

A Nabataean Mansion at Petra: Some Reflections on its Architecture and Interior Decoration

Under the patronage of the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLFA) Basel University has been investigating the terrace just south of the rocky crest of az-Zanṭūr (EZ IV) since 1996. During the three seasons of excavation, parts of a large private Nabataean dwelling dating from the first century AD, richly decorated with wall paintings and decorative stucco have been exposed (FIGS. 1-2).¹ The aim of the following remarks is to present firstly some of the results of the examined architecture and its interior decoration of stucco and wall-painting, and secondly some reflections on the dating of and influences visible in Petraean wall-painting in general.

The Architecture

The oblong-shaped terrace EZ IV falls away sharply to the east, while its westerly long side has a far gentler slope. At its southern extremity the terrace narrows visibly and ends in a tongue-shaped spur of bedrock. Most of the building's southern rooms have been exposed during the campaigns 1996-1998 (FIG. 2).²

The narrow southern spur of the terrace is built up across its entire east-west extent of 25 m by the three rooms 6, 7 and 17. The two large rooms 6 (7 x 8 m) and 17 (7 x 6.8 m), both of them originally richly appointed with stucco and wall-paintings,³ are orientated towards the central vestibule or *exedra* 7 (7 x 6.5 m). Room 6 opens onto room 7 via an open passageway (1.8 m wide) and two lateral doorways (each 0.8 m wide). An additional door in wall K which was blocked up at an un-

known later date, originally connected room 6 to corridor 11 (FIG. 2).⁴ A row of five narrower flagstones at the eastern edge of the pavement in room 7 bears witness to the entrance to room 17 otherwise almost completely lost. The entrance lay on the same axis as the central passageway to room 6 and was 2.4 m wide.

While the floors in rooms 6 and 7 were fitted out with sandstone flagging, the floor of room 17 was originally decorated with a sumptuous *opus sectile* pavement, which had been dismantled at a later date.⁵ A few remaining marble tiles and the tile imprints in the grey cement bedding give at least an idea of the pavement's original geometrical pattern consisting of triangles and squares.⁶ A double row of arches between walls L, N and H supported the floor, most of which is now lost. The basement of room 17, which lies approximately 3 m deeper, was accessible via staircase 9 in grid square 87/AO.⁷

FIG. 2 shows that the north side of *exedra* 7 was probably arranged as a *distylos in antis*. The missing segments of the Attic column and pilaster bases on the one hand and the traces of scraping from doors on the other hand show that the intercolumniations were furnished with doors. The resulting façade-like northern face of room 17 has to be viewed in conjunction with the Attic base of pillar Z (grid square 90/AO). A courtyard-like room, it can be assumed, lay to the north of *exedra* 7.

The stately rooms of the house are rounded off, for the time being, by room 1 (4 x 5 m), which is decorated with the extraordinary frescoes discussed below. Room 1, like rooms 10 and 17, had been furnished with an *opus-sectile*

¹ For a summary of the results see the preliminary reports of the excavation seasons 1996 and 1997: see Kolb, Keller and Fellmann Brogli 1997; Kolb, Keller and Gerber 1998.

² The structures recognisable on the surface were briefly described in the context of a survey conducted in 1990 by the Naturhistorischen Gesellschaft Nürnberg. See Lindner, Gasteiger and Zeitler 1993/4: 310ff. The Horsfields identified the structures on EZ IV as parts of the supposed fortification on az-Zanṭūr; cf. Horsfield 1938: 6, pl. XIII.2.

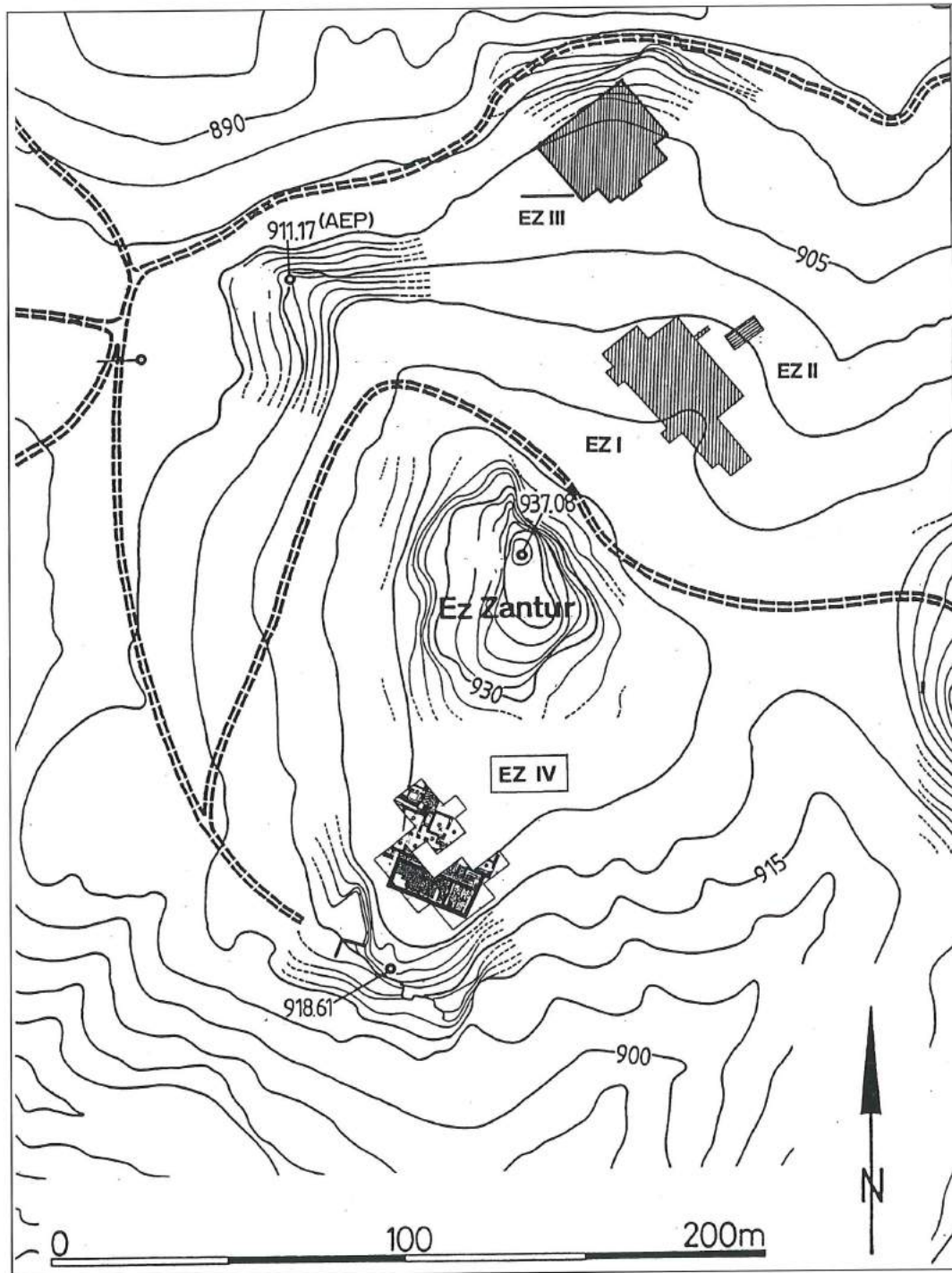
³ Thousands of fragments of the original stuccoed and painted interior decoration were rescued from the three rooms mentioned.

⁴ When the three doorways were blocked up is still a mystery at the moment. Rather surprising is the fact that the quality of the masonry of the blockings in walls K and B is better than that of the original walls.

⁵ Fragments of six different imported marble qualities and two qualities of alabaster were recovered.

⁶ Very similar pavements are known from Herod's third palace at Jericho (Netzer 1996: 40-41, figs. 8-10) and from Herod's Northern Palace on Masada as well as from contemporary houses in Italy (cf. Foerster 1995: 158ff. with further references).

⁷ Indications for an upper floor have been found in rooms 1 and 6.



1. Petra. Topographic plan of the az-Zantūr area with the sites EZ I-IV.

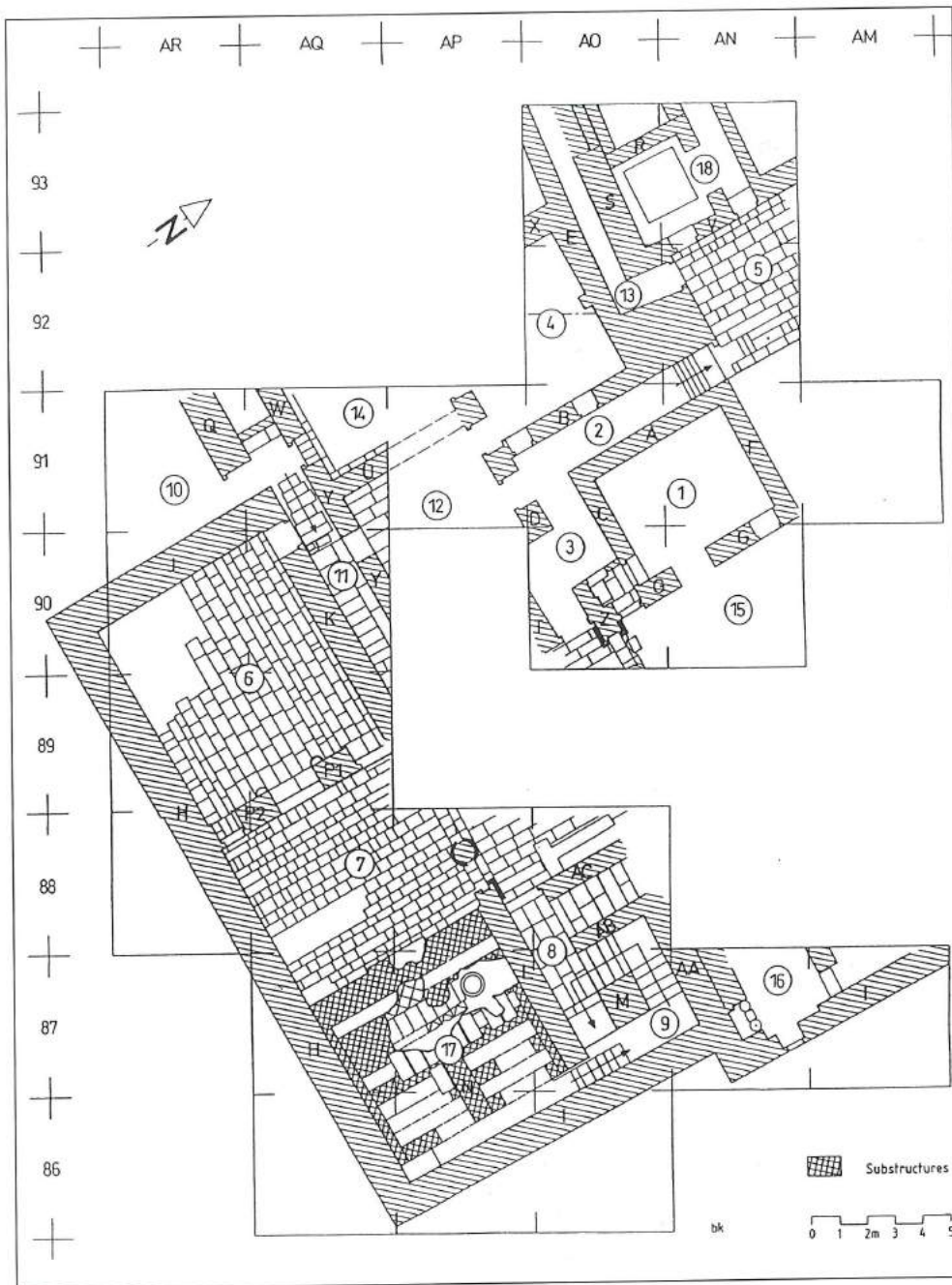
pavement which was plundered at a later date. Far smaller and more simply decorated are the rooms around courtyard 5 to the west and room 16 to the east. These rooms probably belonged to the domestic area or servants quarters.

Dating

The shards of painted Nabataean pottery from the mortar

bedding of the *opus sectile* pavements in rooms 1, 10 and 17 and from the rendering of the rough coats of plaster on the walls all belong to decorative phase 3c, giving a *terminus post quem* of AD 20 for the building.⁸ For the time being it is impossible to ascertain the date of the building's initial phase, since all walls exposed are constructed directly on the bedrock, leaving no possibility to do foundation soundings. The probability that a major phase of

⁸ The decorative phase 3a lasts from c. AD 20-70/80. For a concise overview see Schmid 1997: 131-137.



2. Petra. Schematic plan of the structures on terrace EZ IV.

refurbishment took place—i.e. new pavements in rooms 1, 10 and 17—without structural changes cannot be ruled out completely, but seems to be small.

The blocking of various doorways (see walls B, C, G, K and V) cannot be dated at the present stage of investigation. The building's last phase of use, however, is certain. A number of small finds dating from the fourth century AD came to light from beneath the compact layers of the collapsed wall decoration in several rooms. On the basis of dated coins found in these layers, the end of occupation of the site and the building's final de-

struction can be set during the earthquake of AD 363.⁹

Comment on Rooms 6, 7 and 17

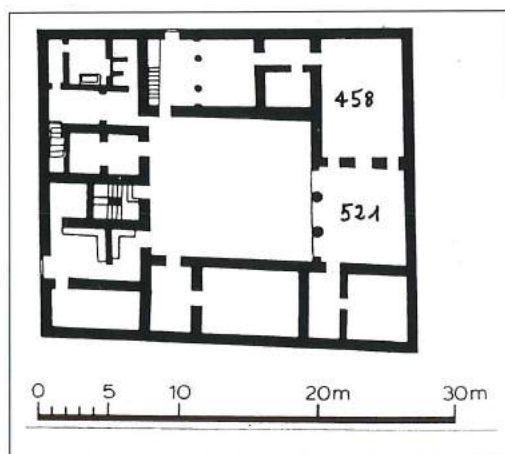
We can now address the question as to where parallels to the conspicuous three room-suite consisting of a central *exedra* with two columns *in antis* and two flanking rooms are to be found in Palestine and to which cultural tradition these buildings belong.

The rooms 458 and 521 in the early Herodian Core of the Western Palace at Masada dating from the fourth decade BC, offers an astonishing parallel to rooms 6 and 7 on

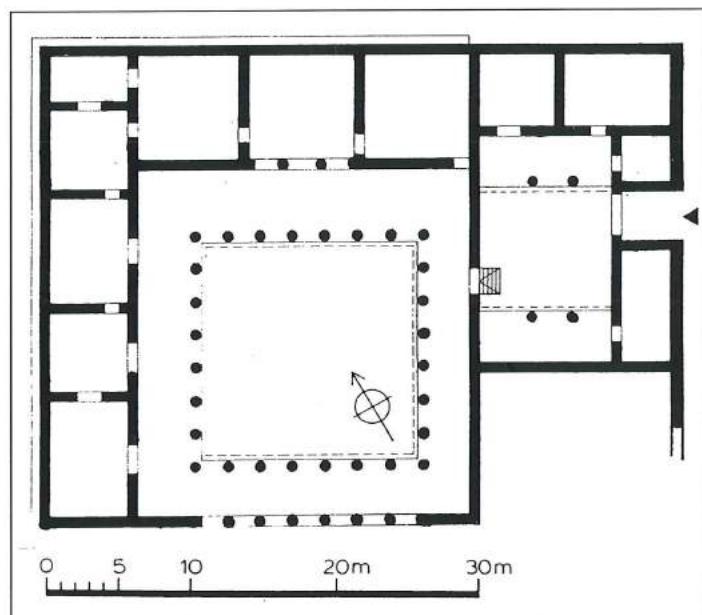
⁹ See Russell 1980; Parr 1986: 192ff. For the impact of the earthquake of 363 cf. Stucky *et al.* 1996: 51.

EZ IV—despite the fact that the symmetry of two flanking rooms has been dispensed with—there is a reception room on only one side of the *exedra* 521 (FIGS. 2-3).¹⁰ The reception room 458, like room 6, has one central and two side entrances. It is also remarkable that the size of the two *exedrae* is almost identical (room 521: 7.1 x 6.9 m; room 7: 7.0 x 6.5 m) and that both open northwards onto a courtyard with a *distylos in antis*. The only difference between them worth mentioning is that the intercolumniations in room 7 could be closed with doors.

Symmetrical suits of three rooms with a central *exedra* and two flanking banqueting rooms are a generally accepted feature of Macedonian palace architecture from the late fourth century onwards (Heermann 1986; Lauter 1986: 234; Nielsen 1994: 84ff.). The importance of this room arrangement for Hellenistic house architecture is echoed in the much later and geographically distant examples in Pergamon and Ptolemais: House 1 near the



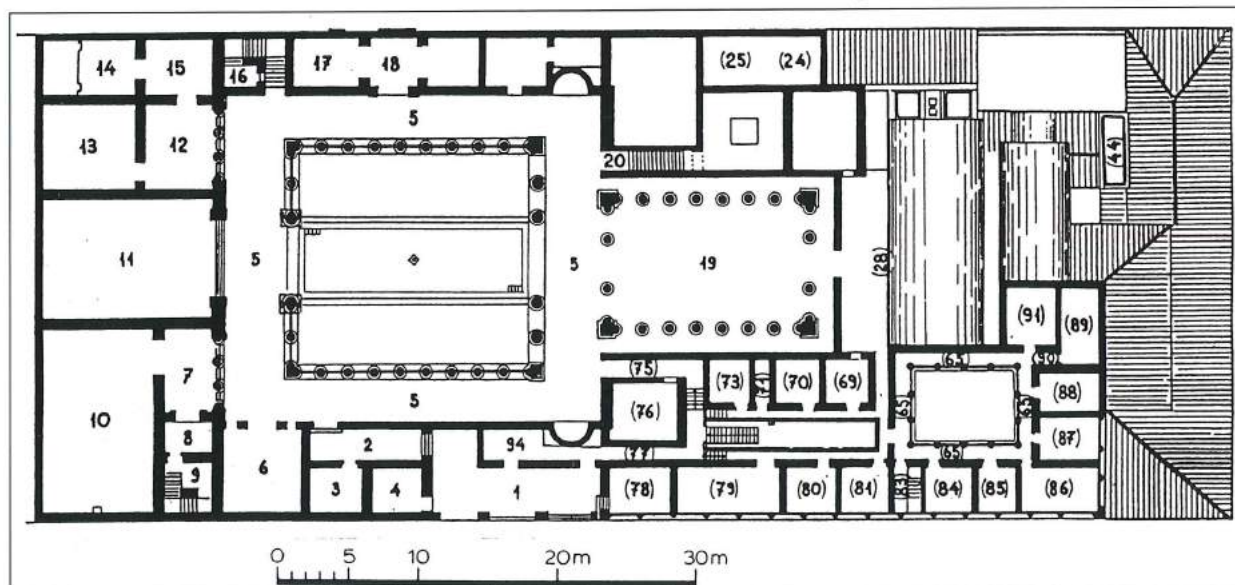
3. Masada. Nucleus of Western Palace. (After Foerster 1995: 163, fig. 270).



4. Pergamon. Schematic plan of House I near the Lower Agora. (After Pinkwart and Stammnitz 1984: 38, fig. 15).

Lower Agora in Pergamon, dating from the second century BC, has a three room-group on the northeastern side of the peristyle (FIG. 4).¹¹ In the famous late Hellenistic *Palazzo delle Colonne* in Ptolemais (Cyrenaica) the remains of a three room-group (17-18) are located on the north side of the garden peristyle (FIG. 5).¹² Contrary to the Macedonian “prototypes”, indications for the use of the lateral rooms as banqueting halls or *triclinia* are missing in all four cases referred to.

The *Palazzo delle Colonne* plays a key role, both geographically and temporally, in linking the Macedonian buildings of the fourth century BC with the buildings of



5. Ptolemais. Schematic plan of the *Palazzo delle Colonne*. (After Pesce 1950: pl. 11).

¹⁰ Netzer 1991: 232ff. A similar arrangement of rooms is found north of the large peristyle in Herod's second palace in Jericho, dated c. 25 BC. See Netzer 1996: 37, fig 2.

¹¹ See Pinkwart and Stammnitz 1984.

¹² See Pesce 1950. For the dating of the building see Lauter 1971.

the first century BC/AD on Masada and on EZ IV. Although the number of buildings which can be referred to is very limited, we may assume that the three room-group was well established in the Ptolemaic architecture of North Africa and that the Western Palace at Masada along with the mansion on EZ IV were inspired by Ptolemaic models.

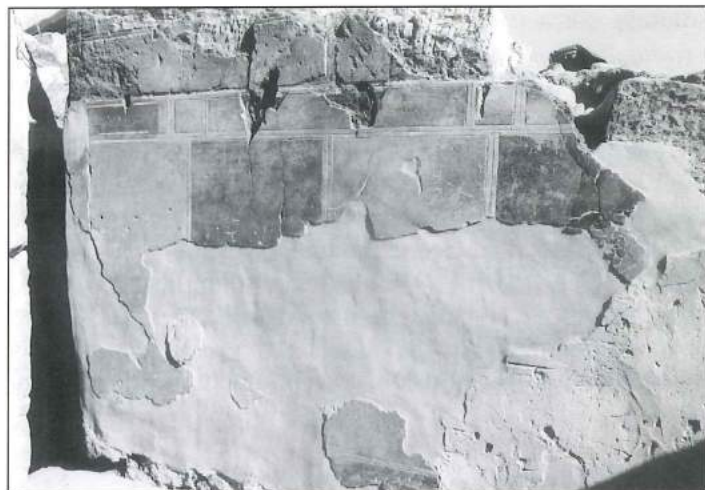
Wall Decoration in the Hellenistic Masonry Style

The use of decorative stucco in the temples, tomb façades and domestic buildings in Petra is well attested. The German Heinrich Kohl was the first scholar to publish a comprehensive study on the stucco decoration in Petra in his 1910 book on the temple Qaşr al-Bint¹³. This work remained basic till the publication of the seminal article on decorative stucco at Petra by Fawzi Zayadine (Zayadine 1987).

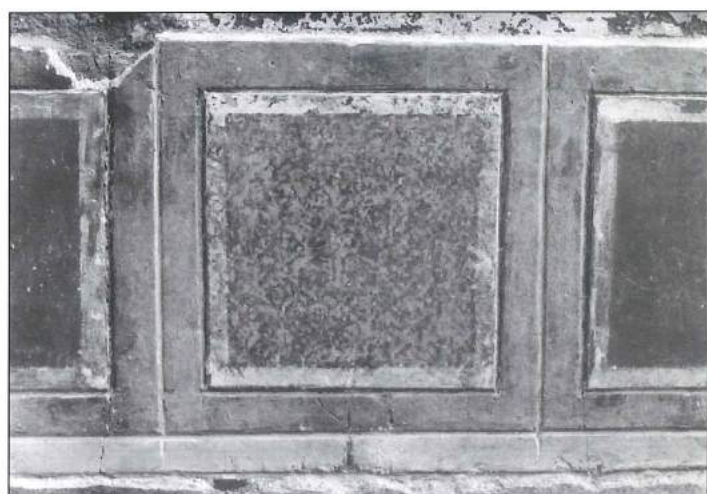
The very limited number of securely dated monuments has always been a problem in the discussion about stucco decoration in Petra. Suggestions for dating were, of necessity, based on stylistic comparisons. The problem inherent to this approach is that it relies chiefly on monuments in Hellenistic *poleis*. Petra was, however, situated on the cultural fringe, and we must therefore expect a degree of “provincialism” with specifically local forms and developments which do not fit into the usual pattern of development or chronology. The importance of the decoration remains preserved on EZ IV in so-called Masonry Style¹⁴ is that they are dated with a *terminus post* of AD 20 and therefore offer the opportunity to reassess the dating of other comparable decorations in Petra.¹⁵

Large surfaces of stucco wall decoration in the Masonry Style are preserved on the western face of wall A in room 2 and on the northern face of wall C in room 3 (FIGS. 6-7). The following decoration scheme can be reconstructed for wall C: above a shallow black plinth (35 cm high) there are panels or orthostats measuring 70 x 140 cm, coloured alternately red and yellow. Incised lines and painted white drafts separate the orthostats from each other and from the plinth below. The string course (20 cm high) above consists of yellow headers and red stretchers, again with white drafts, topped by the remains of the first two courses of the stuccoed isodomic masonry. The stuccoed yellow headers from the string course on wall A have a finely applied marbling (FIG. 7). The careless repairs with white mortar to the corner A/C and to the plinth and orthostat zone in the easterly part of wall C are most probably of Late Roman date (FIG. 6).

An almost identical scheme of decoration is preserved in the staircase of the of the so-called Baths immediately south of the Temenos Gate (Zayadine 1987: 139, fig. 17).



6. EZ IV. Room 3: fragmented Masonry Style decoration on wall C.



7. EZ IV. Room 2: detail of stuccoed string course with marbling on wall A.

There are close parallels not only in the decoration system consisting of plinth, orthostats, string course and isodomic masonry, but also in the colour scheme: the orthostats are painted in the same shades of alternating red and yellow and have the same white borders imitating drafts.

When considering the problem of dating, the supposition that the two, more or less identical, decorations were contemporary seems very reasonable. It can be assumed, as outlined above, that the building on EZ IV was not erected before AD 20. The staircase of the so-called Baths or rather its decoration, has recently been discussed by the expert Alix Barbet who, on the basis of stylistic arguments, dated it to the turn of the second/first century BC (Barbet 1995: 389). The striking difference in the suggested dates of more than 100 years demonstrates very clearly how difficult it is to date Masonry Style decorations at all and especially in Petra with its numerous undated monuments. In the introduction Barbet states ab-

¹³ Kohl 1910: 15-22, 26-35.

¹⁴ For the Masonry Style see Andreou 1988; Barbet 1985: 12ff.

¹⁵ For a colour reproduction see Weber and Wenning 1997: 65, fig. 96b.

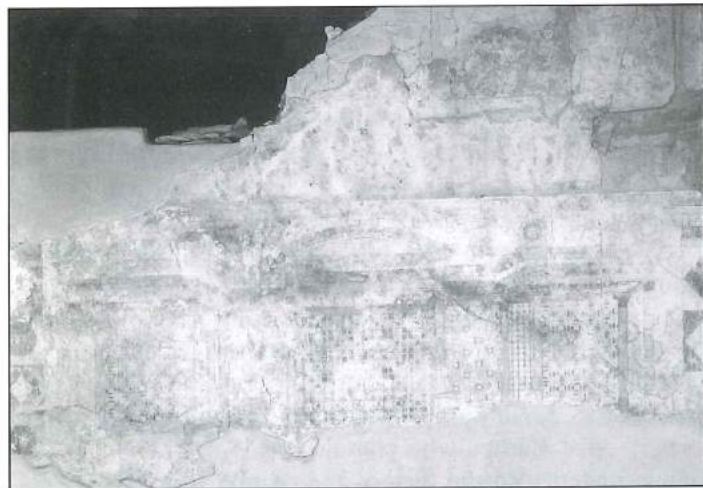
solutely correctly that “*Ce document s’insère dans une production, où, semble-t-il, des traits archaïques subsistent qui faussent nos perspectives et rendent difficile la datation*”.¹⁶

The apparent persistence of the Masonry Style is certainly not a purely Petraean phenomenon. The remains of decoration found in the Herodian palaces and the private houses of the so-called Herodian Quarter in Jerusalem, make it clear that this type of decoration enjoyed a life span far above average in the Near East.¹⁷ A similar anachronistic tendency in Nabataean interior decoration is to be found in the illusionistic architectural paintings in room 1.

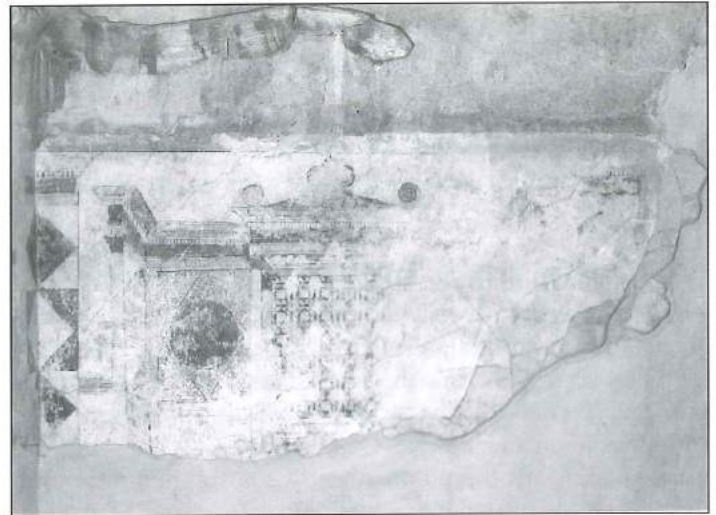
Illusionistic Architectural Painting in Room 1

Room 1, which has an area of 5 x 4 m, was originally decorated on all four walls with illusionistic architectural paintings. The frescoes in the best state of preservation are found on walls A and C (FIGS. 8-9). On wall C the paintings are completely preserved to a length of 2.9 m *in situ*, while those on the adjacent wall A are preserved to a length of 1.8 m.¹⁸ The lower edge of the painted zone is to a large extent lost, but a few fragments still in place on wall G show that the façades did not stand on a painted socle zone but rather started at floor level.

The paintings which are limited to a zone of 1.5 m above floor level reproduce architectural façades against a background of yellowish alabaster imitation. The façades are framed by broad pilasters at the sides and spanned by a narrow blue-green epistyle. The pilasters are divided



8. EZ IV. Room 1: architectural painting on wall C.



9. EZ IV. Room 1: architectural painting on wall A.

into squares which are painted with two-dimensional motifs. The support in the corner C/A depicts a scheme of alternating red diamonds on a white background and white diamonds on a red background. The pilaster at the other end of wall C is decorated in the same colour scheme with a series of quadrilobes of four diagonally placed *peltae* and discs.¹⁹ The fresco on wall C depicts a tripartite façade, consisting of a central pavilion with a segmental pediment flanked by two pavilions, each of which are adorned with a pair of disc-shaped acroteres depicting *gorgoneia*. The front columns of the pavilions are painted with a red on white marbling. The colour of the rear columns, in blue-grey and the crowning Corinthian capitals in dark brown,²⁰ contrast strongly with them. The entablature above the capitals consists of a red marbled epistyle, a reddish-brown frieze, black contoured dentils against a white background followed by the red marbled *geison* and *sima*. The illusionistic effect of the symmetrical architectural compositions give the impression that the façade’s pavilions are “projecting” from the alabaster imitation background towards the observer. The pavilions backdrop is decorated with a conspicuous variety of polychrome geometrical patterns which are plainly borrowed from the repertoire of *opus sectile* and mosaic motifs.²¹ Rather astonishing is the fact that these miniaturistic geometric patterns almost annihilate the impact of the illusionistic effect, at least in the fresco’s present state of preservation (see FIG. 8).

Above the narrow painted main zone follows an inter-

colour scheme as has previously been stated (Kolb, Keller and Fellmann Brogli 1997: 237).

²⁰ The acroteres are reminiscent of Hellenistic shield busts. See R. Winkes, *Clipeata Imago*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Giessen (1969) 10ff.

²¹ That the patterns are intended to represent incrustation is shown by the red marbling on white background. The *opus sectile* arrangements are described in more detail in Kolb, Keller and Fellmann Brogli 1997: 238 with note 11.

¹⁶ Barbet 1995: 383.

¹⁷ For the Masonry Style decorations in the Western Palace (37-30 BC) at Masada cf. Netzer 1991: 232ff. and Foerster 1995: 1-12. For the Palatial Mansion in Jerusalem see Avigad 1984: 95ff. and figs. 84, 86-88, 90, 101-102; *ibidem* 1991: 62-63.

¹⁸ For a colour illustration see Weber and Wenning 1997: 65, fig. 69a.

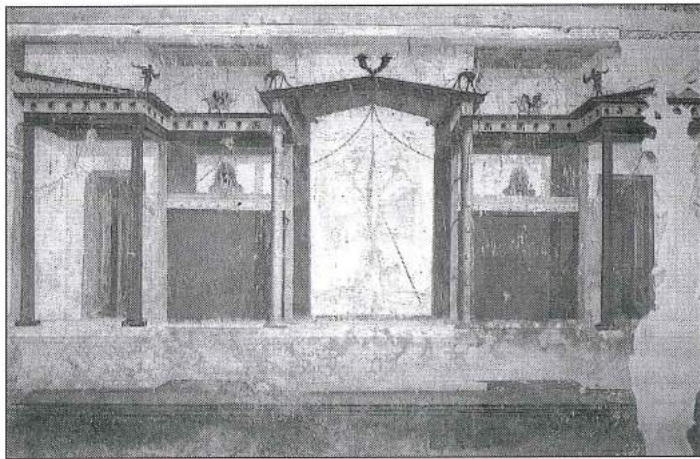
¹⁹ The cleaning of the frescoes carried out during the 1998 campaign revealed that the east pilaster was not painted in a black and white

mediate zone of moulded stucco panels 30 cm in height topped by a painted and gold-plated moulded cornice. Above the cornice a few remains of an architectural scheme of moulded stucco in the Masonry Style are still *in situ*. The only apparent connection between the two zones is in the corner C/A where the pilaster motif, painted as a framing element in the main zone, is repeated in stucco in the upper zone.

Stylistic Classification.

Illusionistic representations of architectural façades develop into the main feature of Roman wall paintings of the second Pompeian Style in the course of the first century BC (ca. 90/80-20 BC).²² This illusionistic tradition was then renounced more or less completely during the subsequent third Pompeian Style which lasted approximately till the middle of the first century AD.²³ Bearing this in mind, it is quite obvious that the frescoes in room 1 cannot be attributed to the third Pompeian Style, although they appear to date from around the same period.

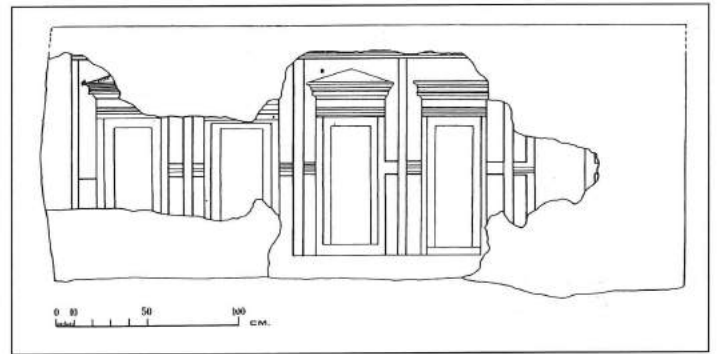
The closest parallels to our frescoes are to be found in Roman architectural paintings from the Augustan Period. Probably the best known examples are preserved in Rome, in the Augustus House on the Palatine, which is dated shortly after 31 BC (FIG. 10).²⁴ The frescoes on the west wall in the so-called Room of the Masks display parallels to the frescoes on EZ IV in the tripartite façade and the classicistic “severity” of the architecture with its rather flimsy columns. The substance and detailing of the architectural members is generally reduced in comparison to paintings from the middle of the same century.²⁵ The somewhat stretched appearance of the architecture and the relatively two-dimensional architectonic framework, con-



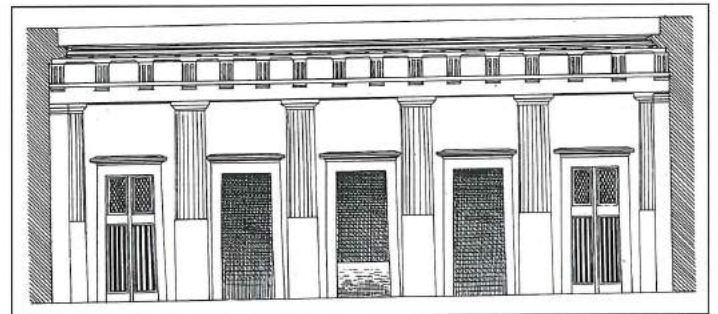
10. Rome. House of Augustus: Room of the Masks. (After Carettoni 1983: pl. 2.1)

sisting of corner supports and a narrow epistyle, are further comparable elements. But there are also notable differences: the frescoes in the Augustus House take up the whole surface of the wall, as is usual in Roman wall-painting but not the case on EZ IV. A clear wall-piercing perspective is observable, achieved chiefly by the vista through the dominant central *aedicula* and by the openings above the lateral screen-walls. The illusionistic painting on EZ IV, in contrast, is composed against a solid background and projects forwards.

The limitation of the architectural painting to the lower part of the wall on EZ IV is striking but not singular in Petra. The decoration in a cave in Wādī aṣ-Ṣiyyagh appears to repeat this peculiarity (FIG. 11). The walls are painted with a very flat—i.e. non-illusionistic—row of closed doors, which is set within and subordinate to an architectural system consisting of supports and an epistyle. As F. Zayadine (1987: 140) correctly remarks, the paintings in Wādī aṣ-Ṣiyyagh belong not in the Roman but rather in the Hellenistic tradition of Ptolemaic Egypt. Firstly, the motif of a row of doors, subordinate to an architectural framework, is very close to the architecture in the Hellenistic *hypogaea* of Alexandria, e.g. chamber 4 in hypogaeum 3 in the Mustapha Pasha necropole dated to the sec-



11. Petra. Wādī aṣ-Ṣiyyagh cave, architectural fresco, west wall. (After Zayadine 1987: 141, fig. 23)



12. Alexandria. Mustapha Pasha Necropole, Hypogaeum 3, chamber 4. (After Adriani 1963/6: no. 86, pl. 56, fig. 199)

²² For the second Pompeian Style see Barbet 1985: 36ff. Ling 1991: 23ff.

²³ For the third Pompeian Style see Bastet and de Vos 1979; Barbet 1985: 96ff.; Ling 1991: 52ff.

²⁴ See Carettoni 1983: 23ff., colour pls. B-F.

²⁵ See, i.a. the powerful and expertly executed architectural paintings in triclinium 14 in Poppaea's villa at Oplontis - De Franciscis 1975: fig. 17.

ond half of the third century BC (FIG. 12).²⁶ Secondly, the two-dimensional adaptation of the architectural theme has to be viewed as a derivation from Ptolemaic funerary paintings whose tendency to flatness can be regarded as one of its characteristic features (Gordon 1977: 266).

To come back to the narrowness of the painted zone: one of the few known examples of architectural painting to be found in Judea must be mentioned (cf. Fittschen 1996). The relevant fragments are situated in the north-west corner of room 5 in the Herodian Palatial Mansion in Jerusalem.²⁷ What is still recognisable are the remains of small *aediculae*, which are set within an architectural framework consisting of supports and an epistyle. The epistyle is set at about eye-level, as it is on EZ IV—i.e. the architectural painting here also appears to have been limited to a low band on the wall. One is tempted to interpret the limitation of these Hellenistic—and Roman—inspired paintings to a narrow zone of the lower wall as a regional peculiarity, but this remains conjectural since the evidence is too slight.

As mentioned above, the architectural façades on EZ IV are painted on a background of alabaster imitation. Forerunners or models for alabaster imitation are probably monuments like the Hellenistic alabaster tomb in Alexandria which is constructed with huge monolithic alabaster slabs (Adriani 1963/6: n. 89, 140ff., pls. 61-63). There are also early examples of painted alabaster imitation in Alexandria, e.g. in hypogaeum 3 in Mustapha Pasha, dated to the second half of the third century BC (Adriani 1963/6: no. 86, 145ff., pl. 54, fig. 194) or in tombs 2 and 3 in the Anfushi necropole from the third-second centuries BC (Adriani 1963/6: nos. 142-3, 192ff., pls. 109, 111). It therefore seems reasonable to seek the models for the inconspicuous handling of the background of the architectural paintings in room 1 in Ptolemaic Egypt. The same seems to be true for the painted decoration of the pilasters on wall C. They have direct a forerunner in Petra in the stuccoed panel decoration of the *antae* of the temple of Qasr al-Bint (*terminus ante*: late first century BC)²⁸—itself most probably inspired by Alexandrian prototypes, e.g. hypogaeum 2 at Anfushi, where the painted decoration of the pilasters of the aedicula is closely comparable (Adriani 1966: no. 142, 192ff., pl. 109.).

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said, that both in the architecture of the mansion on EZ IV, and in certain details of the interior decoration of the rooms, a close connection with Ptolemaic Alexandria appears to exist. The illusionistic architectural painting in room 1, on the other hand, is a manifestly Roman component. The discussion of the details of

the wall paintings has however made clear that the Roman models were freely interpreted and that Alexandrian elements and regional preferences were worked in. The limitation of the painted zone to the lower half of the wall in combination with a system of decoration in the Masonry Style gives the paintings in room 1 a new and un-Roman valence. The anachronistic tendencies one is confronted with on EZ IV, specifically the use of the Hellenistic Masonry Style and the adaptation of Augustan architectural painting in the first century AD, are especially striking.

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²⁶ Adriani 1963/6: no 86, 145 ff., pl. 56, fig. 199.

²⁷ See Avigad 1984: 112, fig. 102; 114, figs. 104-105; *ibidem* 1991: 58f., 62f. Fittschen 1996: 114 attributes the painting to the late sec-

ond or early third Pompeian Style.

²⁸ Zayadine 1987: 138, Fig. 14. McKenzie 1990: 137, pls. 73-74

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