

Jacqueline Calzini Gysens
Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e
l'Orient
via Merulana 248
00185 Rome - Italy

Luigi Marino
Dipartimento di Storia
dell'Architettura e Restauro
delle Strutture Architettoniche
Facolta' di Architettura
Università di Firenze
Via Micheli 8
50121 Florence - Italy

Jacqueline Calzini Gysens and Luigi Marino

The Qaşr Rabba Temple Project: Preliminary Remarks on the Architecture and State of Conservation

Introduction

Since 1996, under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, former Is.M.E.O.), in Rome, and the History of Architecture and Conservation of Architectural Structures Department of Florence University,* started a research project involving the study of the archaeological sites and architectural monuments of Rabba and the adjoining territory.¹ First object of our study is the isolated ancient monument located at al-Qaşr, five km north of Rabba, in the al-Karak District.²

A preliminary analysis of the architectural structures still *in situ* and of the building materials of the monument in question has been elaborated in view of their conservation and in function of future archaeological excavations. The ruins are in a relatively good state of preservation, but some of the structural collapse, caused by a major earthquake, and the effects of recent quarrying, cause some concern. Particular attention has thus been drawn to the need of diagnostic surveying.

Al-Qaşr is a small village located five kilometers north of Rabba (the ancient city known as Areopolis/Arsapolis or Rabbathmoba of the classical sources), fifteen kilometers north of al-Karak. Located near a road that in ancient cartography appears to be the King's Highway, are the present remains of a massive nearly square ancient construction, with walls in some places reaching up to 6 meters. Since the early years of the 19th century its im-

pressive presence in a still unsettled area and its exceptional technical workmanship had been noted by visitors such as U. J. Seetzen (1803) and J. L. Burckhardt (1812).³

But it is only at the beginning of the 20th century that the monument became the object of scholarly observations with photographs taken. N. Glueck had the occasion to visit it during his survey of the region and he published a number of decorated architectural features, such as elements of the frieze and some lion head gutters.⁴

Not so long ago, the locally called "qaşr" was occupied by some members of the Majâli family. The Department started to intervene in the archaeological area from the late sixties onwards and in 1986 the archaeological area was cleared of abusive constructions.

Working at al-Qaşr has turned out to be a stimulating experience, thanks also to the helpful and enthusiastic cooperation of the habitants. Our first two campaigns (1996, 1997) have been dedicated to architectural surveying. A number of interior and exterior sections have been drawn as well as a detailed ground plan of the site. All architectural features still *in situ* have been indicated (FIG. 1). All traces of earthquake damage on the structures have been documented in view of a detailed interpretation. The presence of several canalizations and cisterns has been investigated. These studies together with a detailed analysis of building techniques are now prepared for publication.

A proposal for a project for the general enhancement

* Members of the team were: Architects Ombretta Dinelli, Roberto Sabelli, Giovanna Battista, Francesca Malesani; Archaeologists Valentina Manzelli, Gianluca Grassigli.

This project is supported by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Comitato Nazionale delle Ricerche, the University of Florence, the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient, Rome. Our gratitude is expressed to all these Institutions. We enjoyed the firm support of the local Jordanian authorities. We would like to express our gratitude to the Italian Consular authorities, H.E. E. Cerulli, Italian Ambassador to Jordan and the Italian Cultural Attaché, Dr. G. Benenati.

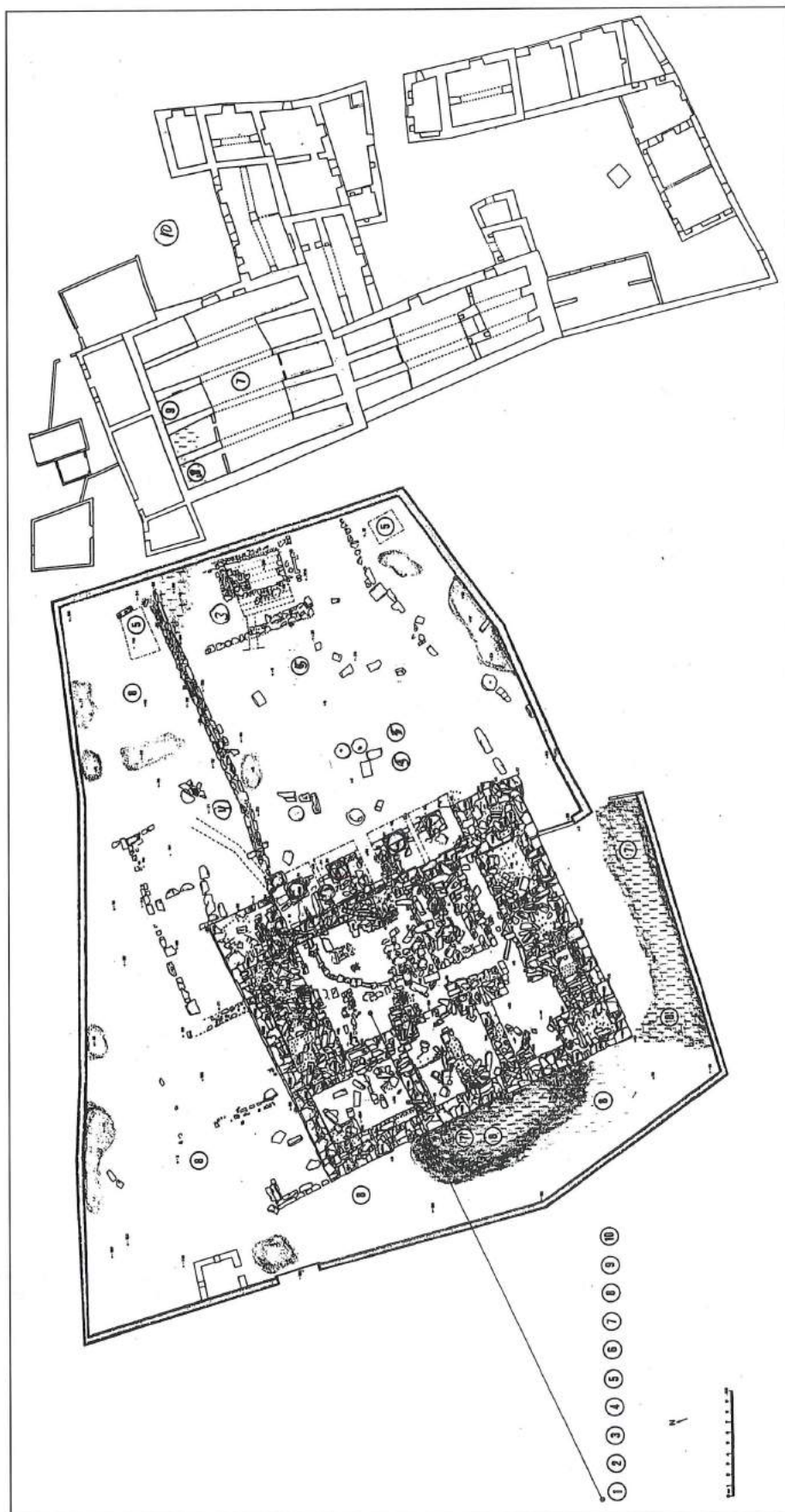
¹ J. Calzini Gysens et L. Marino, *Etude du temple antique de Qaşr*

ar-Rabba dans le Moab. Rapport sommaire d'une première campagne de relevés (1996), *ADAJ* 40 (1997): 189-193. J. Calzini, L. Marino *et alii*, *Il Qaşr Rabba in Giordania*, *Quasar* 19 (1998): 110-113.

² Palestine Grid Map, K series 737, 3/52

³ F. Fruse (ed.), *Ulrich Jasper's Seetzen's Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan Länder, Arabia Petraea und Unter-Aegypten*, I, Berlin (1954): 416. J. L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, London (1922): 376-377. Cf. R. E. Brünnow und A. von Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, I, Strassburg (1904): 46-53.

⁴ N. Glueck, *The Nabataean Temple of Qaşr Rabbah*, *AJA* (1939): 381-387. *Ibid*, *Deities and Dolphins*, Toronto (1965): 56ff.



1. Ground plan of the temple and its surroundings.

of the archaeological site could envisage the inclusion of a sector of the existing vernacular architecture. This project could eventually lead to a transformation in the visitors' facilities. Also to be taken into consideration is a possibility of creating a local museum. In one of the first houses built at al-Qaşr one can admire reutilized decorated materials from the ancient monument.

Architecture and Ground Plan

The building appears as a freestanding massive quadrangular structure (32 x 27 m) with walls of an average width of 1.80 m. The tetrasyle porch on the front is flanked on both sides by tower-like structures. Contrary to R. Amy's opinion, these are empty inside and were probably used for storage purposes.⁵

These "towers" present singular entrances on the outer side. A principal door opening in the axis of the porch and lateral secondary doors gave access to the interior of the *qaşr* (FIG. 2). The possible existence of a staircase-tower in the southwestern corner of the building will be verified when the destruction debris are removed. A section of the outer wall corresponding to this sector appears to have been substantially restructured at different times, with variations in the courses and the integration of a number of adjusting elements.

Against the front wall, engaged pilasters were constructed as well as niches (not conserved in elevation) flanking the main entrance. Only a lintel remains of this main entrance. Of the order of the porch, only the attic basis of corinthian columns are *in situ*, with only one drum still attached to the last basis on the right. The diameter of these columns bases reaches 1.50 m. The fallen column drums of that porch lay scattered on the forecourt as well as inside the *qaşr*. Their material is a fossil-rich lime-

stone. Very different from the hard limestone used in the construction of the monument.

Among the fallen debris two Corinthian capitals could probably belong to the front columns. Interesting is the discovery among the fallen material inside the *qaşr* of a huge Corinthian capital of the composite figured type, presenting busts of Selene/Luna and of Helios/Sol (FIG. 3; a third figure has not yet been identified).

Concerning the internal arrangement of the building, one can observe two broadroom units, with perpendicular side rooms. A tripartite division characterizes the sector at the rear. In the southwestern corner are the remains of a staircase. Poor remains of a stone pavement can be seen in the main hall; the original flooring of the tripartite sector is completely missing.

Oriented along an east-west axis, with its façade opening to the east, the monument was connected with an open area the extension of which is now impossible to determine. This partially collapsed monument buried under its debris has never been excavated. In the forecourt a large underground cistern lies deprived of its original roofing. It appears connected to the *qaşr* through underground canalization. An additional bottle-shaped cistern supplied water inside the building. Both have been investigated.

Building Style and Date

The monument at al-Qaşr is considered a monument of Nabatean architecture revealing some parallels with monuments such as Qaşr al-Bint in Petra, the temple of the Nabatean period at Dhibān etc. Nevertheless its surviving decoration points to a construction or decoration of the late Antonine, early Severan period. (end of second-beginning of third century AD).



2. The Qaşr Rabba monument: general view of the porch (1997).



3. Composite Corinthian capital - the Celene/Luna figure (1997).

⁵ R. Amy, *Temples à escaliers, Syria* (1950): 97. Cf. A. Negev, *The Staircase-tower in Nabataean Architecture, RB* 80 (1973): 364-

383; E. Will, *Iraq al Amir. Le château du Tobiade Hyrcan*, Paris (1991): 270ff.

The emerging outer walls are preserved in some places at more than 6 m. Its isodomic building technique uses blocks of medium-large dimensions (0.50 x 0.60 x 0.60/0.70m in average) set in a relatively regular header and stretcher alternation. The interior side of the outer walls present instead a lesser refined technique of the pseudo-isodoma type, with the use of smaller stones to correct the horizontal curtains.

The recuperation of the isodoma technique in the upper courses is significant.

Local limestone has been used for construction materials, with the exception of some basalt blocks for the foundations. Samples collected from different features have been analyzed by Prof. P. Malesani, of the Earth Science Department of Florence University. We kindly thank him for his courtesy. From his general observations it results that the limestone seem to belong to three geological formations of a single Pleiocene carboniferous platform, mainly consisting of organogenic sedimentary rock formation presenting inclusions of *foraminifera*, *brachiopods* and *gastropods*. Their high diagenic level provides good physical and mechanical resistance. On the contrary, samples taken from limestone blocks of the columns including molluscs (i.e. *pecten*, *lamellibrachs* etc.; with visible mother-of-pearl parts on the plinth surface) show a minor density and less resistency over time to rock deterioration.

Identification

In the absence of written sources, and even if no cultic furniture has so far been discovered, there are good reasons to believe that the *qaṣr* was a public building with a religious function. This thesis is supported by its peculiar architectural composition and interior organization — with what seems to be a tripartite cella and tower-like structures in the front, and of two distinctive divine representations: One is a limestone bust of the Greek-Roman god Helios/Sol, originally an element of the architecture; first noted by R. E. Brünnow among the archaeological debris; and now reused as the base of an arch in an old house of the village; the second, is the figure on a block of a frieze, presenting a male bust, arms raised. This figure may be identified as Lycurgos, a not so much favoured member of the mythological cycle of Dionysos. The block was used in the construction of a modern walled fence. Another divinity carved in a limestone panel, the face badly damaged, integrated upside down in a wall pertaining to the same building where the Helios fig-

ure has been found, could maybe be confronted with a similar type found at Khirbat at-Tannūr. There are good reasons to assume that several architectural blocks presenting elements of a vegetal frieze of the type referred to in archaeological literature as “peopled scrolls”, and presenting acanthus leaves encircling flower buds belong to the same composition. We have also to consider other blocks of the same dimensions, stylistic cravings and vegetal background, with anthropomorphic (*Erotes*) or animal figures (a fawn and possibly a panther), now exhibited in the museum of al-Karak. This classical ornament is best known from regional studies.⁶ Another interesting architectural element now only partially liberated from the destruction layers inside the *qaṣr*, is a Corinthian style limestone capitel of the so-called composite style. It is of huge dimensions (the diameter measures more than 1.50 m) and presents the damaged figures of Selene/Luna and what could probably be Helios/Sol (FIG. 3, see above). At this stage of our research it is impossible yet to propose a location for it.

Two simple Corinthian capitals present on the spot are — because of their dimensions — better suited to crown the columns of the porch. Other architectural features discovered until now include Corinthian pilaster capitals, fragments of a trabeation, and of a cornice with lion-head gutters damaged by an earthquake. All these features, like the general composition certainly attest to the original magnificence of the monument. On stylistical grounds only it could be attributed to the late Antonine-Severan period (end of second-beginning of third century AD). The striking high quality of the workmanship suggest a probable official or maybe even imperial commitment.

Its structural collapse was certainly the consequence of a major earthquake. Prior to its definite abandonment, the *qaṣr* appears to have been occupied, at least in its southern sector. In circumstances not known to us yet, part of the collapsed elements have been utilized in what seems a thorough structural fortification. In the tripartite section, new masonry had also been erected leaning against the outer wall, consisting of carefully squared blocks with the use of mortar. No earthquake damage is noted there.

An analysis of this occupation phase is now in the process of completion.

Moreover, during a recent archaeological sounding in front of the temple, a typical Nabataean style anta echinus has been discovered.⁷ This important element added

⁶ N. Glueck, *The Nabataean Temple of Qasr Rabbah*, *op. cit.*, 382 figs. 3-5, 9 (*Erotes*), 12 (*Helios*), 385, fig.11 (panther), fig.10 (*gazelle*). Cf. for example: Y. Turnheim, *Acanthus scrolls “peopled” with flowers. A classical ornament in the architectural decoration of Eretz Israel in the Roman and early Byzantine periods*, *Rivista di Archeologia* 18 (1994): 119.

⁷

Atif al-Shiyab, *An Archaeological Excavation at the Temple of Qasr Al-Rabbah in Al-Karak*, *Newsletter of the I.A.A., Yarmouk University* 16 (1994): 25-28; *Ibid.*, *Highlights of the Excavations of al-Rabbah and al-Qasr in Al-Karak in the Year 1996*, *Newsletter of the I.A.A., Yarmouk University* 18 (1995): 14-16.

to several other architectural material found scattered or reused in the village (among which fragments of two Doric/Nabatean columns), suggest a first building stage of the monument or an installation prior to the incorporation of the region in the Provincia Arabia.

Observations on the Figures (FIGS. 1, 4, 5)

In its present configuration we propose to read our graphic documentation as following:

Ground Plan (FIG. 1)

The archaeological area of al-Qaşr has been divided into two sectors: ground plan includes the ancient temple and its associated structures (cisterns, canalizations etc.), and a schematic plan of a sector of the adjoining old village.⁸

The archaeological area is limited by the most directly contiguous structures:

- 1: Two large sectors of collapsed material are seen on the eastern and western outskirts of the area probably fallen from perimetral structures.
- 2: Remains of recent building activity (in the forties or fifties) by the last Majâli occupants of the *qaşr*.
- 3: Archaeological remains of a large square cistern (5 x 5 m) at the southern end of the courtyard. An underground channel brings the water to a bottle-shaped reservoir. The underground passage has been investigated for a distance of about 11 m.
- 4: A modern boundary wall built from ancient materials runs over the courtyard.

- 5: Column drums from the front porch appear scattered all over the courtyard, and inside the *qaşr* (some had been removed and transported in the village).
- 6: Traces of a recent sounding.
- 7-8: Huge amounts of fallen debris from the outer wall.
- 9: Ancient architectural features reused in a house of the "Ottoman" period.
- 10: Schematic plan of the village sector.

North-South Section (FIG. 4)

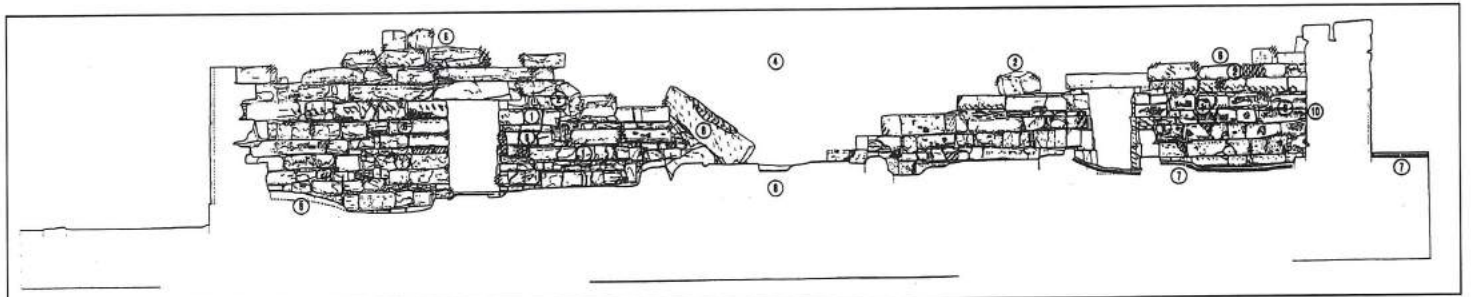
Inner side of the front wall. Actual ground level and destruction levels. Earthquake damage situation is evidenced here. Large-sized ashlar are slightly rotated (some are in danger of falling). Traces of plaster.

Southern Elevation (FIG. 5)

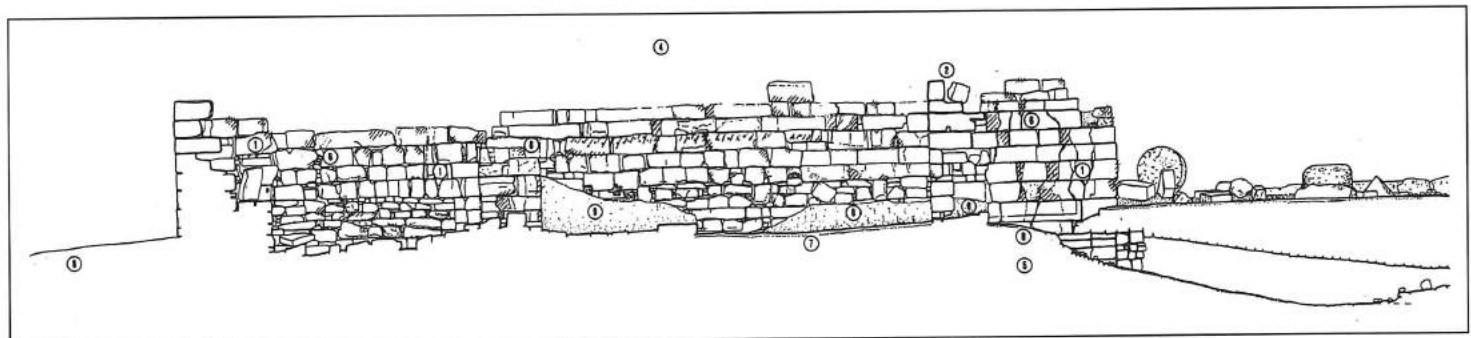
1 and 6: large parts of erosion on the outer wall. The upper part of the corner is slightly rotated. 5: fallen material. The "tower" structure on the east presents a severe structural collapse, the expelling and the inward rotation of some ashlar.

Western Elevation (not illustrated)

Masonry wall in a fairly good state of conservation, but covered with modern graffiti. Fallen material at the basis of the wall hides the lower curtain courses. Some upper ashlar are rotated and expelled, some are fractured. In the south corner an overall bulging out of ashlar is noted.



4. North-south section.



5. Southern elevation.

8. R. Kana'an and A. McQuitty, *The Architecture of Al-Qaşr on the Kerak Plateau: An Essay in the Chronology of Vernacular Archi-*

tecture, PEQ 126 (1994): 127-151.

Northern Elevation (not illustrated)

Ashlar courses showing vertical and diagonal fissuring; local rotation of or missing ashlar are present in the upper courses.

East-West Section (not illustrated)

Fallen material mixed with ground-soil on the west side. A secondary wall-structure against the perimeter wall; a clear difference is detected on the surfaces and between the upper and lower parts. Traces of intervention; a rather

widespread cracking is evident, and trasversal fissures in some ashlar; feeble remains of plaster; accumulation of fallen material. On the east limit an underground passage is shown (blocked after 11 m). The upper level of the foundations was reached here. Near the archaeological area's enclosure a large cistern has been investigated. East of the perimeter the section cuts into the embankment, a former passage between two parallel urban streets was discovered next to the first village houses.