

## Visiting the Sacred: Continuity and Change at Jabal Hārūn

Although Nabataean history and monuments remain the main focus of scholarly investigations at the Nabataean capital city of Petra, a number of recent archaeological projects have contributed to a considerable expansion of knowledge concerning the post-Nabataean periods in Petra and its vicinity. One such project is the Finnish Jabal Harun Project (FJHP), which is concerned with exploration of the mountain of Jabal Hārūn, located *ca* 5 km south-west of Petra. According to Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition, the mountain is the burial place of Aaron, Moses' brother. An Islamic shrine (*wali*) dedicated to the Prophet Aaron is currently located on one of the mountain's two peaks. Remains of a Christian memorial church below the *wali* were described in the early 20th century (Wiegand 1920: 141-146; Lindner 2003: 177-204; Miettunen 2008: 34-38).

Of importance here is the ruined architectural complex located *ca* 70 m below the peak, on a wide, high plateau of the mountain. The site was briefly mentioned by a number of early explorers of the area (Miettunen 2008: 30-34) but received a fuller description only in the early 1990s (Peterman and Schick 1996). Extant ancient sources indicate that the site may be that of a Byzantine monastery dedicated to St Aaron. This is probably the same monastery mentioned in one of the Petra papyri (Inv. 6a, dated 573 AD) as "the House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron" located outside of the city of Petra (Frösén and Fiema 1994: 7; Gagos and Frösén 1998: 477). However, confirmation of this hypothesis would only be possible through archaeological excavation. To this effect, the FJHP carried out a comprehensive investigation of the site and its environs between 1997 and 2008. The project is directed by Prof. Jaakko Frösén and funded by the Academy of Finland and the University of

Helsinki.

The excavations exposed the remains of a Byzantine monastic complex (later 5th-9th / 11th centuries AD), most probably dedicated to St Aaron (FIG. 1). However, the existence of the monastery is only part of a whole spectrum of religious significance accorded to the mountain from Nabataean times until well into the Islamic period, not least because it is now apparent that the Byzantine monastery was preceded by a Nabataean cultic center. The great historical continuity represented by a site considered sacred by Judaism, Christianity and Islam is remarkable in itself and worth recounting.

### Site Description

The FJHP site (FIG. 2), which measures roughly 62.9 m north-south by 46.7 m east-west (at *ca* 1240 m asl), can be divided into four main components or wings situated around three courtyards (Fiema 2008a: 87-98). Most of the structures in their extant form belong to the Byzantine monastery, but the site contains more Nabataean remains than initially assumed. The east-central location is occupied by the church and chapel. The church is preceded by the entrance porch, or narthex, located next to the central courtyard. The main feature of this courtyard is a large, natural fissure or depression in the bedrock, which would have served as a cistern. Directly west of the fissure is a large multi-roomed structure – the so-called Western Building. Its orientation is clearly different from that of the Byzantine monastery into which this building was later incorporated. Its architecture, construction technique and associated finds of 1st-2nd century pottery indicate the Nabataean origins of this building. South and south-east of the central courtyard is a wing of rooms forming the southernmost part of the complex. This area of the site has a particularly complex architectural



1. The FJHP site following the end of excavations in 2007 (by Z. T. Fiema).

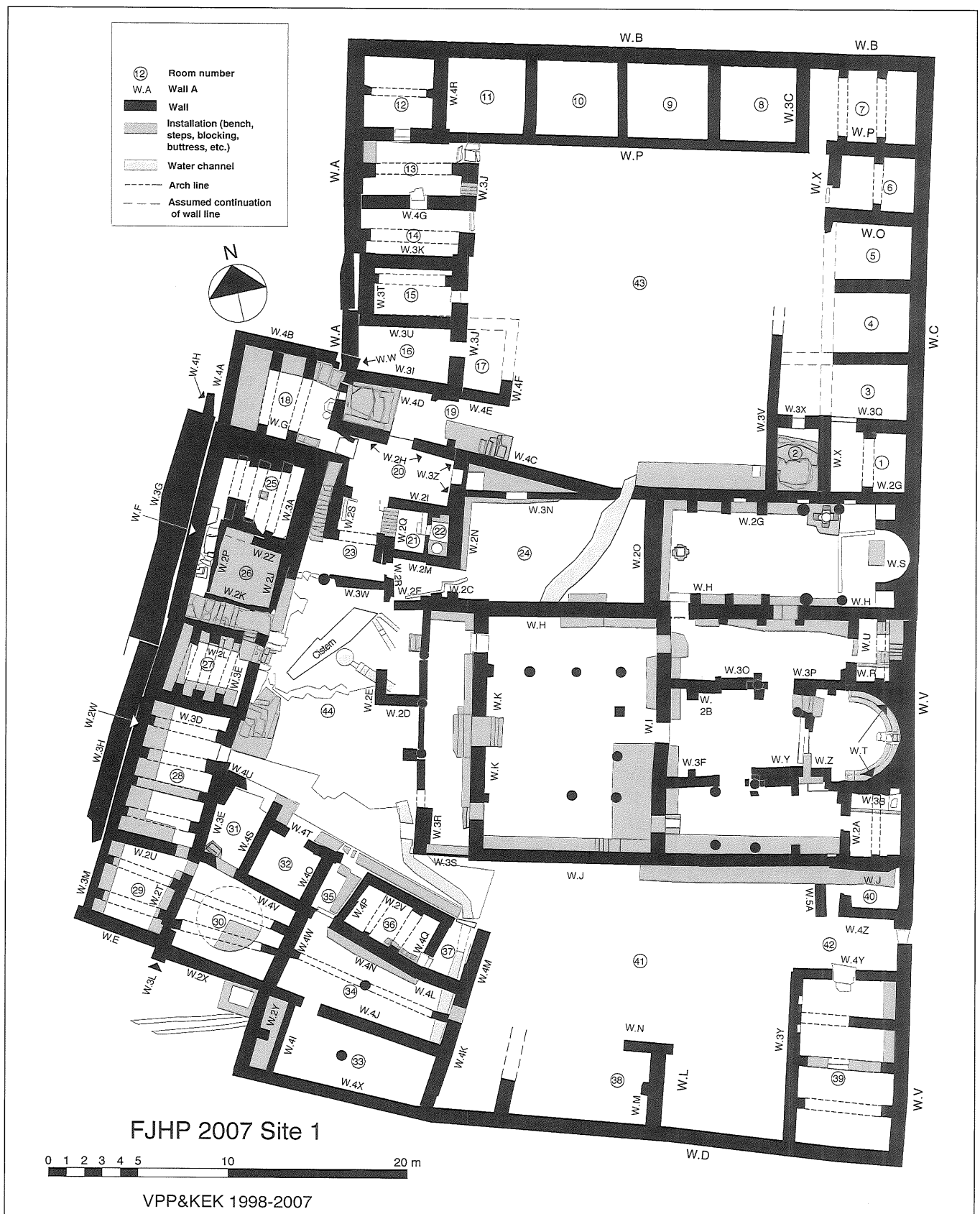
history that must have already begun in Nabataean times. In front of these rooms, a rock-cut cistern of Nabataean date was partially excavated. North of the chapel is a large U-shaped wing of 16 rooms located around the northern courtyard, which may be interpreted as accommodation for the monastic community and/ or as a hostel.

### The Nabataean Period

Jabal Hārūn is the highest peak in the area, attracting both attention and imagination, and clearly inviting comparison with the locations of other Nabataean sacred installations of the 'high place' type. By the early 20th century some scholars had already suggested that Jabal Hārūn may have been the location of Petra's main mountain sanctuary (e.g. Robinson 1908). Clearly, no investigations can be carried out under the *wali* situated on the mountain's higher peak. However, Nabataean pottery

was found not only at the FJHP site, but also on the summit of the mountain, suggesting that the *wali* and Christian shrine below it may have been preceded by Nabataean cultic installations.

It is significant that, in addition to the FJHP site, the entire area of the high plateau of Jabal Hārūn bears traces of intensive Nabataean activity. At the foot of the summit – where a path begins to ascend towards the *wali* – there is a large cistern (ca 20 x 4 m), probably of Nabataean origin, which is spanned by a row of 15 arches that support its roof. A small Nabataean cultic site, featuring a rock-cut niche and semi-circular enclosure, is located close to the cistern (Frösén *et al.* 1998: 493). In its vicinity, heavily eroded rock-cut staircases – probably Nabataean – ascend towards the summit. A second cistern, accompanied by elaborate rock-cut water channels, lies ca 100 m away in the cliffs south of the FJHP site (Lahelma and Fiema 2009: 203).



2. Plan of the FJHP site (by K. Koistinen and V. Putkonen).

To date, the site of the FJHP excavations has provided most of the evidence for pre-Byzantine occupation. This work has permitted a tentative reconstruction of what would have been a Nabataean sacred complex, which probably included a shrine. The core of that complex was the Western Building, built in front of the cistern formed by the above-mentioned natural cavity in the bedrock (FIG. 3). The two rooms of the Western Building, together with a large stairway, might originally have been a Nabataean shrine. The massive, well-cut ashlars, as well as fragments of cornices and other decorative elements found re-used in the later Byzantine structures, suggest that the structure was of monumental proportions and that its exterior was decorated. Another room, part of the Western Building in structural terms, was added to its southern side during the Nabataean period. The room features three arches spanning its interior and three benches along its walls. It therefore resembles a Nabataean *triclinium*, where ritual and commemorative meals associated with ancestral cults were held (Healey 2001: 165-169). Parallels are also found in Nabataean temple architecture, e.g. at Khirbat at-Tannūr where three *triclinia* were part of a sacred complex (McKenzie *et al.* 2002: 69-71).

Additionally, the Nabataean cultic complex would have included some rooms in the south-western part of the site and the Nabataean rock-cut cistern. These were all enclosed within a quadrangular *temenos* and were clearly focussed on the bedrock fissure in front of the Western Building. Significantly, this entire early phase at Jabal Hārūn is clearly on a different orientation (north-east-

south-west) to that of the succeeding Byzantine monastery (north-south). Combining all available evidence, it is therefore reasonable to suggest that, during the Nabataean period, Jabal Hārūn was the site of a shrine associated with the cultic infrastructure and was presumably visited by the pilgrims. The location is spectacular and the presence of the natural bedrock fissure, probably filled with water, at such a high elevation would concur well with Nabataean beliefs and cultic practices. In contrast to the monumental sacred structures in the center of Petra, which were built in the Hellenistic style, the shrine at Jabal Hārūn would have retained a more traditional character.

In addition to the Nabataean remains on the high plateau of Jabal Hārūn, an extensive system of bar-rages and terrace walls on the mountain slopes has been documented by the FJHP survey. To judge by the large quantity of Nabataean pottery found there, their earliest phase of use probably dates to the Nabataean period. These extensive installations form a deliberate system of water conservation and management associated with run-off cultivation. It was in all probability constructed and maintained under a single system of management, perhaps an estate administered by the shrine on the mountain's summit.

Although the identity of the deity worshipped at Jabal Hārūn cannot easily be ascertained, the mountain's long-term religious significance-beginning in the Nabataean period and continuing up to the present day – can be documented. A recent review (Miettunen 2008) of ethnographic data regarding the autumn pilgrimage to Jabal Hārūn, which



3. Western Building with bedrock fissure in front (by Z. T. Fiema).

included sacrificing a goat to the Prophet Haroun and was associated with prayers for rain, indicates that if the rains did not start on time, a ritual procession known as *Umm al-Ghayth* or 'Mother of Rain' was organized by the women of the community. The 'Mother of Rain' was a crude female doll carried in a procession that went around singing songs associated with the ritual. Although songs for *Umm al-Ghayth* are sung during the autumn pilgrimage to Jabal Hārūn to this day, the identity of the 'Mother of Rain' was already unknown to locals in the early 20th century. It can reasonably be suggested that these prayers and ritual practices are relics of far more ancient rites (Miettunen 2008: 42-43).

There is probably a meaningful connection between the Nabataean cult at Jabal Hārūn and the small sanctuary of Isis at Wādī Abū 'Ullayqah, which features a rock carving of a female figure dressed in a garment which includes an 'Isis knot' (Lindner 2003: 178-180). As the figure is turned towards Jabal Hārūn, it is possible that Nabataean pilgrims to the mountain would have performed cultic rituals at the sanctuary beforehand. The recent association of the mountain with crop fertility and the mysterious 'Mother of Rain' is suggestive of an interpretation featuring Isis as the deity of Jabal Hārūn. Attributes traditionally associated with Isis suggest that she may have been a goddess of agriculture and fertility in Petra, and would thus have been linked with springs, water reservoirs and grain. In this context, the natural fissure/ cistern on the high plateau of Jabal Hārūn, being the focal point of the Nabataean shrine, is probably a significant cultic installation. The presence of water on the high plateau of the mountain may have been perceived as miraculous by the Nabataeans, leading to the identification of the fissure as a sacred spring (Lahelma and Fiema 2009: 211). Although the association of Isis with a Nabataean cultic center at Jabal Hārūn cannot be fully proven, the possibility that the deity worshipped at Jabal Hārūn was a female associated with fertility and agriculture is certainly worthy of further consideration.

### The Christianization of the Site

Regardless of exactly which deity was worshipped at Jabal Hārūn during the Nabataean-Roman period, by the early Byzantine period it had been superseded by veneration of Aaron. One of the religious phenomena typically associated with the rise of early Christianity in the Near East, viz. the

transformation of a pagan cultic place into a sacred, Biblical location, evidently took place at Jabal Hārūn. Extant sources (e.g. Epiphanius *Panarion haer* II.51.22.11, 1980: 286-287; Sozomen *HE* VII.15.11, 1960: 321; Nau 1927: 186-187) unanimously emphasise the persistence of pagan beliefs and attest to the power struggle between the paganism and Christianity in 4th century Petra (Fiema 2002); the Christianization of pagan locations would undoubtedly have been very much in the interests of the ascending religious elite.

By the 4th century, an association of the Petra area with Israelite wanderings in the desert was well established. According to Eusebius, followed by Jerome, Mount Hor near Petra was "the mountain on which Aaron died near the city of Petra, on which even until today is shown the rock (from which water) flowed by Moses" (Eusebius 1904: 176-177; 2005: 165, No. 976). Apparently by this time tradition located not only Aaron's death, but also Moses' miraculous spring on the same mountain near Petra. It is not inconceivable that Eusebius' statement may refer to the natural bedrock fissure on the high plateau of Jabal Hārūn, assigning to it a new significance: of being the rock from which Moses miraculously produced water. Furthermore, it implies that the mountain was a focus of Christian pilgrimage by the 4th century and that the process of the eradication of the pagan cult of the likely female Jabal Hārūn deity culminated with its replacement by a well-known Biblical male figure: Aaron. This reinvention of the sacred location was probably aided further by the fact that, by the later 4th century, the Nabataean center was already in decline, or had even been abandoned as the result of the catastrophic earthquake of 363 AD which left a third of Petra in ruins (Brock 1977) and would also have affected the wider environs of the city.

### The Byzantine Period

When the Byzantine monastery was built in the late 5th century AD, its orientation was changed to north-south, with the result that the newly constructed church now faced east. However, the Byzantine complex was still clearly centered on the bedrock fissure, just like its Nabataean predecessor. Some structures of the original Nabataean complex were incorporated into the western part of the monastery, but the builders took care to eradicate all obvious traces of the previous pagan occupation.



The central room of the Western Building – possibly the main cultic focus of the Nabataean shrine – was completely filled with stones, as if to prevent the pagan ‘demons’ from emerging. This room remained completely blocked throughout the entire period of Christian occupation at Jabal Hārūn.

The most prominent new structures at the site were the church and the chapel. The Jabal Hārūn church was a large tripartite, monoapsidal basilica, associated with a chapel with a baptismal font, which would have provided space over and above that required for the liturgical services of the monastic community (FIG. 4). In fact, only a few monastic churches in the region compare in size with the Jabal Hārūn church (see Fiema 2008b: 426–429 for comparative examples), and most of these are memorial churches commemorating a specific Biblical event or person, and were clearly associated with pilgrimage (Hirschfeld 1992: 55–56, 130). The memorial churches attracted the attention of pilgrims and, thus, the monasteries which sprung up next to such churches would also have served the needs of pilgrims (see Macdonald 2010: 23–35 for Christian pilgrimages in Jordan). It is highly relevant in this context that the 16 rooms around the northern courtyard of the monastery are relatively large, almost twice the size of cells in some Judaeen Desert monasteries (Hirschfeld 1992: 176–7). These rooms may have served as monks’ cells, but their layout around a courtyard is more reminiscent of a typical Near Eastern *caravanserai*. It is therefore possible that the northern part of the monastery was used as accommodation for

pilgrims.

All monasteries built around memorial churches were of the *coenobium* type (Hirschfeld 1992: 55–56) and the Jabal Hārūn monastery is no exception. The terraced fields associated with extensive run-off agriculture, which were documented by the FJHP survey and were presumably part of the original temple estate, probably now came under the administration of the Byzantine monastery. The south-western part of the monastic complex features a series of rooms which might have served as locations for food processing and storage. Several basalt millstones of Pompeian type were found in that part of the monastery.

The monastery exhibits several phases of occupation interspersed by episodes of seismic destruction and remodelling. These are particularly well evidenced in the area of the church and the chapel (Mikkola *et al.* 2008). In fact, the church and chapel at Jabal Hārūn present a fairly complete picture of a Byzantine memorial structure from the time of its construction, through its heyday and into decline. Furthermore, the history of these edifices, as archaeologically reconstructed, reflects the life of an apparently vibrant monastic community at Jabal Hārūn, including their constant struggles with environmental challenges and their efforts and resourcefulness in restoration and remodelling, all of which stemmed from their attachment to the sanctity of the place (Fiema 2008b: 434).

### The Early Islamic Period

The conquest of the area represented by modern



4. Interior of the Jabal Hārūn church, facing east (by J. Vihonen).

Jordan and its incorporation into the Muslim state did not seem to affect activities at Jabal Hārūn. However, as stated above, during both the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, the monastery was damaged several times by earthquakes. Each time, the damaged structures were rebuilt or restored, including the mosaic in the narthex of the church. However, the mosaic also features iconoclastic damage, specifically to images of living creatures, thereby paralleling observations made in other churches in Jordan. In most of the scenes, living creatures were completely removed, with only the contours being left untouched (FIG. 5). The damage was repaired either by employing large limestone cubes or, more commonly, by re-using the original *tesserae* in a scrambled manner. These interventions seem to have allowed for the continued use of the church for worship, which suggests that the Christians themselves were the perpetrators (Piccirillo 1996: 183-184). Although there is no definite confirmation of the iconoclastic edict of Caliph Yazid II (Ognibene 1998: 386), recent analysis suggests that such an edict could have been issued in 723 / 724. Yazid's motive for iconoclasm would have been more concerned with the fact that Muslims initially used Christian edifices for prayer, with the result that these edifices had to conform to Islamic prescriptions (Bowersock 2006: 91-111).

It was therefore a matter of concern for Christian communities to hide or obliterate living representations as being potentially offensive to Islamic co-worshippers.

That Jabal Hārūn was frequented by Muslim visitors is also confirmed by a number of inscriptions found near the site. The oldest inscription, a fragmentary short plea to Allah, can be palaeographically dated to the 8th-9th centuries AD. A second inscription, dated to 690 AH / 1291 AD, refers to the mountain as a "blessed and honoured place" and asks Allah's forgiveness for all Muslims (al-Salameen and al-Falahat 2007). As for Christian visitations, the *Vita* of Saint Stephen the Sabaite reports that the monks who walked from Mâr Sabas around the Dead Sea during Lent and at other times in the mid-8th century stopped at Mâr Hārūn. Although Jabal Hārūn is far enough south that it would have required a detour of several days for anyone walking around the Dead Sea, Mâr Hārūn can reasonably be identified with Jabal Hārūn (Schick 1995: 314).

Al-Mas'ūdî mentions Jabal Hārūn around 955 AD as a Christian holy mountain in the possession of the Melkites. However, the archaeological record at Jabal Hārūn indicates that by this time the monastery was experiencing a gradual contraction. Access to some rooms was restricted by the blocking



5. Iconoclastic damage to the narthex mosaic (by J. Vihonen)

of doorways, whilst other rooms were abandoned. Following one of several destructive episodes in the history of the site, by the 9th century the church had been abandoned although the chapel may have continued as the main ecclesiastical edifice until the Crusader period.

### The Crusader-Mamluk Period

Although the Monastery of St Aaron was visibly in decline, occupation of the site continued. Quantities of so-called Ayyubid-Mamluk pottery or hand-made geometrically painted ware, which is generally dated to the late 12th-15th centuries (Walmsley 2001: 544-553), have been found on the north-eastern summit of Jabal Hārūn. This pottery can probably be associated both with limited occupation of the monastery as well as with pilgrims, who might occasionally have carried pots of food up the mountain (Lahelma and Fiema 2009: 205). Significant in this regard is the large midden at the south-west corner of the monastic complex, in which large quantities of parrotfish bone were preserved. Undoubtedly, fish was a significant part of the monastic diet during the Byzantine period. However, the stratigraphy of the midden indicates that fish continued to be brought up the mountain by pilgrims, as a ritual meal to be consumed at the site, until well into the Early Islamic period when that part of the monastery fell into disuse.

A Christian presence at Jabal Hārūn is again highlighted by sources of the Crusader period. Baldwin, later King of Jerusalem, visited Jabal Hārūn in 1100 AD. In the words of Fulcher of Chartres (1059-1127): "Furthermore we found at the top of the mountain the Monastery of St Aaron where Moses and Aaron were wont to speak with God. We rejoiced very much to behold a place so holy and to us unknown". Fulcher seemingly accompanied Baldwin and, as an eyewitness, he called the place the Monastery of Saint Aaron, which must therefore have been the monastic complex-or what was left of it – on the high plateau. Although not an eyewitness himself, Gilbert the Abbot (1053-1125) wrote about Baldwin's visit: "There, in the church which is called Saint Aaron's, where God had given his oracles to our fathers, he prayed, and the army drank from the fountain of refutation." A Christian pilgrim, Magister Thetmar (Thietmar), on his way to Sinai in 1217, wrote: "At length I came to Mount Or, where Aaron died, on whose summit is built a church in which live two Greek Christian monks"

(see Frösén and Miettunen 2008 for references and descriptions of all sources in this section).

From an archaeological viewpoint, occupation of the church and chapel, in whatever form, should be considered as having ended by the end of the 10th century. It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether Balwin prayed at the summit of the mountain, where the remains of a church have been described by Wiegand (*supra*), or in any of the still-occupied rooms of the monastery on the high plateau of the mountain (Fiema 2008b: 434-436). Significantly, clear signs of continuing occupation during the Crusader, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods were detected in the area of the Western Building. A sloping, composite wall, located directly west of the building, closely resembles the sloping fortifications (*glacis*) characteristic of castles and fortified cities of the Crusader-Ayyubid period in Palestine and Jordan. This particular type of fortification was not only used for defensive purposes, but also to reinforce against potential earthquake damage. Apparently, the western part of the monastery was the longest occupied part of the site. Even after the church and the monastery were no longer in use, pilgrimages to the Mountain of St Aaron would have continued. The strengthened Western Building would have accorded a degree of safety and protection to visitors at that time.

A description of the journey of Sultan Baibars from Cairo to Karak in 1276 provides some references to the environs of Petra: "On this mountain is the tomb of Aaron, Prophet of God, brother of Moses, son of 'Umran, peace upon them, on the left of the traveler whose face is unto Damascus..." However, the text does not provide information about specific buildings or a Christian presence, whether on Jabal Hārūn or in Petra (Zayadine 1985: 164-170). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that occupation of the monastic complex on the high plateau of Jabal Hārūn ceased soon after the visit of Thetmar, probably not later than the construction of the Muslim shrine (*wali*) at the summit in the 14th century. The site is mentioned by the Arab geographer Yaqūt in the 15th century AD (al-Salameen and al-Falahat 2007: 259), but after this references to Jabal Hārūn become exceedingly scarce. A few Jewish writers, including Rabbi Jacob (1238-1244) and an anonymous author, who visited the site in 1537, mention Jabal Hārūn as a site of pilgrimage (Schick and Peterman 1996: 478). Following that, Jabal Hārūn more or less disappeared from the his-



torical sources, until it was 'rediscovered', so far as the west was concerned, by Johann Burckhardt in 1812.

The results of the FJHP investigations emphasise the importance of the Jabal Hārūn site in the context of the history of Petra and Jordan. The Nabataean cultic center and Byzantine monastery appear to have been quite successful, both in terms of their longevity and as attractions for pilgrims. This site, significant for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as for Nabataean history and religion, existed – probably without major interruption – for almost 1000 years; as such it has produced a wealth of archaeological data and material culture remains.

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