (Ueli Bellwald deserves a most grateful mention for his help with this) (FIG. 9). Other pieces were in perfect condition, including an architectural element in reddish sandstone (Inv. Nr. C133) depicting the head of a goddess in high relief (FIG. 10) found in the first season (Dentzer and Renel 2000: 61, Fig.; Wenning and Hübner 2004:166 Nr. 14.1. 175 Pl. 25; Augé 2005: 189 Fig.2).

Honorific Bases, Dedicatory Inscriptions and Statues

As shown on a recent plan of the monument (FIG. 11), a series of structures were built in



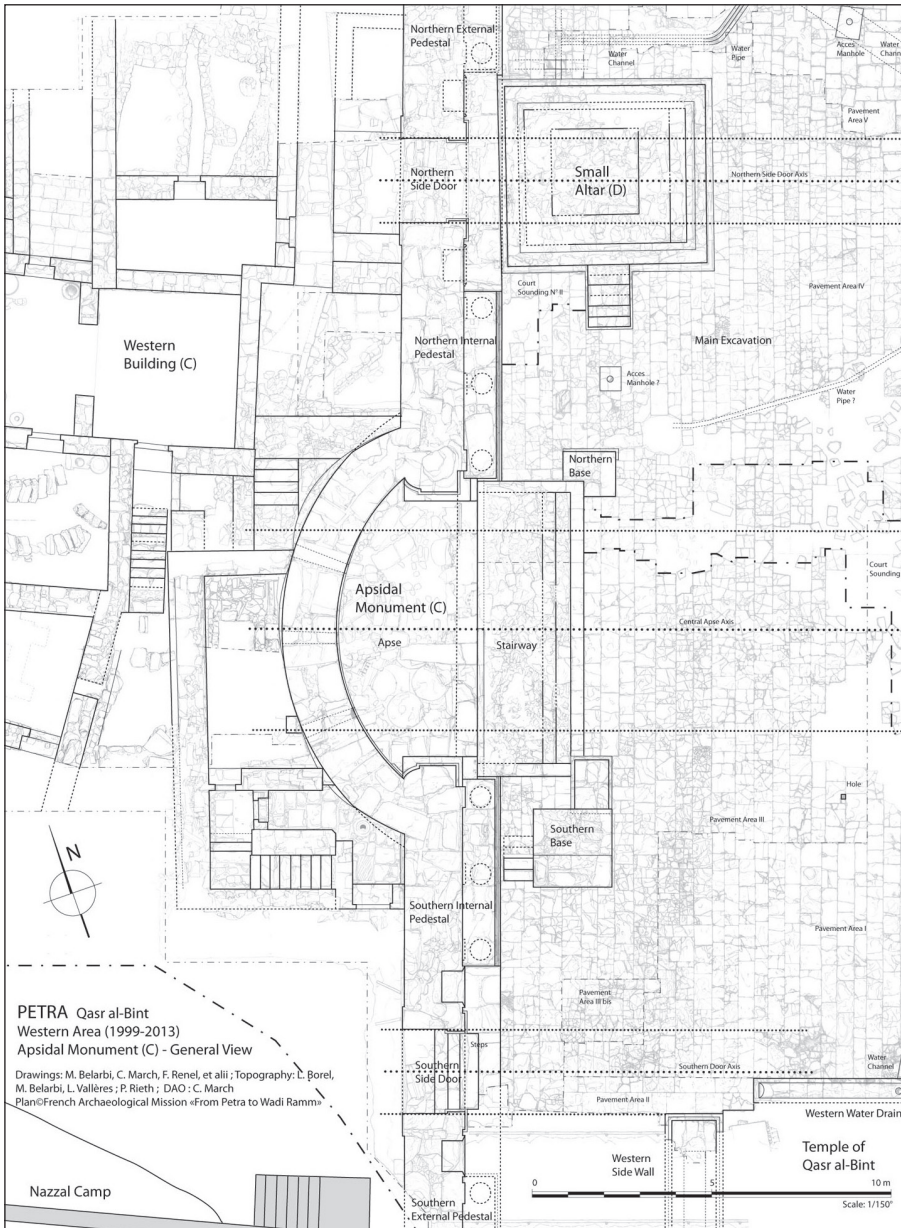
8. Carved bust of Isis (Inv. Nr. C302) in the section of ground (F. Renel).



9. Treatment of a damaged pediment block (Inv. Nr. C316) with bust of Dionysos (C. Augé, 2002).



10. Well-preserved block (Inv. Nr. C133) showing goddess with cornucopia (F. Renel, 1999).

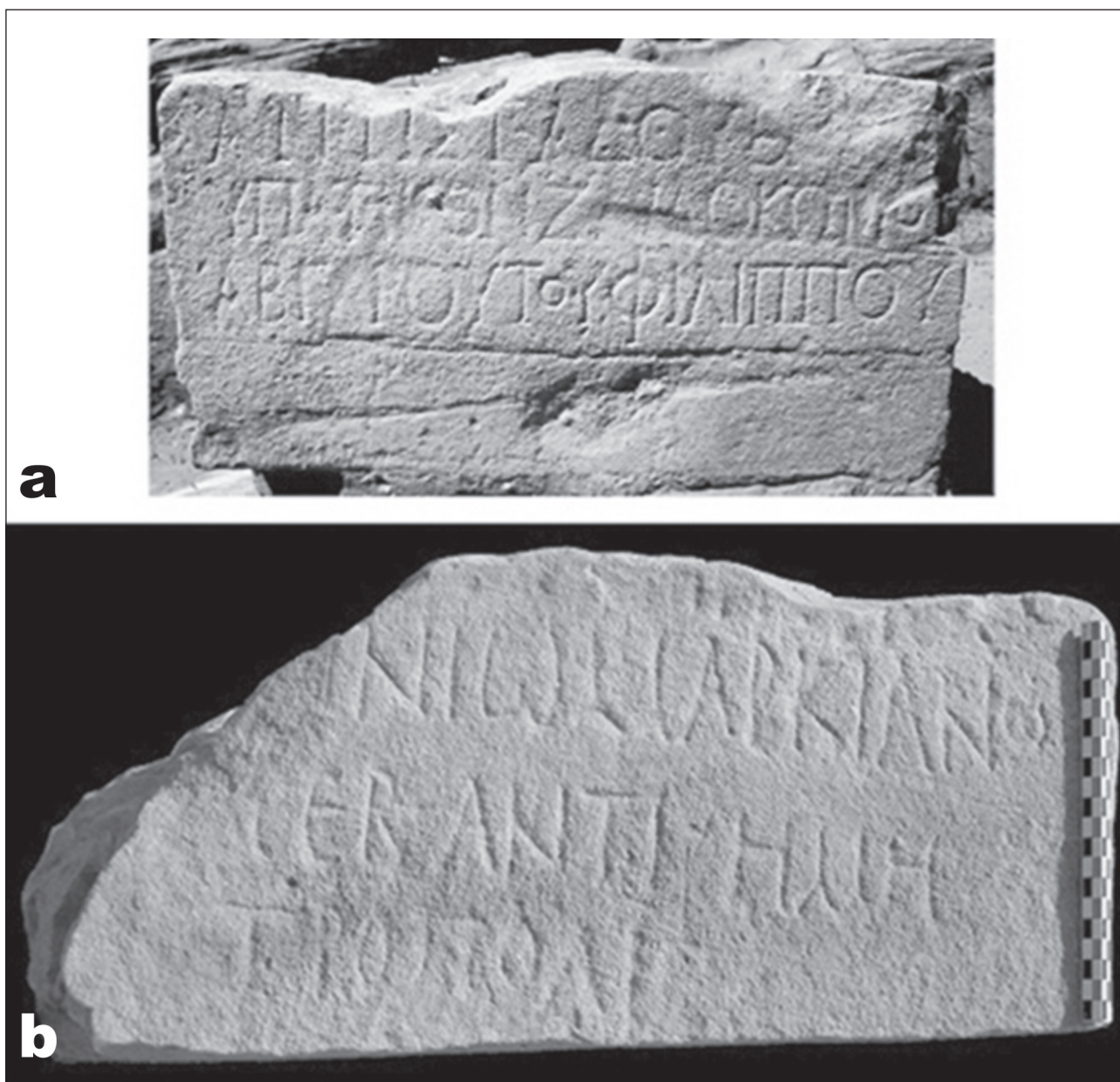


11. Plan of the apsidal monument (F. Renel, L. Borel, C. March, M. Belarbi *et al.*, 2013).

front of the central apse (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 56 Fig.7.2.). These included stairs leading to a podium and two pedestals or platforms, the southern one decorated with a moulding at its base. Two blocks bearing inscriptions in Greek (FIG. 12 a-b), as well as fragments of marble statuary, were found near these platforms. We presume that they are the remains of honorific statue bases as the inscriptions mention two imperial legates of the Roman Province of Arabia, Quintus Antistius Adventus (Zayadine 2002: 211), and Publius Julius Geminius Marcianus (Augé in Tholbecq

(ed.) 2014: 81-82). Both governors are known for their building activity in other cities of Arabia during the joint reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (161-169 AD), Marcianus at the beginning of that period, between 162 AD and 164 AD, and Adventus at the end, between 166 AD and 169 AD. The latter is probably the governor who completed the building and perhaps (let us fantasize a little) presided over its inauguration.

The excavation also brought to light two almost complete blocks, one 1.55 m in length and the other 1.58 m in length, both framed

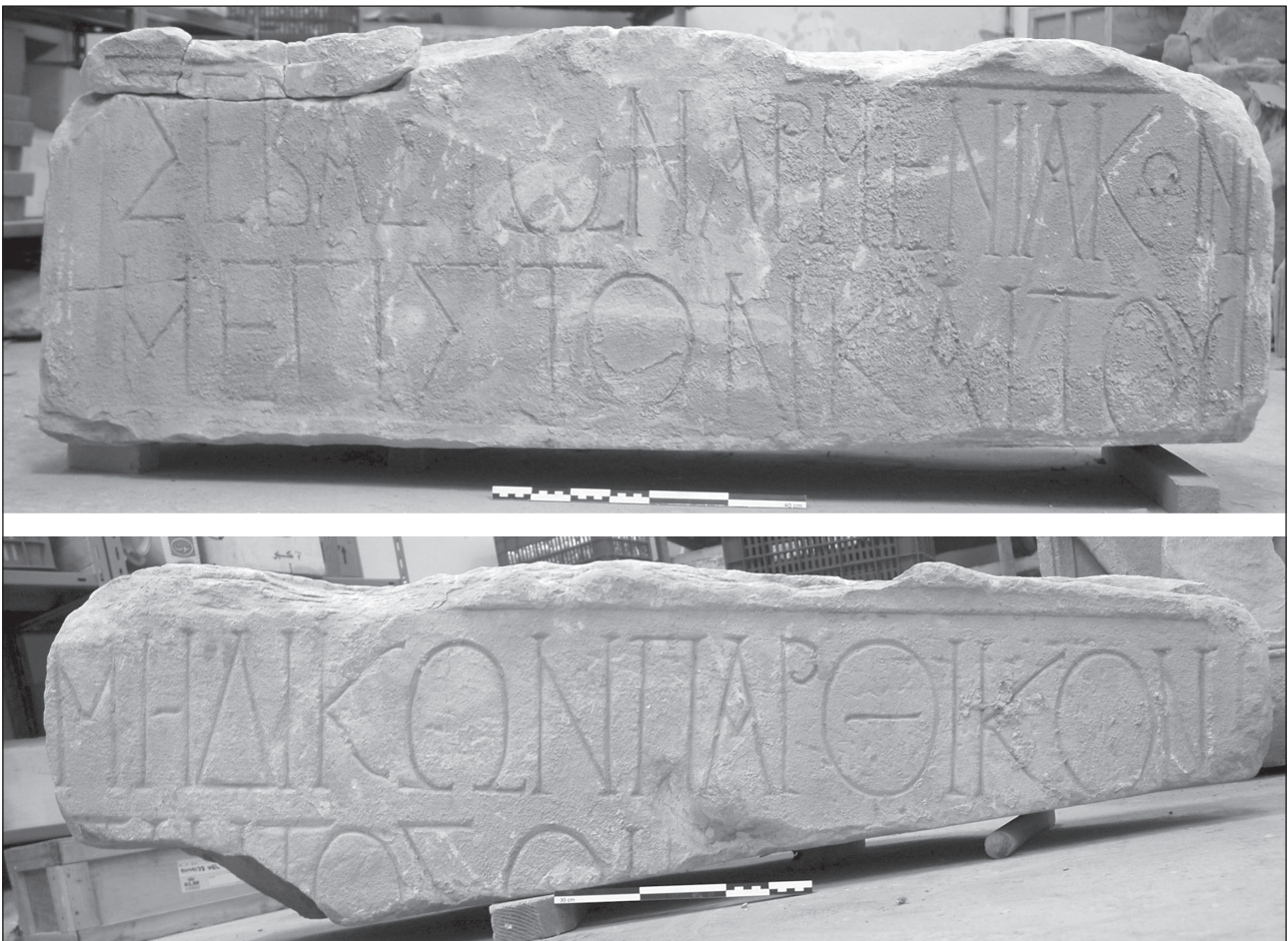


12a-b. Inscriptions mentioning two governors of Arabia, Adventus and Marcianus (C. Augé).

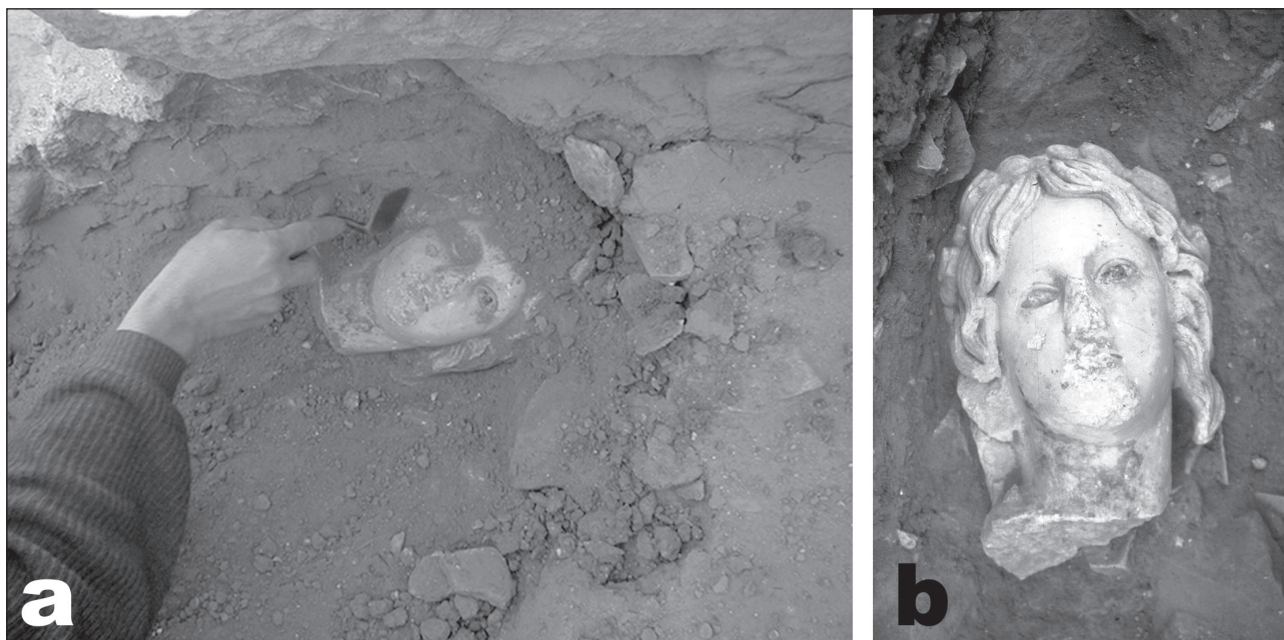
and bearing part of the dedicatory inscription of the monument, in Greek, to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (FIG. 13): they were first published by Dr Fawzi Zayadine (Zayadine 2002: 209-210; Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-63 Fig.7.10-12). Additional fragments of the dedication, which was inscribed on four blocks of similar size, were discovered later on, allowing reconstruction of the full text and thus providing a date of 167-169 AD, based on the titles of the emperors and most probably before the death of Verus. Dr Fawzi Zayadine also published a fine marble head of a statue (FIG. 14 a-b) (Zayadine 2002; 2008) with inlaid eyes and laurel wreath. Found in the same area, like other large fragments in marble and white limestone, it shows that this part of the paved courtyard was probably peopled with pieces of artistic merit.

Fragments of white marble belonging to

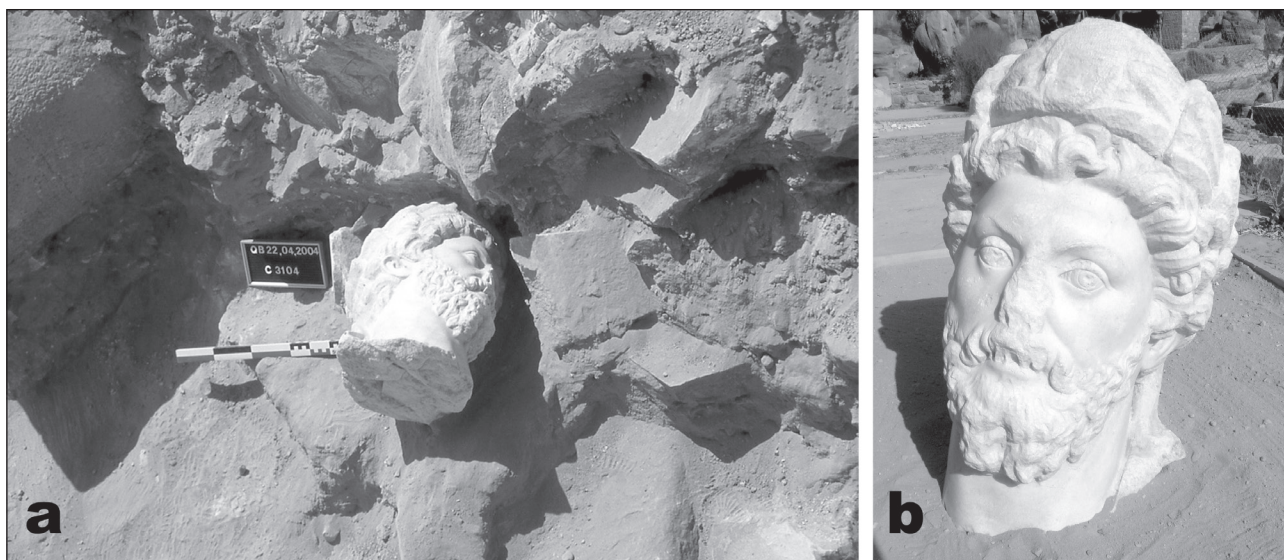
oversized statues were particularly numerous in the excavation of the central podium within the apse, the incurved walls of which appear to have been added in a late phase of construction. Finally, on April 21, 2004, a portrait of Marcus Aurelius was found nearby (FIG. 15 a-b) in a section of ground some 15 m to the south. Its face was in excellent condition, except for the nose, which was found separately and incomplete (among others: Kropp 2004; Moriggi 2005; Augé, Fontan, Roger 2007; Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 69-71 Fig.7.26-29). It seems very likely that the statue was pulled down in the first period of abandonment sometime before the earthquake. Insignificant pieces of marble, such as drapery fragments, were intended to be burnt in a lime kiln, while the head was probably put aside on purpose, perhaps in order to escape an accusation of 'lese-majesty'.



13. Two blocks bearing elements of the dedicatory inscription of the monument.



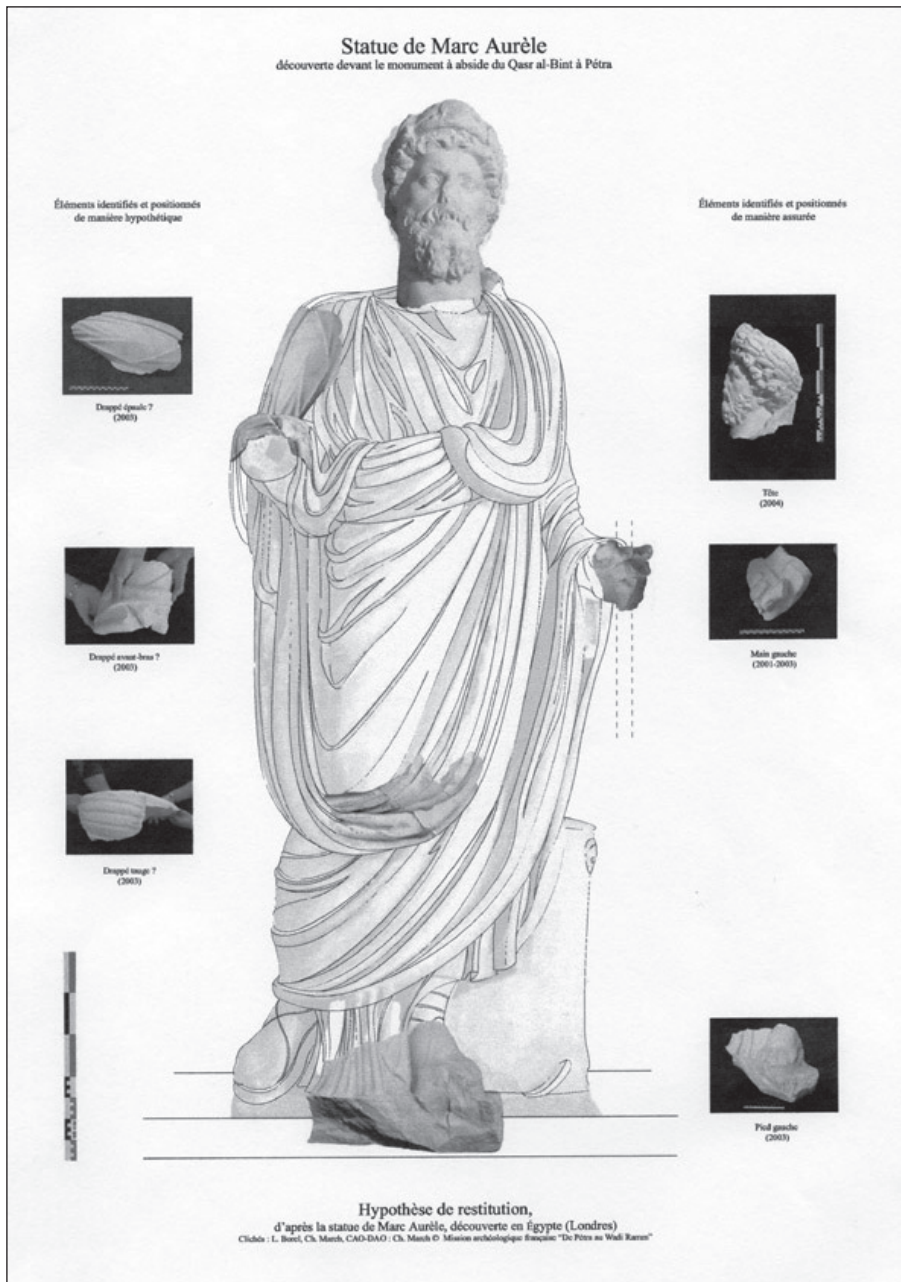
14a-b. Marble head found in front of the central part of the monument, at discovery and in the museum.



15a-b. Portrait of Marcus Aurelius, as found and on the terrace of the Nazzal Camp (L. Borel).

Members of the team, especially Chrystelle March, immediately began to fit the pieces of the puzzle together, hence a first tentative reconstruction (FIG. 16) of the oversized statue, some 3 m high, clad in a toga. The similarity between the portrait of Marcus Aurelius and another white marble head, which had been found in November 1996 in the bed of the Wādī Mūsā and thus in a poorer condition, was striking (FIG. 17). This second marble head was first identified as depicting Aelius Caesar,

the father of Lucius Verus (Kreikenbom and Weber 2002: 195-206, with doubts about the former identification: 204; Bowersock 2003: 19-25 Fig. 8; Zayadine 2008: 352-353; Augé in Vannini and Nucciotti (ed.) 2009: 67 Nr. 18; Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 69-71 Fig.7.30). Both heads are the same size, made from the same marble, show the same characteristics of workmanship, and wear the same high and thick laurel wreath. It is therefore probable that the two statues formed a pair



16. An attempt at reconstructing Marcus Aurelius' statue (C. March).

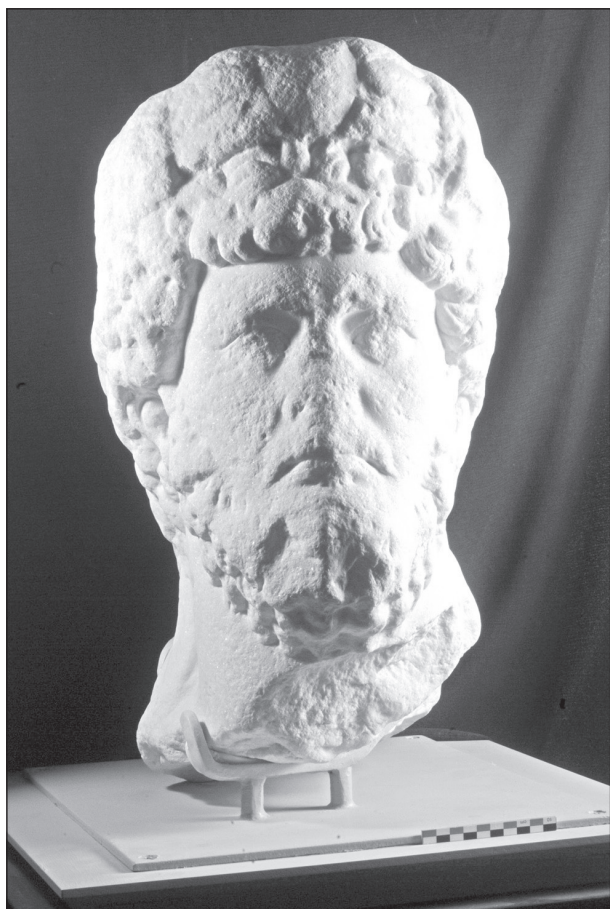
depicting the two reigning emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. Indeed, several other twinned imperial images of the same rulers are known from the same period in the eastern and southern provinces of the Empire. In the Petra monument, they were put up in the middle of the central apse.

A Hypothetical Reconstruction of the Façade

It is now possible to put forward plausible proposals for the reconstruction of the façade (FIG. 18) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 58 Fig.7.4. 74 Fig. 7.34). We still have no

evidence for the upper parts of the building but from the very few available elements, mainly a curved piece of an arch, it is very likely that the central apse was covered with a half-cupola forming a conch (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 65 Fig.7.19). The frontal arch might have been depressed rather than semi-circular, and the rest of the superstructure seems somewhat complicated: it may have included an attic with engaged columns or even dwarf pilasters like several monuments of the later phases in Petra.

It is easier to reconstruct the lower elevation on the basis of the southern section as it is



17. Marble head of 'Aelius Caesar', more probably Lucius Verus, found in 1996.

better preserved. The façade wall, which followed the south-north slope of the ground, may have reached a height of some 9.70 m to the north and 8.60 m to the south, including the uninterrupted cornice at the top. In the central apse (7.12 m broad at ground level) the podium reached a height of some 2.60 m. It probably supported one or two bases for the statues of the emperors, which were positioned side by side and formed the centre of the architectural composition (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 74 Fig.7.34).

The two lateral doors or openings (2.32 m broad and probably more than 4.80 m high) were framed by jamb pilasters bearing an architrave and a triangular pediment. On either side of these, a framed rectangular niche (0.54 m deep, 0.90 m broad, and *ca.* 1.90 m high) adorned the façade wall. In its lower section, on either side of the central apse, the wall was reinforced by

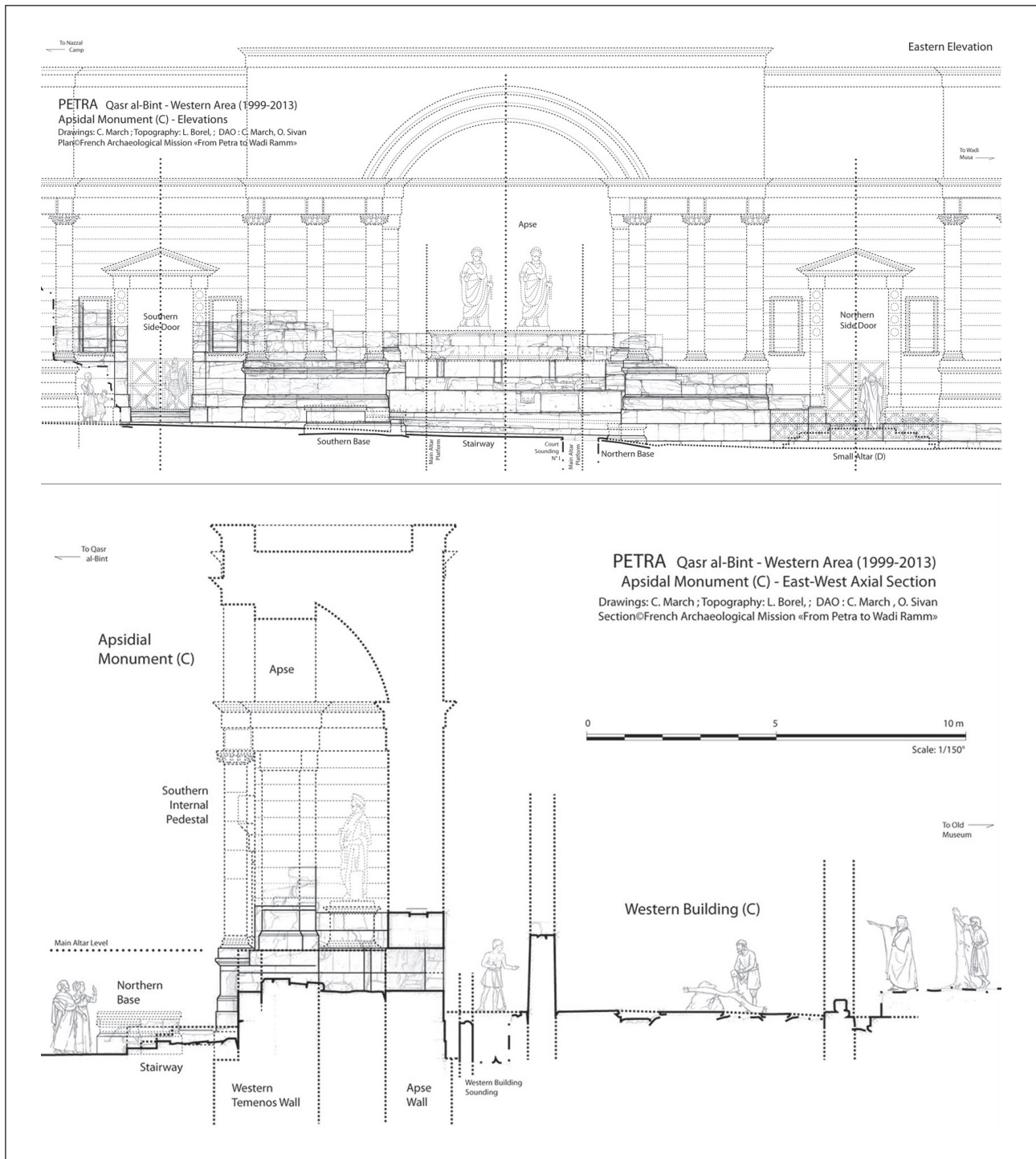
a long engaged pilaster (more than 5 m long, jutting out on some 0.80 m), supporting an applied order of three columns with Attic bases and Ionic capitals (comprising six drums, with a minimum diameter of *ca.* 0.60 m, an estimated height of 5.40 m, and a distance between the axes of *ca.* 2.20 m). Three superposed elements can be restored above the capitals: an architrave (0.60 m high), a frieze 0.41 m high) and a cornice (0.26 m high) holding up the central arch (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-65 Fig.7.9 and 7.18). At the south end of the monument, a part of a similar engaged pilaster bearing an applied order of at least two columns (its length is still unknown) was excavated. A symmetrical version may well have been built to the north.

This recent reconstruction allows us to assign more plausible, even likely locations to some of the inscribed and sculpted pieces found in their fallen positions in front of the façade wall. At the present state of both architectural and iconographical knowledge, all the figured representations seem to be related to the heavenly sphere, but in some cases their identification is uncertain due to the state of preservation of the blocks. For this reason the conclusions below remain speculative.

Pieces Fitting into the Reconstruction: Inscriptions and Large Busts

The four large framed rectangular blocks inscribed with the dedication (*ca.* 0.60 m high and 1.55 to 1.58 m long) fit perfectly upon the Ionic capitals of the applied orders, acting as architrave pieces. The continuous text written on the two remaining pieces, found in front of the northern side of the apse, does not include the beginning of the dedication, so these two blocks were probably placed on the northern applied order and moved some 12 m southward when the statues were pulled down.

Among the sculpted blocks showing figured representations, two main groups can be easily distinguished. The first includes examples



18. Hypothetical reconstruction of the façade and axial cross-section of the apsidal monument (L. Borel, C. March *et al.*, 2013).

carved in reddish sandstone; two of the remaining pieces being set in frames *ca.* 0.45 m wide and high. The second group includes larger busts set in frames of *ca.* 0.60 m and heads or other fragments of similar size that could fit into that group. In addition, some architectural

fragments of reddish sandstone show heads and foliage garlands, while a larger group of pieces from friezes, carved in a more friable white or yellow material, are sculpted with vegetal patterns such as acanthus scrolls, and *putti*, little erotes or cupids, holding vegetal garlands.

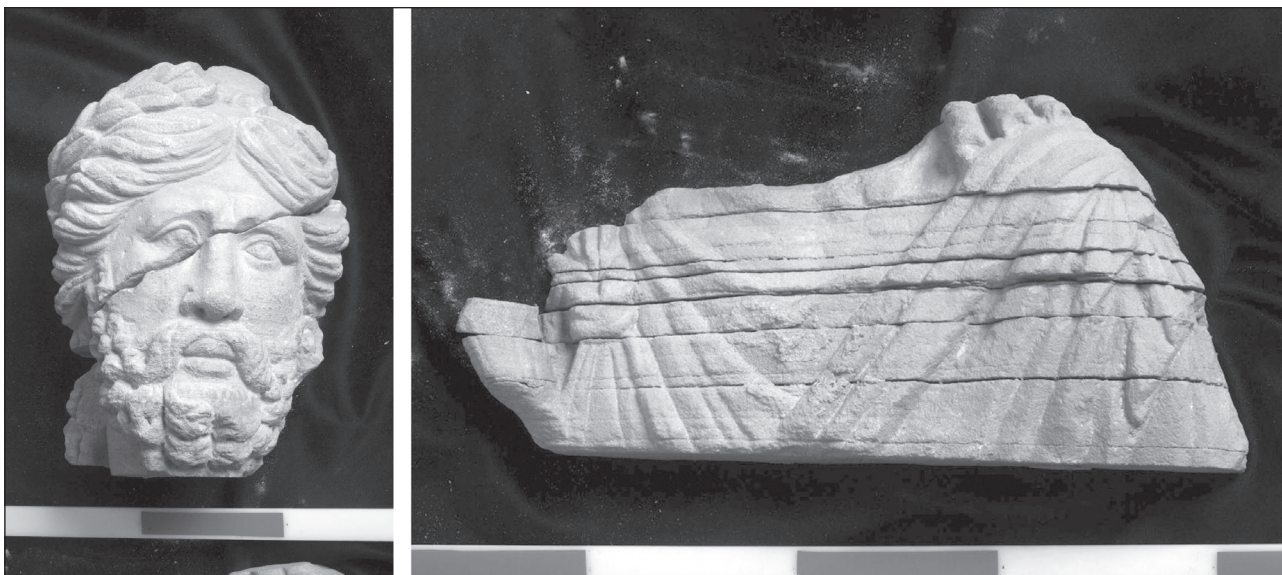
The high relief of a goddess bearing the cornucopia of Tyche/Fortuna (Inv. Nr. C133) and crowned with a laurel wreath and a polos, is carved in reddish sandstone (FIG. 19) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 66-67 Fig.7.21; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print). It matches fragments of another relief in poor condition, whose rear extent was broken off from an architectural block (Inv. Nr. C315+C317), depicting a bearded god in the guise of Zeus/Jupiter (FIG. 20) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 66-67 Fig.7.22; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print). He too wears a laurel wreath, and his

hair is arranged in the Nabataean style, with long ringlets falling on the shoulders. According to their dimensions (the remaining frame of the goddess was probably 0.45 m high and wide) it is quite possible that these two blocks in reddish sandstone were situated on the top of the jamb pilasters of the southern opening, just under the angles of the pediment. They might represent a pair of tutelary gods assimilated into local supreme deities, probably Dusares/Dushara and his consort al-‘Uzzā or al-Lāt.

It is very likely that the triangular block in reddish but friable sandstone (Inv. Nr. C316)



19. Reddish sandstone block depicting goddess with cornucopia (Inv. Nr. C133).



20. Bust of bearded god in reddish sandstone: Dusares/Dushara depicted as Zeus/Jupiter? (Inv. Nr. C315+C317).

bearing a beautiful bust of Dionysus in high relief flanked by foliage scrolls (FIG. 21), whose face is now unfortunately damaged, topped the same southern opening (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 65-67 Fig.7.23; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print). A similar element was probably positioned above the northern opening.

The larger busts are also sculpted in high relief but from friable white or yellow sandstone. These are set in square frames measuring *ca.* 0.60 m. We can identify a young war-god in armour (FIG. 22) as Ares/Mars (Inv. Nr. C31+C32) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-64 Fig.7.13; Wenning and Hübner 2004: 166 Nr. 14.3; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print) and which can be paralleled with the war-god on the ‘temenos gate’ (FIG. 23) whose

frame has a very similar moulding⁴. There is also a goddess with a knot on her dress (Inv. Nr. C302) who is probably Isis (FIG. 24) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-64 Fig.7.15; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print).

To these busts we can add pieces of white and yellow sandstone carved in high relief and found separately but which have corresponding dimensions and show obvious similarities in scale and stonework. These include a fragmentary head of a deity (C137+C142) more likely Hermes/Mercury than Athena/Minerva, as was first suggested (FIG. 25). This reading of the piece is based on the headgear which is not a helmet but a winged cap (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-64 Fig.7.14; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print)⁵. A second is a female diademed head (Inv. Nr. C1339) which



21. Pediment block in reddish sandstone with head of Dionysus (Inv. Nr. C316).

4. Also with the helmeted bust with a spear from the ‘1967 Group of sculptures’: Wenning, Hübner 2004: 165 Nr. 12.1.

5. The cap looks like the ‘helmet’ of the incomplete bust from the villa at az-Zantur IV, set in a circular frame and identified as an ‘Ares’: Kolb 2012: 242-243 Fig. 20.



22. Bust of a cuirassed war-god: Ares/Mars? (Inv. Nr. C31+C32).



23. Bust of war-god on the 'temenos gate' (M. Abdalaziz, 2013).

could well fit onto the bust of Isis (FIG. 26 a-c). A third is the upper part of another diademed female head with a hair knot (Inv. Nr. C314), and a fourth fragmentary male with a laurel wreath (Inv. Nr. C708+C1338), perhaps Apollo. All these elements might well belong to the same series (Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print).

The square frames of the preserved busts have the same height, 0.60 m, as the frames of the long rectangular blocks inscribed with the

dedication. They must have been placed together in a row alternating above the columns of the applied orders on either side of the apse. The average distance between their axes (2.20 m) exactly equals the length of an inscribed block (1.58 m) plus the width of a block bearing a bust (0.62 m). But now it is impossible to assign any precise location in this row to each individual figure. The reconstruction work is even more hopeless, if not desperate, if we consider the number of fragments carved in various kinds



24. Bust of Isis (Inv. Nr. C302).



25. Head of 'Hermes/Mercury' with winged cap (Inv. Nr. C137+C142).



26a-c. Other fragments of divine heads:

- a. Female head, perhaps Isis (Inv. Nr.C1339).
- b. Top of female head with hair-knot (Inv. Nr. C314).
- c. Male head: Apollo? (Inv. Nr. C708+C1339).

of material, including limestone, some of them might well come from the decoration of the Qaṣr al-Bint itself.

Smaller heads and vegetal patterns: comparisons with other monuments

There were also a few smaller heads, about 0.10 m to 0.12 m wide. The identification of the figures is difficult. They may have been broken off from architectural elements, like the example shown in figure 27, carved in reddish sandstone with a head punctuating a pomegranate garland (Inv. Nr. C709) (Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print) and which almost surely belongs to the imperial monument (FIG. 27). Judging from the number of other small fragments which came to light (e.g. Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 62-68 Fig.7.16-17), it is very likely that such vegetal patterns played a great part in the

decoration, probably covering the friezes and jamb pilasters.

Inspiration for the monument and its decorative repertoire, most likely comes from the ‘temenos gate’, which is thought to date back to the early second century AD, soon after the Roman annexation (FIG. 28). The pilasters of its central opening are adorned on their eastern face with two vertical rows of panels, alternating busts and vegetal motives including scrolls. Some features, such as the mouldings of the frames, closely resemble the ones on the apsidal monument, while others, such as the position of busts within the composition and the carving and stonework, are quite different.

The excavation of the imperial monument also brought to light a number of fragmentary frieze blocks, mostly in poor condition as they were carved in a friable white or yellow



27. Architectural piece of a frieze with head and pomegranate garland (Inv. Nr. C709).



28. Busts and vegetal motives on the ‘temenos gate’ (M. Abdalaziz, 2013).



29. Fragment of a frieze from the apsidal monument (Inv. Nr. C315): Erotes/Cupids (*putti*) holding garlands (A. Pelle).

sandstone. They are sculpted with vegetal motifs, including acanthus scrolls, and sometimes with little winged erotes/cupids (such as Inv. Nr. C315) holding vegetal garlands with pomegranates (FIG. 29) (Augé *et al.* in Tholbecq (ed.) 2014: 66-67 Fig.7.25; Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print). Some of them seem to have fallen down from lofty places on the façade. This iconographical theme is a recurring one in Petra, especially in the ‘temenos’ area of the Qaşr al-Bint where a lot of figured blocks were found at various places, such as the elements of a frieze reconstructed for the Cincinnati exhibition (FIG. 30). A larger block with a similar representation was found at Umm al-Biyara (FIG. 31): remarking on that beautiful piece, Stephan Schmid pointed out that such an ‘Erotic’ iconography, which



30. Reconstructed frieze with Erotes/Cupids, from the temenos area.



31. *Putto* and garland: element of frieze from Umm al-Biyara (S.G. Schmid).

has often been related to the Roman period, may well have its origins in the Nabataean royal ideology (Schmid 2012: 266-273 Fig. 4.8-9.10). As a confirmation, let's note that the same theme, erotes, cupids or *putti* holding vegetal garlands, already occurred in the decoration of the Qaşr al-Bint itself, as we may infer from a few scattered remains, such as stuccoed panels (two at least) in the *aedicula* under the portico of the rear wall and a small stone head of a cupid, perhaps broken off from a column capital (Zayadine *et al.* 2003: 95 and 222 Fig.99). We cannot exclude other possible representations of similar figures or scenes in the luxuriant painted and stuccoed decoration within the temple, but almost nothing of it has been found.

A number of carved stone elements were found in front of the apsidal monument, near the north-west corner of the temple. A destruction level was excavated there, linked with the fire which made the roofing of the temple collapse, perhaps in the late 3rd century

AD. Considering their find-places in the mass of fallen blocks, these pieces surely belonged to the upper parts of the Qaşr al-Bint and not the imperial monument. Some fragments are quite puzzling, such as the lower part of a male head with a moustache (FIG. 32) which is reminiscent of Hellenistic representations of Gaulish or Barbarian prisoners. Some large blocks of reddish sandstone showing vegetal patterns (FIG. 33) probably fell from the cornice of the temple. From its frieze, there are additional fragments of triglyphs and an incomplete medallion with a male bust (FIG. 34 a-c). It has the same diameter as the well-known example with a god, probably 'Helios', found in 1962 near the north-east corner of the temple where it had probably fallen from the frieze of the eastern wall⁶. Like similar examples found in Petra, such as the piece from az-Zantur IV (Basile 2002), there is little doubt that the new medallion from the Qaşr al-Bint depicted a god, though its head is missing and we have no precise clue to identification.

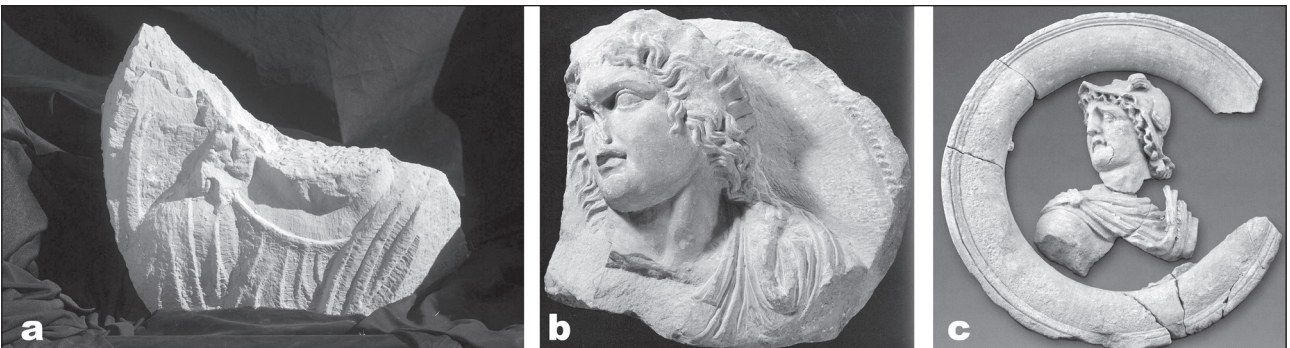
6. Decoration themes at Qaşr al-Bint: Zayadine *et al.* 2003: mainly 45-75. 93-95 Fig. p.214-218. 222.



32. Lower part of male head with moustache, found in the excavation of the imperial monument, from the decoration of the Qaşr al-Bint? (A. Pelle).



33. Block with vegetal pattern found in the excavation of the imperial monument, fallen from the cornice of the Qaşr al-Bint (A. Pelle).



34a-c. a. Stone disc with male bust found in the excavation of the imperial monument, from a metope of the Qaşr al-Bint (A. Pelle).
 b. Metope showing Helios' bust.
 c. Medallion bust from az-Zantur IV.

An Iconographical Programme?

The apsidal monument had a high façade which blocked the perspective at the western end of the sanctuary and looked like a *scaenae frons*, a stage wall. Like many other buildings of the Antonine period it was animated by various visual effects, mainly contrasts of shadows and colour, and by an intricate combination of vegetal and figured elements in its decoration. Its ultimate function was to glorify the emperors, whose oversized statues in white marble sheltered under the apse and were theatrically set in the centre of the composition. If their pedestals reached a height of 1.50 m above the podium, they could have been seen at a distance of 150 m over the stairs of the great altar by any person entering the ‘temenos’ through the monumental gate.

The apsidal building in Petra is part of a group of edifices all built in the same period and by the same governors, Marcianus and Adventus, in honour of the co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. As far as we know both imperial legates are mentioned here for the first time at Petra, but several inscriptions from Bostra, the edification of the temple on the citadel at Amman, the higher temple of Zeus at Jerash, and the temple of the ‘Thamudians’ at Ruwwafa, all point to an intensive campaign of imperial propaganda, that was marked by the erection of monuments of cultic character, several of them being additions to, or embellishments of sanctuaries that already existed. It could be that the decoration of the apsidal building was conceived of and carried out according to the same inspiration, focusing on imperial glory. We should not be misled by the common use of the expression ‘imperial cult’, which implies the existence of an organization, including priests and attendants, not yet attested to at Petra⁷. In such a monument, ‘deifying’ the emperors may have simply meant placing their names and their statues in a divine background, under the

protection of the main gods, a way of greeting them in the heavenly world.

It is therefore very likely that any other ‘human’ figures, such as statues of the governor or of the magistrate, were probably erected separately from the apsidal monument, either in front of the façade or beside it. The only images to be integrated into the decoration of the imperial monument were borrowed from a divine or mythological repertoire, depicting gods, goddesses and heavenly creatures. The little erotes, cupids or *putti* displayed among luxuriant foliage on the apsidal façade, as on other monuments of the sanctuary, were probably concrete expressions of what was invoked by gods and rulers: fertility, prosperity and happiness. In spite of differences in craftsmanship and style, inspiration of this nature might well have been modelled on the abundant decoration of the nearby Nabataean temple, and similar conclusions can be arrived at from the analysis of its very few remaining elements, whether internal or external, carved, stuccoed or painted. It is very likely that the same themes of political propaganda expressed in religious iconography were also expressed in the decoration of other buildings in the sanctuary.

Considering all the evidence together it is very likely that the entire decorative repertoire can be attributed to one local workshop as many similarities can be observed in the treatment of the faces, of the hair and eyes of the sculptures, whether in marble or in reddish or white sandstone (Augé and Linant de Bellefonds in print). Though, we have no evidence for a more precise ‘iconographical programme’ we can assume that in the central part of the façade there were at least six large busts of deities carved in white sandstone, three on each side of the apse, disposed in a row about one meter above the heads of the emperors’ statues and punctuating the written enumeration of their

7. Epigraphical evidence of a consecration of the Qasr al-Bint to the emperors is quite uncertain and questionable: Sartre 1993: 49, 57-58 Nr. 25.

names and titles. It is unlikely that a seventh bust, would have been placed on the arch above the apse but some sculpted pieces may also come from the applied orders hypothetically reconstructed at the northern and southern ends of the façade. Thus, the row of large busts could have reached twelve in number. The most likely interpretation of the scene should be an adaptation of the classical pantheon, the ‘Twelve Gods’⁸, including deities such as Isis, whose cult was common in Petra (Alpass 2010). In addition, tutelary gods were depicted over the side openings, at least in the case of the southern opening for which we have evidence, and were incorporated into local deities, Dusares/Dushara. Though focussed around the glorification of the emperors, such an iconographical composition would well suggest a form of continuity with the Nabataean period and even the royal dynastic cult.

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8. Probably without any zodiacal signification as can be found at Khirbet Dharih: cf. Linant de Bellefonds and Villeneuve 2012: 343-377.

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