

A Large Nabataean-Roman Period House at adh-Dharīḥ

During the 1980s and 1990s, an ancient house was excavated on the hill above the sanctuary at adh-Dharīḥ¹. Of the twenty or so dwellings discovered at the site (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000, 2008), this is both the largest and has the most interesting interior features. In 2007, the plan of the house was updated and, along with a review of its architecture, new information came to light which encouraged us to resume its study. This will be carried out over the next few years through analysis of the material and photographic archive held at Yarmouk University in Irbid. The finds from the excavation, which are currently under study, suggest that the house was first erected in the 1st or 2nd centuries AD, while material from the destruction / abandonment layers is no later than the 4th century AD (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000). New soundings will allow the dates of construction and abandonment to be determined more accurately, as well as shedding further light on the function of certain rooms and the status of the structure's inhabitants. However, even at this stage, it is possible to present an overall description of the building, as well as some thoughts on its interpretation and (hypothetical) reconstruction.

Description

The house stands on the north slope of the hill which overlooks the sanctuary (FIGS. 1 and 2). It is a compact structure, extending over at least 900m², which consists of three adjoining sections with two courtyards (FIG. 3). The walls are double-faced, with occasional buttresses, and are uniformly built of limestone ashlar blocks about 0.35m high. Wall thickness is relatively uneven, ranging from 0.70 to 1.50m. The walls abutting the hill to the south are preserved up to 4 m high, but most of the others

are only one to three courses high, with a few preserved only at the level of the foundations. Several rooms and the two courtyards have remains of paving, consisting of small rectangular blocks *ca.* 0.30 m wide, 0.60m long and about 0.15m thick.

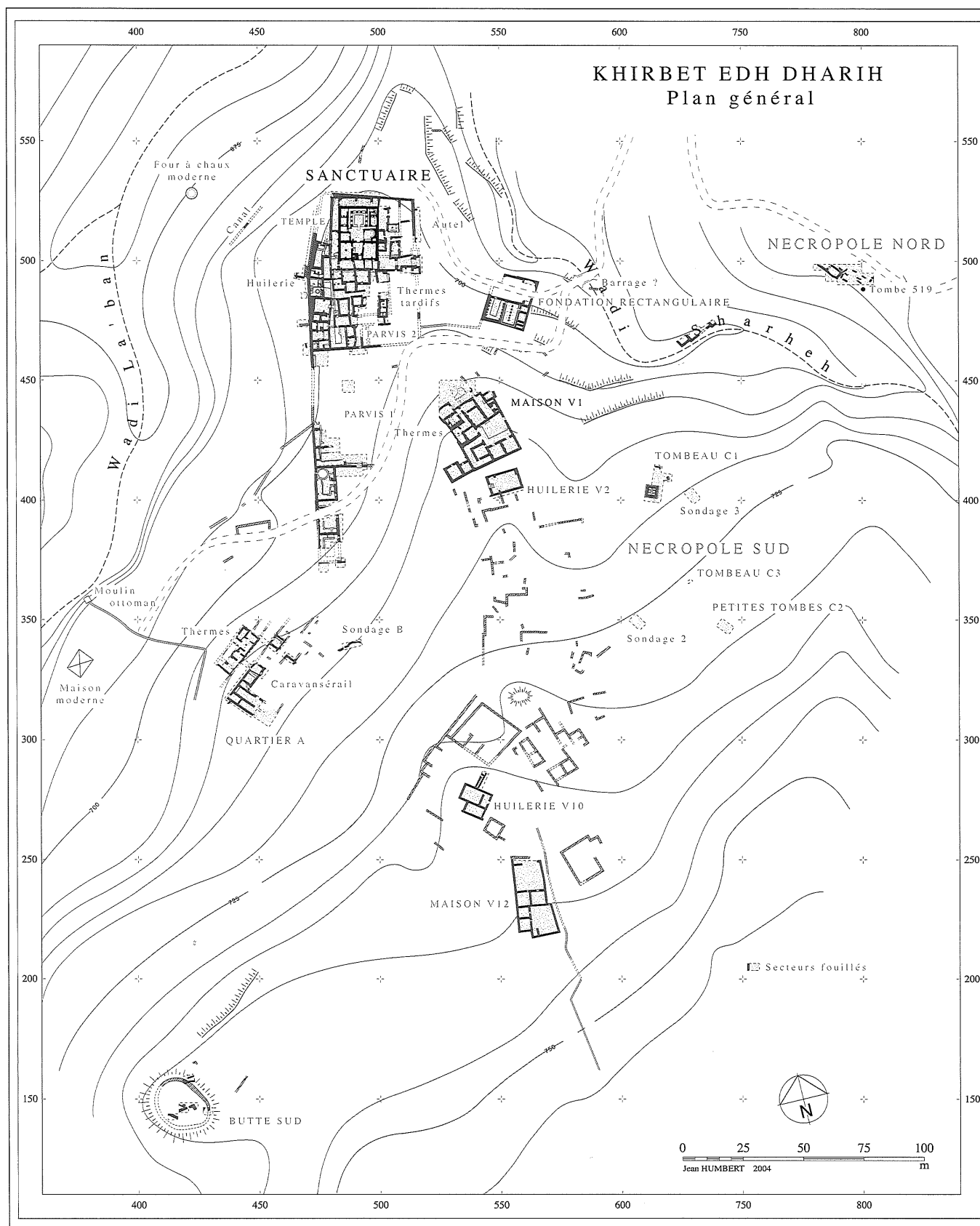
The first section of the house (315m²) is organised around a trapezoidal courtyard (A; 118 m²), which still retains some of its limestone paving. The only known entrance to the house is on the east side of this courtyard. The western and southern sides consist of a stone-built platform 0.50 m high with two small sets of steps in the north-west and south-east corners. To the south, the platform provides access to two paved rooms (B and C) of equal size (29m²), both of which have two pairs of arch springers as well as traces of plaster on the walls. To the west, the platform provides access via two doors to a central room (D), surrounded on three sides by a wide corridor (E).

The second section of the house (F and G; 73m²) is at the south-west corner which, because of its structural details, seems to belong to the house. Its floors are nearly 3 m above those of the first section, a difference in elevation that can be simply explained by the slope of the land, which has been terraced. It comprises two square rooms, a smaller one (F; 13.65m²) and a larger one (G; 27m²) to its west. Both can be reached by doors in their north sides and neither have any traces of paving.

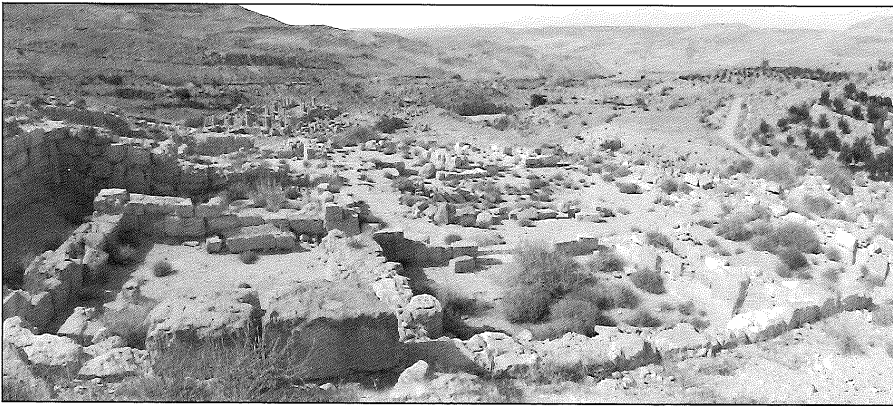
The third section (365m²) is different to the other two sections on account of its orientation and installations. It is aligned 13.5° closer to west. The main room of this section was probably the large, central rectangular room (H; 36.5m²), which has springers for three evenly spaced arches support-

¹ In 1984, François Villeneuve excavated room G; the rest of the structure was excavated by Professor Zeidoun al-Muheisen be-

tween 1992 and 1996. We thank François Villeneuve for his corrections and suggestions.



1. Plan of the site of adh- Dharīh (J. Humbert 2004).



2. House V1, the sanctuary and the hills of Wādī al-Ḥasā, looking north (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

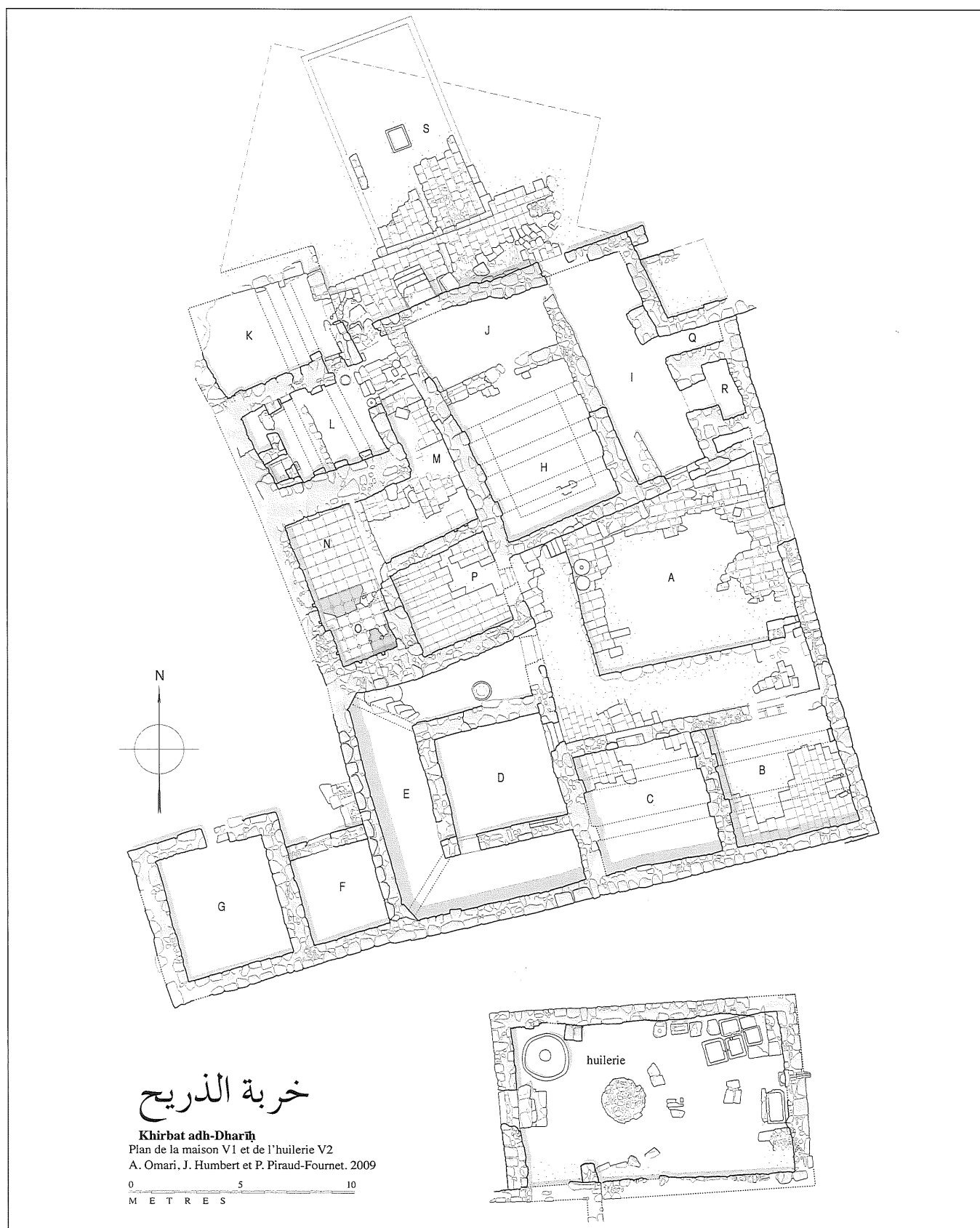
ing the roof. The north wall may have had three doors. This room cannot be reached from the courtyard, but a wide corridor (I) to the east probably linked the courtyard (A) with a small room (J), which could have functioned as a vestibule for the large room. Unfortunately, the presumed threshold between (I) and (J) has disappeared, as well as one between (J) and (M) that probably provided access to the western part of the house. The corridor (I) provides access to two small rooms (Q and R) to the east.

One of the most interesting installations linked to this part of the house is a large paved courtyard or esplanade (S), in front of the north face of the ‘vestibule’ (J) (FIG. 4). Only its southern part is preserved; the north part has been destroyed by gulley-erosion of the hill, but there are traces of several installations and of the original plan. Also, some of the paving and installations that must have existed seem to have been partly robbed out, which prevents us from determining its original eastern, western and northern edges. The preserved southern part of this terrace, adjoining the vestibule (J) and better-preserved room (K), is a paved esplanade comprising a lower central part separated from a higher surrounding pavement by two steps, *ca.* 15 cm high. A buried monolithic basin (1.04 x 0.84 x 0.44 m), the top of which is at the same level as the bottom of the paving stones, may have been a central feature of this esplanade or terrace. It is aligned with a channel which divides the paved surface in two. We did not find any remains of steps leading up to the house from the bottom of the hill, nor of walls or buildings enclosing the esplanade. The dominant position of the esplanade and its panoramic view over the Wādī al-La‘bān and the hills of the Wādī al-Ḥasā, as well as over the sanctuary *ca.* 100m lower down, might explain its presence here (FIG. 5). We refer to this courtyard as an esplanade or terrace (S) in order to distinguish it from courtyard (A). Its connec-

tion with the north façade of the house has been heavily damaged by earthquakes. These tremors were of such violence that they raised the foundations of the eastern half of the façade by the height of one course. Similarly, part of the paving of the terrace abutting this façade was raised by 0.75m and, along with the façade, was projected slightly forward (FIG. 6). There are two small, stepped blocks (at least 1.5m wide) on the upper part of the terrace, one abutting the façade of room (K) to the west and the other the façade of vestibule (J) to the south. The former leads to room (K), but its four steps are incomplete; the latter, the first four steps of which are well preserved, would have provided uncomfortable access to vestibule (J) and the large room (H).

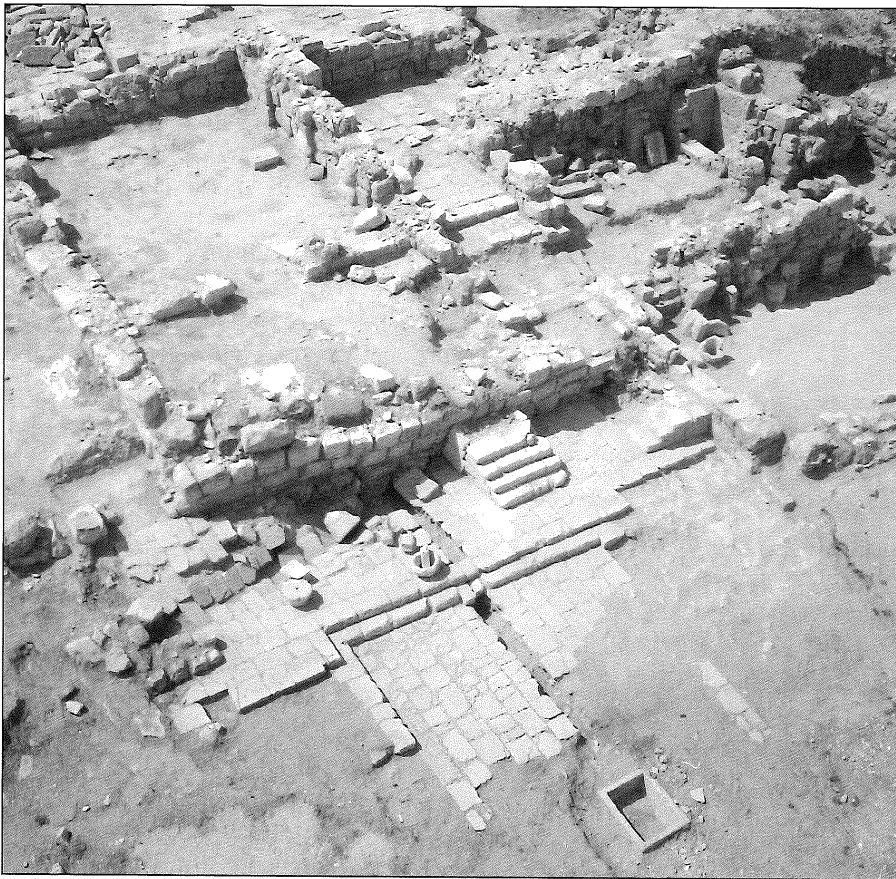
The terrace (S) can be reached from the western part of the house complex we are describing. This part consists of six rooms: two adjoining 20m² rooms to the north (K and L), one long, paved, L-shaped corridor (M) with two steps in its paving that ends at two contiguous rooms (N and O) and, lastly, a small, square paved room (P), which by its structure and orientation belongs to this part of the structure. However, the door that links it to the corridor (M) is carefully blocked, making room (P) accessible only from the platform of courtyard (A), which is associated with the last phase of the house.

The southern wall of room (K), which is better preserved than the others, has a door, in the thickness of which there are three steps leading to the higher room (L). This room also has three pairs of springers for arches that would have supported the roof; those on the south side are in a particularly thick wall. Two steps are integrated into the paving in corridor (M), running across its whole width and taking care of the difference in level between the northern and southern parts of the house. The north face of the wall separating (M) and (P) has two wide notches 12cm high cut into it about 1m above floor level, on either side of the central axis of the corridor. These notches are linked by a narrow horizontal

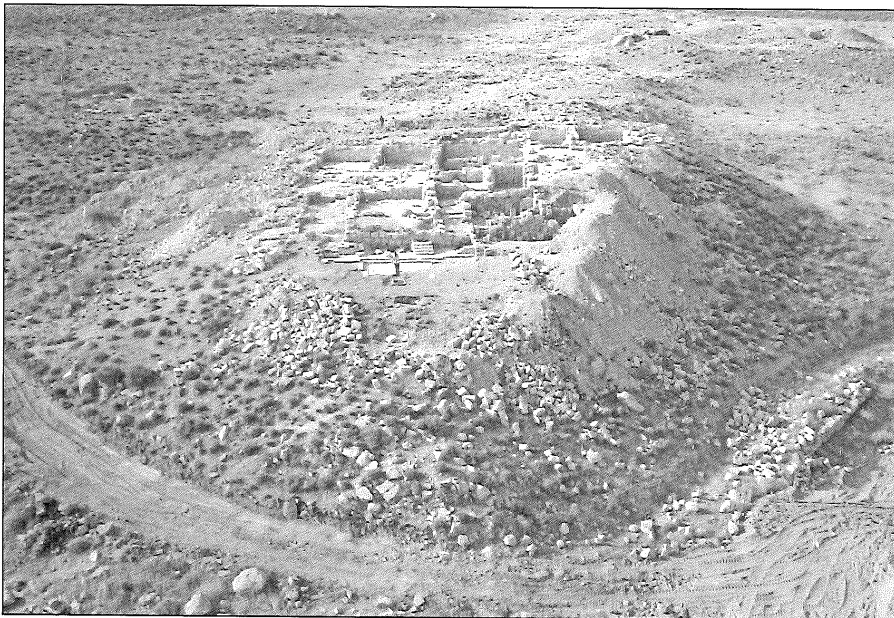


3. Plan of house V1 (A. Omari and P. P.-F. 1996 - 2007).

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4. Aerial view of the house, looking south; esplanade (S) in the foreground (photo H. Fontaine 1996).



5. Esplanade (S) in front of house V1 and the view to the sanctuary (photo P. P.-F. 2007).

groove, the top of which must have been at the height of the next course of the wall, which no longer exists (FIG. 7). These clearly represent recessed fittings for the ends of two small wooden beams that would have supported a small wooden table recessed in the horizontal groove

in the wall. Just to the west of the notches are the door-jambs of the doorway that was carefully blocked with facing stones, against which the paving slabs in room (P) are abutted.

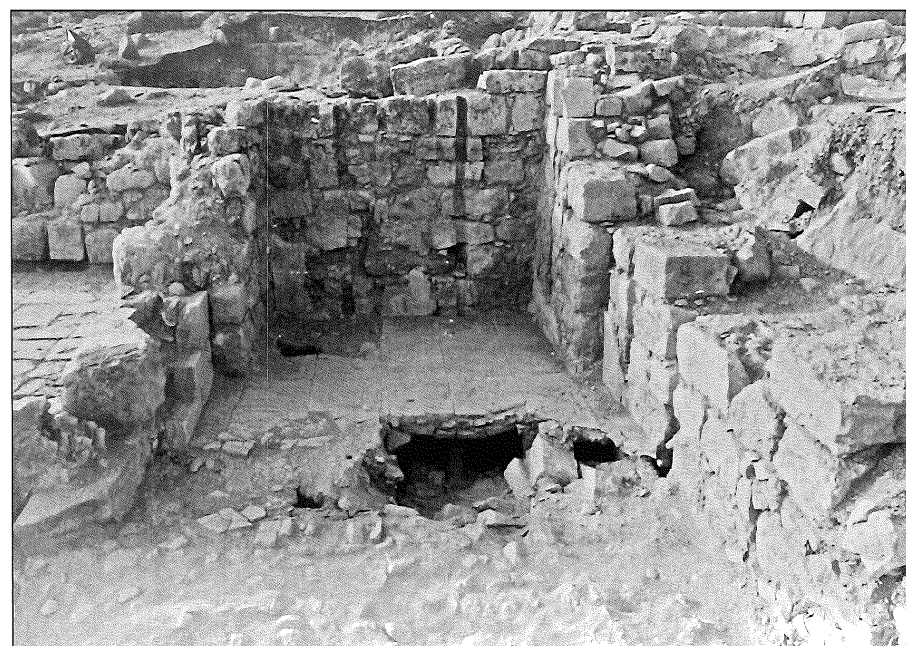
The southern part of corridor (M) leads to the small



6. Façade of room (J) and the upper part of the esplanade (S) damaged by earthquake (photo P. P.-F. 2007).



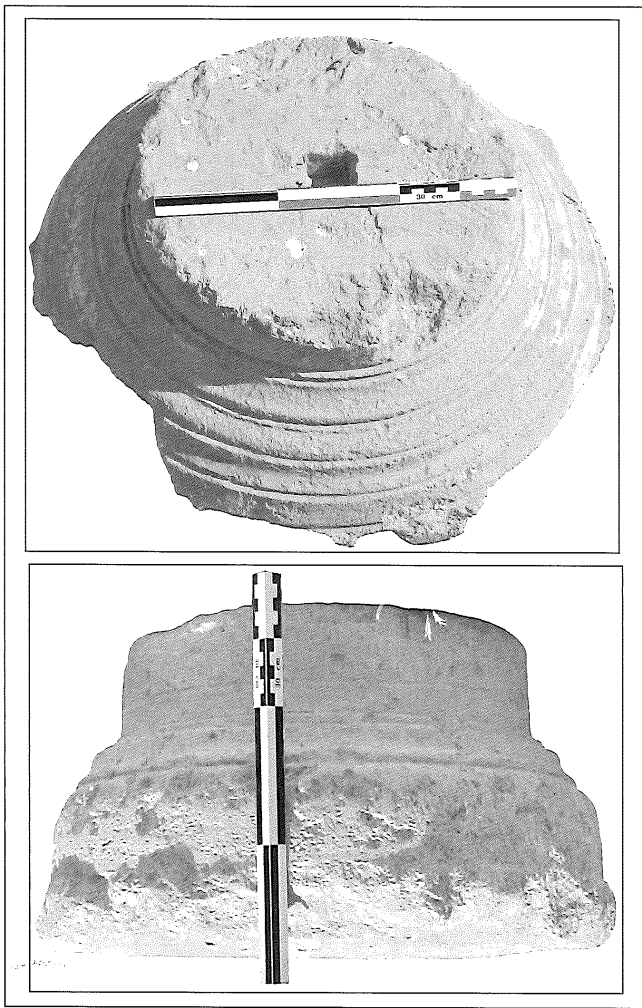
7. Corridor (M) and square notches in the southern wall at the back (photo P. P.-F. 2007).



8. Heated chamber (N - O) looking south, with hypocausts and chimneys for smoke (photo F. Villeneuve 1993).

room (N), which in turn opens onto small room (O). They each have an area of *ca.* 9 m². The wall separating (M) and (N) is almost completely gone; only the north-west corner with its plaster still remains today. Room (N) forms a single room with room (O); the imprint of the robbed clay tile floor is still visible (FIG. 8). This room forms a sort of alcove which becomes wider in its façade, in a T-shaped plan. The interior face of the western wall is cut by three vertical channels, characteristic of rooms heated by hypocaust. The underground part is well preserved; the small surrounding walls of brick and the remains of twenty *pilae* stacks of fired clay (0.17 m in diameter) that carried the *suspensura* of fired clay slabs (0.52m wide by 0.05m thick) are still *in situ*. Two other vertical channels flank the opening of the furnace in the south wall of the room. The furnace was fed from room (E); the stones from the part of the wall separating the hearth from the heated chamber have fractured with the heat.

Dispersed architectural fragments pose new questions or provide additional information. The base of a small column was found fallen on the paving of the terrace, along with a fragment of capital (FIGS 9a and 9b). Two column-drum fragments were found in rooms (J) and (K). A complete capital and two pieces of entablature from the excavations were stored 20m further west. All these elements could belong to a small portico which, given their position, is more likely to have been on the side of the terrace than of the courtyard. The diameter of the well-preserved drums, base and capital is 0.33 m and the height of the complete columns must



9a and b. (a) Capital and (b) base of a column (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

have been about 2.50 - 3 m. Courtyard (A) probably did not have a stone portico, but there might have been a wooden one, which would have shaded part of the courtyard and the domestic activities taking place there from the sun. Equally, given the present condition of the site, it is difficult to visualise a portico in front of the northern façade. Indeed, the well-preserved southern part of the esplanade (S) is obstructed by the stepped blocks and cut by the channel, so it is difficult to reconstruct the position of columns for a portico. The scarcity of portico fragments and absence of traces of walls or buildings around the other sides of the esplanade do not suggest the existence of a surrounding portico. Thus, we need to find alternative hypotheses for its location.

There is nothing to attest to the existence of an upper floor in this house, nor to a staircase. If one had to be reconstructed, to access the roof for instance, then we would have to assume that it was supported on the bulk of small rooms (Q) and (R). Several rooms were roofed

with arches, the span of which means that they were about 4 m high. The terrace-roofs must have been almost directly accessible from the slope above the house to the south and west. Unlike the excavations of house V12, a small house excavated on the southern edge of the village of adh- Dhariḥ, our building did not produce large, limestone covering slabs. Leaving aside the possibility that such slabs may have been removed for re-use, we are more inclined to think in terms of a roof of matting or lathwork, supported on wooden beams and covered with a layer of earth.

The surroundings and boundaries of the house are more or less known: to the east and north it is not attached to any other structures, nor does it appear to be to the south, where an alley or passage *ca.* 4 to 6 m wide separates it from a buried oil press. To the west, the house backs onto the slope where there are no adjacent constructions.

It has not yet been possible to identify and date the different construction phases of this house, but the northern half seems to have been added to the older, southern half. It is clear that, after the destruction and abandonment of the house, parts of its construction, facing stones and perhaps arch stones, and certainly some paving slabs, thresholds and door-jambs, were removed for re-use in domestic buildings of Byzantine and early Islamic dates in the area of the sanctuary below.

Interpretation of the Remains

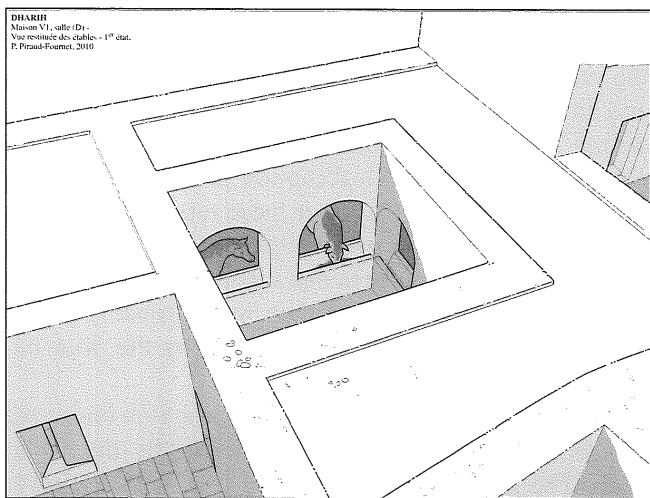
The standing remains allow us to hypothesise about the function of the different rooms. There are two complexes: one in the south, where all the rooms open onto the courtyard, which was probably for domestic use as attested by the items still *in situ* (*viz.* work-bench, cutting table, grindstones, basins, benches), perhaps belonging to a family and associated with living quarters. In the other, northern part, the rooms are inter-connected and have more interesting installations: a terrace whose design is structured around a central element, a large room that was perhaps a reception room, and a heated room on hypocausts. Together these represent a certain degree of luxury. The two complexes are more or less the same size; the southern one was perhaps intended to serve the northern one, and they were probably joined by corridor (I) and also, at one time, by the door between (P) and (M).

The only known entrance to the house is in courtyard (A), but there was perhaps another one by the esplanade. The layout of the courtyard (A), with its lower yard and L-shaped raised platform, is unusual, although it resembles an oft-used local house-plan characterised

by an L-shaped portico as, for example, at Mampsis (Netzer 2003; Negev 1981). The three large, square rooms (B, C and P) were probably living and sleeping rooms. At least two phases can be identified in rooms (D) and (E). Initially, room (D) was not accessible from room (E). Three blocks with a sloping surface still *in situ* inside the south wall, 1.10m above the floor level, most probably belonged to mangers, which would make this complex a cow-shed or more probably, given the height of the mangers, a stable (FIGS 10 and 11). Stables of this sort are well attested in the Near East as, for example, at Mampsis, Oboda and Sobata in the Negev (Negev 1988, 1981), as well as in southern Syria (Most recently, Clauss-Balty and Bodo 2009). Animals would



10. Rooms (D) and (E), probably a stable; remains of mangers both fallen and *in situ* (photo P. P-F. 2010).



11. Oblique reconstruction of the stable in house V1 (P. P-F. 2010).

have been kept in the southern and western wings of the surrounding corridor, which is 2.30 - 2.40m wide, with the mangers being supplied from the central room (D). In a later phase, the mangers seem to have gone out of use, a door was put in between (D) and (E), and perhaps smaller animals - possibly sheep and goats - were kept in room (D) which had a long water-trough standing on the beaten earth floor. The corridor became, at least in its northern part, the access to the furnace for the heated chamber (O) and, in its western and southern parts, most probably a store for forage and furnace-fuel. It is perfectly possible to assume that supplies were brought in through the roof, which was probably accessible since it backs on to the hill slope. The surrounding corridor (E) was roofed, but the central room (D) could have been open. The two rooms (G) and (F), which stand above this complex to the south-west, were also used for domestic purposes. During the excavations they produced a lot of kitchen-ware, a hearth and items such as a broken basin, which is still visible in the floor of room (G), and fragments of grindstones.

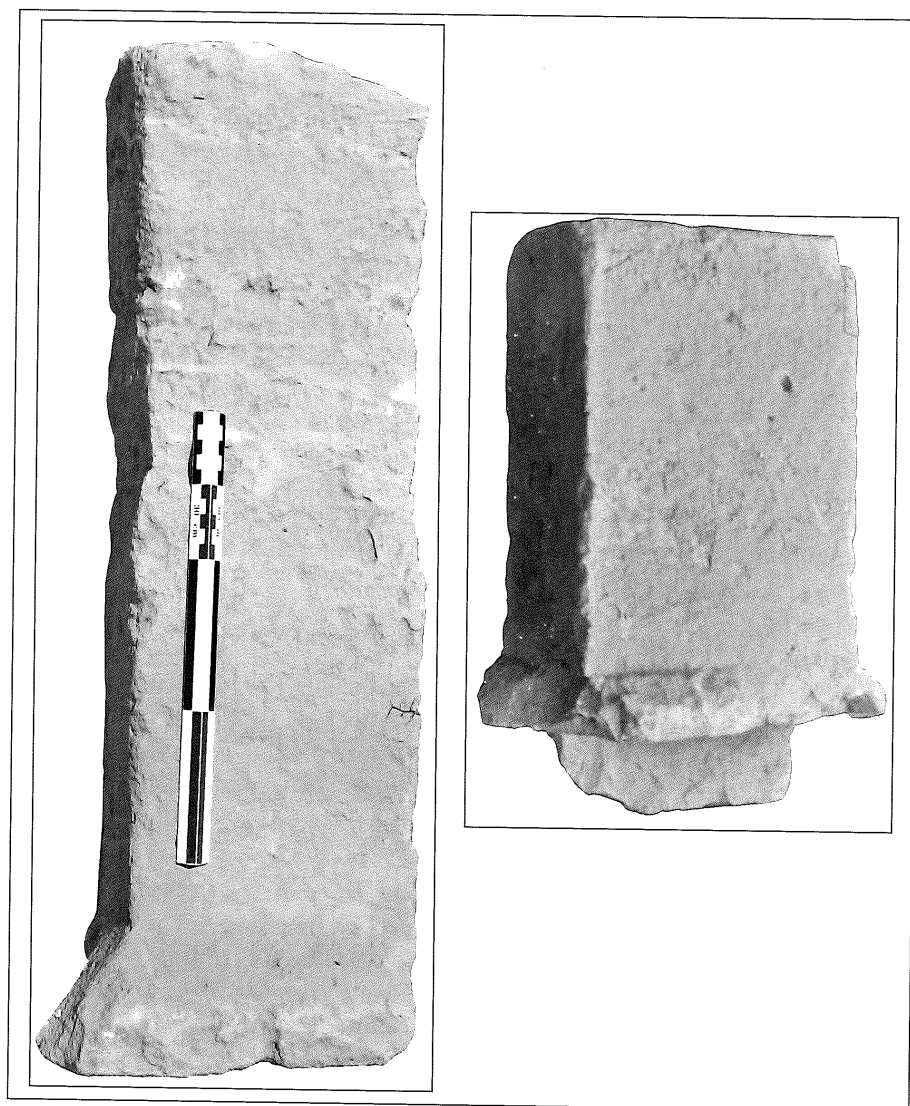
The northern part of the house, no doubt accessible from the southern part through corridor (I), is organised around three main features: the large room (H), the room with niche (L) and the chamber heated by hypocausts (N - O). It is tempting to see room (H) as a banqueting hall of the *triclinium* type, if indeed it had stone benches along the east, west and south walls. The paving in this room has almost totally disappeared but the position of the few remains does not contradict such an interpretation. It was approached from the vestibule (J), probably via three doors, two of which have completely disappeared. Its plan is similar to that of the *triclinium* in the luxurious Roman house built on the top of the hill at Sepphoris in the 3rd century AD (Netzer and Weiss 1994: 30-39), which is surrounded by corridors and opens onto a courtyard; the north part of that house was used for domestic purposes and has a cistern, service rooms, a bathroom and latrine. The poor state of preservation of the vestibule (J) precludes a description of its exact organisation, but the floor level is known thanks to a paving slab that has remained *in situ* in the south-west corner of the room. Its four walls are badly eroded and, as elsewhere, it seems that the door thresholds were robbed out. Thus, it is purely hypothetical to reconstruct a door in the east wall and another in the west wall. These two openings would have allowed movement between the two halves of the house.

There is no hint as to the function of room (K), which is accessible from the esplanade and in which a betyl was found. The betyl is aniconic, narrow and tall

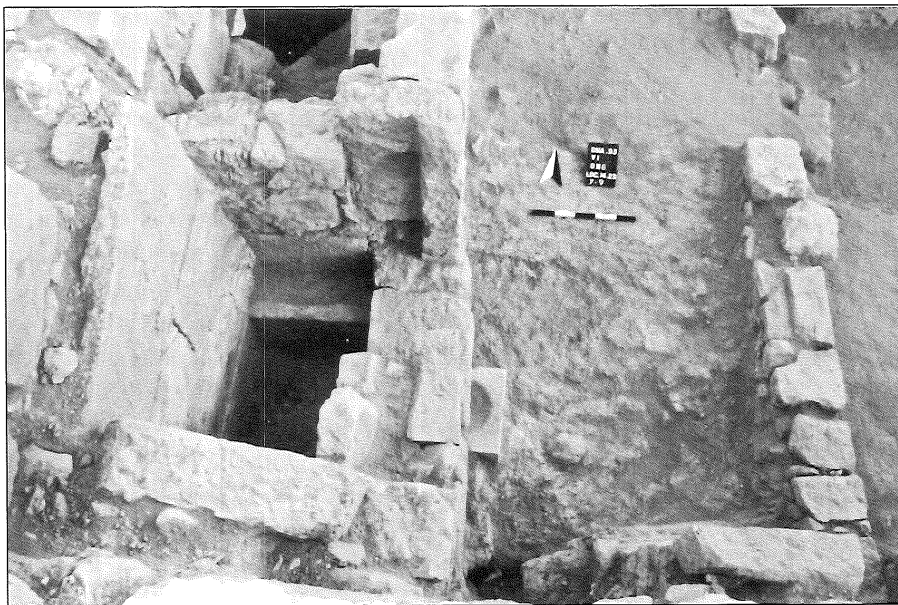
(0.69 x 0.19 x 0.14 m), without a tenon (FIGS. 12a and 12b). Room (L) still has fragments of a basin and the niche mentioned above (FIG. 13). Its lower part, 0.35m high and 0.60m wide, is narrower than the upper part and could have supported a shelf, probably of wood. The upper part is at least 1.32m high and 0.62m wide. Its inside face is made of narrow blocks placed upright and the façade is an opening 0.43m deep and *ca* 0.80 m high. Under the opening, a small round basin cut into a rectangular block directed any liquids into the lower half of the niche. This niche must have had a paved floor in front of it, about 1.60m wide and edged by a low wall on the east side. This installation was interpreted by the excavators as a possible wine press; the paving would have been used to tread the grapes, the must would have flowed via the small round basin built into the floor and the spillway into a receptacle placed in the lower part of the niche. Indeed, the niche still seems to

have some remains of a water-resistant mortar. The upper part could have been used to store the grapes before they were trodden. It is tempting to reconstruct a niche directly to the north, which could have served the same purposes or could have been used to ferment and store the wine. However, the presence of such an installation in the house, in the centre of a part that does not, at first glance, seem to have been used for agricultural or craft purposes, is surprising; other explanations and hypotheses for its identification need to be explored (FIG. 14).

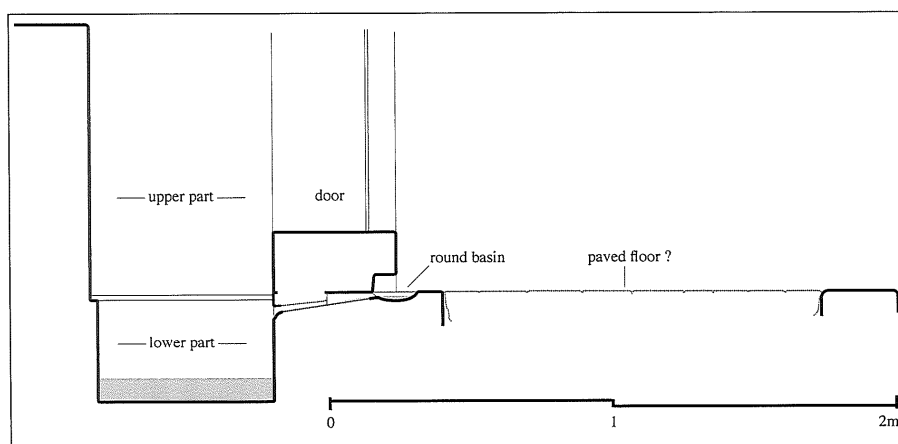
In the L-shaped corridor (M), leading up to the heated chamber (N - O) there are notches in the wall, mentioned above, which supported a wooden table that carried one or several unknown objects. In the alcove in the south of room (N - O), a floor of wide tiles was laid on hypocausts and heated; the front, or northern, part was also paved with wide tiles, but was not heated. The walls were covered with plaster which



12a and b. (a) Long betyl 13.001 from room (K) (photo P. P.-F. 2007) and (b) short betyl 8.242 from the esplanade (photo Y. Zu'bi).



13. Niche with round basin in room (L) (photo Y. Zu'bi 1993).



14. Section through niche with round basin in room (L) (P. P.-F. 2010).

hid the chimneys on the south side. We can speak unequivocally of a heated chamber, but there is nothing to prove that it was a bath rather than simply a room, for example. There are no traces of a basin, of hydraulic plaster or water channels, but it could nonetheless have been used as a heated bathroom as long as the water was brought in and poured using movable bowls or basins which have since disappeared. A cistern should be looked for nearby, higher up on the hill. Several more or less contemporary houses, including a fine villa at Wādī Mūsa and the houses az-Zanṭūr (EZ III, Nehmé and Villeneuve 1999: 62-71), (EZ IV, Kolb 2000; Kolb and Keller 2001: 319), also have heated chambers like this one; some have been interpreted as private bath-houses (Augé 2012 forthcoming).

In its general plan, the paved esplanade (S), consisting of a lower central area separated from a higher surrounding pavement by two steps, resembles on a smaller

scale the courtyard of the north forecourt of the nearby sanctuary below. It, too, comprises a lower esplanade separated by two steps from a higher surrounding part with a portico. The design of the al-Madhbah high place in Petra and the nearby courtyard of the sanctuary at Khirbat at-Tannūr (McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes 2002), with its two small steps, are also similar. In fact it brings to mind a *theatron*, as already noted by al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, although there are several installations that are difficult to interpret. The paving of the pavement and sunken esplanade is crossed by a small open channel, 0.26 - 0.30 m wide. There do not seem to be the remains of any lining, clay channelling or hydraulic mortar. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in spite of its patchy preservation, it must have supplied the central basin. This latter has no drainage hole. If it was filled with a liquid, it would have to be bailed out to empty it, but this is how the rock-cut basins are in Petra, for example.

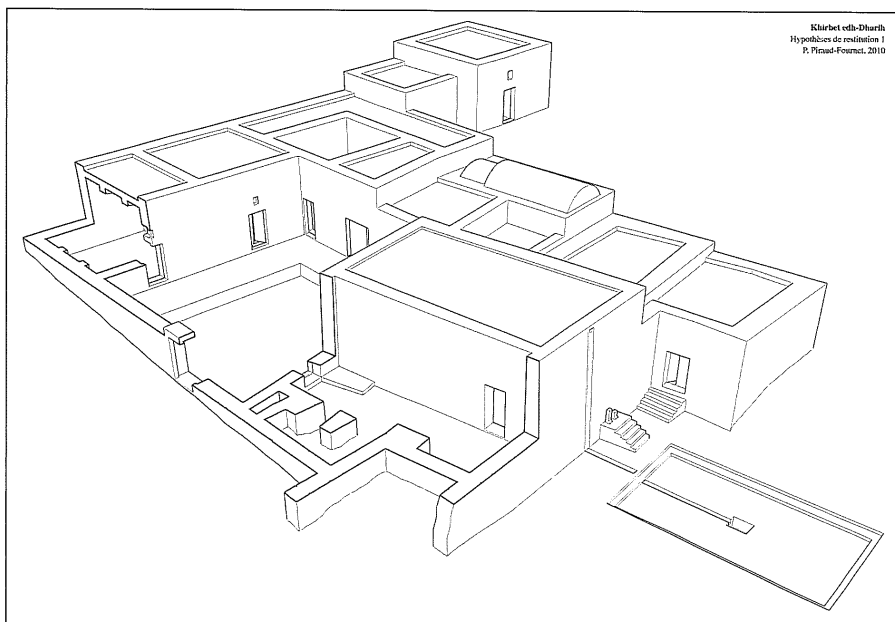
The southern end of the channel that crosses the paving seems to abut the face of the vestibule wall (J). It does not turn either east or west. Therefore, it must have been supplied from above. Perhaps a mortar gutter-slide collected run-off water from the roofs and directed it to this reservoir (FIG. 15). This plan resembles that of the so-called “Garden *Triclinium*” at Petra, on the high terrace of Wadi Farasa, which has been identified by Schmid as a complex for secular use belonging to a residence (Schmid 2003: 482, 2004: 343-345). It consists of a hall reached through a deep, rock-cut portico *in antis*, which in turn is preceded by a peristyle in the centre of which there is a buried, vaulted cistern. A narrow channel cut into the bedrock links the cistern with the portico (FIGS 16 and 17).

The discovery of the tall, rectangular betyl in room (K), described above, and another shorter, flatter betyl with a tenon (0.36 x 0.19 x 0.12 m) (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000: Bloc 8.242) (FIG. 12b) on the esplanade, suggest that religious services may have taken place on this terrace. We might also suggest that, for example, an altar stood against the north face of the house, above the start of the channel which would thus have collected the liquids from libations or sacrifices. The stepped blocks against the wall of room (J) look like a flight of stairs, but if the supposed missing steps are reconstructed, one hits the wall that still exists without reaching the floor level of the room it is meant to reach. As has long ago been suggested by al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, these steps might be better interpreted as a stepped block or dais for the display of betyls along the

lines of those found against cliff-faces on the way up Jabal an-Numayr in Petra (Tholbecq 2011 forthcoming) in the many examples illustrated in Dalman’s work (Dalman 1908: 125 and 212) (FIGS 18a and 18b), the one on the façade of the temple in Ramm (Tholbecq 1997: 1076) and the one built near house EZ IV at az-Zanṭūr (Kolb and Keller 2002).

The small portico, several pieces of which have been found, could be visualised in front of room (H), in vestibule (J), in the style of a distyle pronaos *in antis* of a sanctuary (FIG. 19). It was here that most of these architectural fragments, described above, were found, along with two fragments of a latticework window that might have been used as an *oculus* (circular window) above the central door of this large room (H). This window (0.47 x 0.66 m) still bears red-painted decoration, suggesting that it was in a sheltered position (FIG. 20).

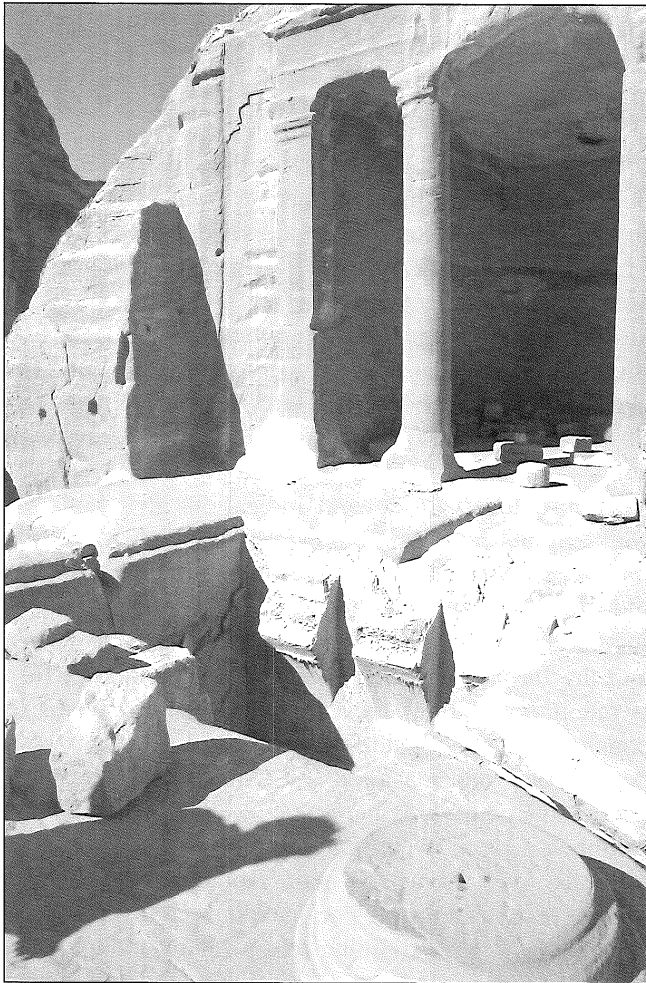
Thus, there are several indications that both the southern and northern complexes belonged to one and the same house and were inter-dependent: the threshold of a door between courtyard (A) and corridor (I), the blocked door between room (P) and corridor (M), and the furnace supplied from (E) to heat alcove (O). If our interpretations are correct, this house seems to consist on the south side of three dwelling rooms with paved floors and plastered walls, a stable or cowshed and a large courtyard, and on the north side of a heated chamber, a room which may have sheltered the betyls, a terrace overlooking the main sanctuary and perhaps a large reception room. The installations linked to the esplanade (S) and adjoining rooms (J = vestibule, H =



15. Initial hypothetical reconstruction of the house, looking southwest (P. P.-F. 2010).

large room, L = room with niche and round basin and K = room with betyl) need further exploration, because

the interpretations presented here remain too hypothetical. Nevertheless, we can perhaps say that this was the



16. Façade of the “Garden triclinium” in Petra, from the outside (photo P. P.-F. 2010).



17. Façade of the “Garden triclinium” in Petra, from the inside (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

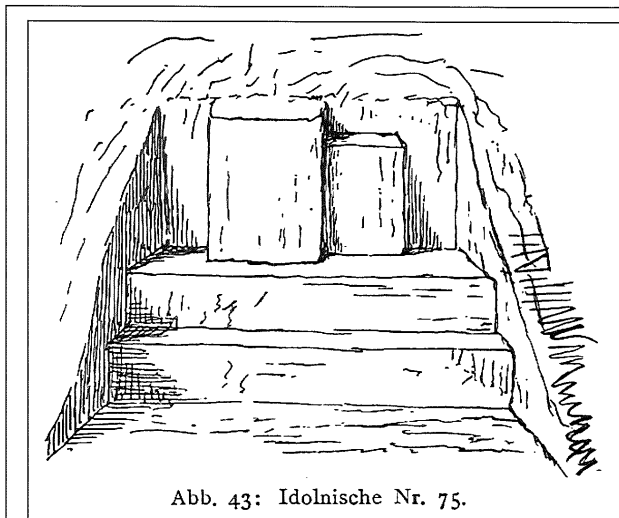


Abb. 43: Idolnische Nr. 75.

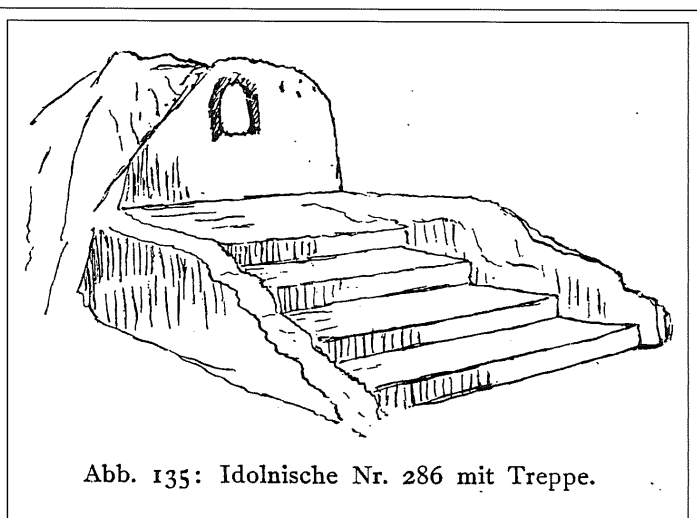
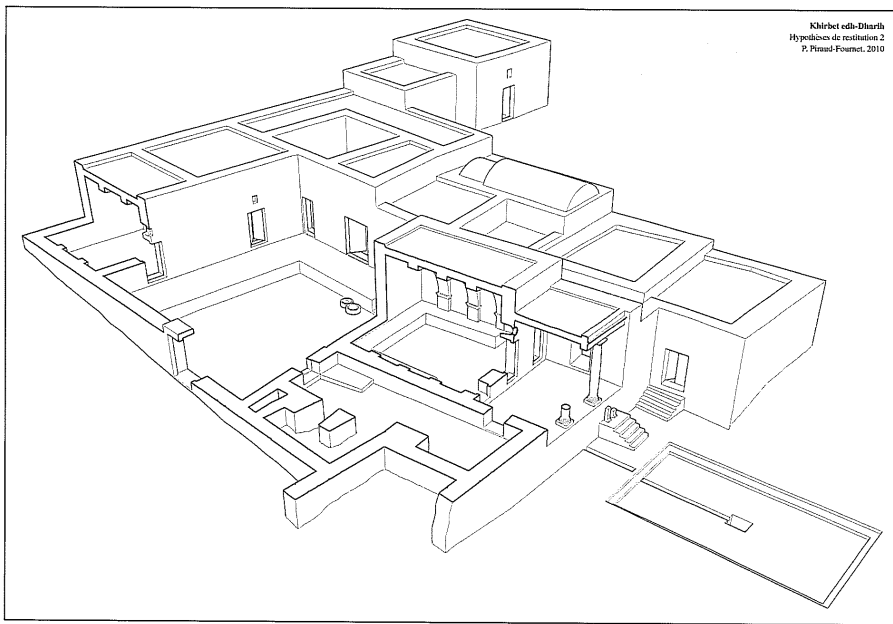
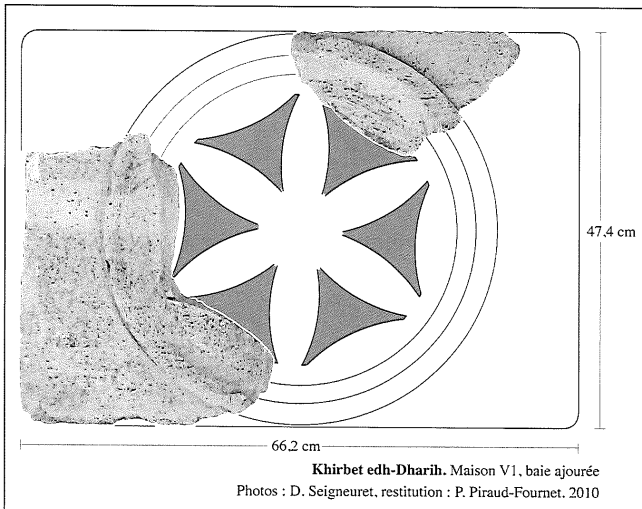


Abb. 135: Idolnische Nr. 286 mit Treppe.

18a and b. Petra, (a) niche for betyl and (b) niche with steps (Dalman 1908: figs 43 and 135).



19. Second hypothetical reconstruction of the house, looking southwest (by P. P.-F. 2010).



20. Limestone window with latticework, (photo D. Seigneuret 2007; reconstruction by P. P.-F. 2010).

residence of a rich owner, perhaps a member of the family responsible for the construction of the sanctuary, or which administered its possessions or took care of religious services.

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