

# THE RIDGE CHURCH AT PETRA

by

Patricia M. Bikai

This Byzantine church is located approximately 160 m NNW of the church uncovered by ACOR during excavations begun in 1992. For ease of reference, that church, the one with the spectacular mosaics and where the Petra Papyri were found, is referred to here as the Petra Church. This second church has been dubbed the Ridge Church because of its location.

The Ridge Church is located at the north-western edge of the Byzantine-era city and is just inside the city walls that run along the ridge overlooking Wādī Abū al-'Ullayqa. Its location on a sandstone ridge that rises to 924 m has subjected the structure to severe erosion. Most of the stones of the walls and the other architectural elements have disappeared; many have been washed down the slopes around the structure. The church may have been noticed by A. Musil in the early part of the century (*Arabia Petraea II: Edom*, Vienna, 1907: 105-6, 108, Fig. 76). He described two churches in the general vicinity, but matching his descriptions to either of the two known churches is difficult. The Ridge Church definitely appears on A. Kammerer's map (*Pétra et la Nabatène*, Paris 1929: Carte III). It was noticed again by Thomas Dailey and Pierre Bikai on January 2, 1994, and they encouraged documenting it before it deteriorated further. Excavations were conducted in October 1994, October 1995, and March 1996.

In the 1994 season, preliminary trenches were opened that indicated that at least the floor of the structure was preserved.<sup>1</sup>

The objectives of the next two seasons were:

1) to clear the structure and document it;

2) to restore as much as is necessary in order to prevent further erosion of the monument;

3) to locate architectural fragments on the surrounding slopes and, when possible, move them up to the church where they should be safer.

## Ecclesiastical Phases

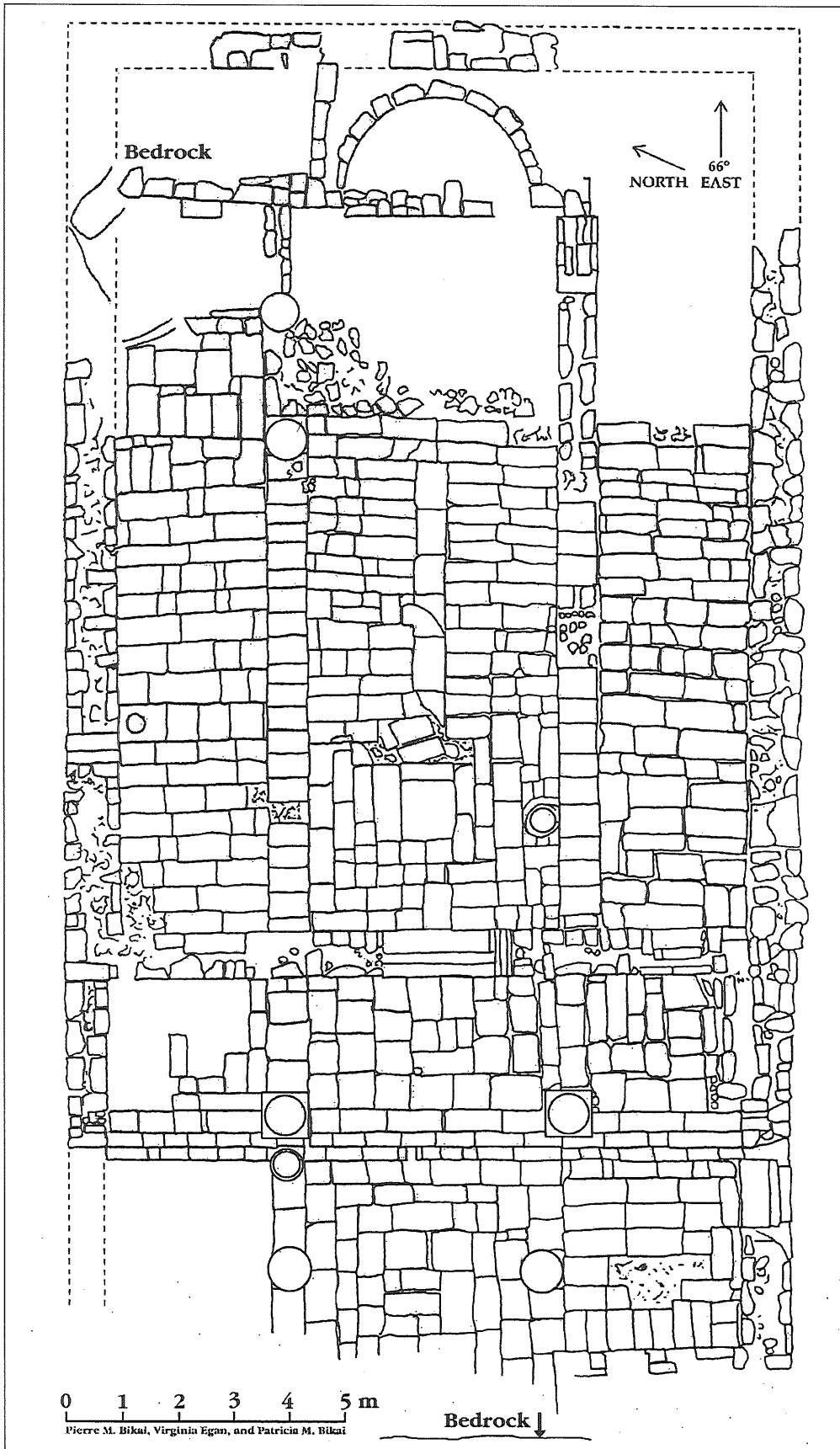
The building itself measures 18.1m in length and 13.5 m in width (interior: 16.55 m x 11.75 m). The church itself has a nave and two side aisles. At the eastern end of the northern aisle, the construction was adapted to the rising bedrock by the insertion of a step at the line of the chancel and again between the aisle proper and the pastophorium. The southern aisle has been cleared only to the line of the apse of the church. The area of the southern pastophorium is badly eroded. The side aisles are separated from the nave by stylobates that once carried five columns on each side. At the eastern and western ends, there were pilasters. Considering that almost all of the superstructure has disappeared, the stone floor in the aisles and nave is in surprisingly good condition (Figs. 1 and 2).

In the course of the excavation of the nave it was discovered that there is a cistern under its western end. This measures 2.8 m x 3 m and is cut into bedrock, which is plastered, on all four sides. The roof is supported by three arches above which is the subfloor of the church. The cistern's only entrance is by a round mouth located next to the southern stylobate. The cistern would, of course, have been inside the building.

No flooring was recovered in the chancel or apse areas, but remnants of what appears

1. See Patricia and Pierre Bikai, 'ACOR Excavations at Petra' *LA* 44 (1994): 634-636; Patricia Bikai

'The Ridge Church in Petra' *SHAJ* VI in press.



1. Plan of the Ridge Church (drawn by Pierre and Patricia Bikai and V. Egan).



2. View from the south across the narthex and lower court.

to be the underlayment of the floors of those areas were found, and it is now almost certain that at one time those areas were covered with a mosaic consisting in the main of white cubes measuring ca. 2.5 cm on a side. The chancel area measures 18.8 m<sup>2</sup> and the apse 5.6 m<sup>2</sup>, for a total of 24.4 m<sup>2</sup>. 6500 mosaic cubes were recovered from the debris; these would have paved an area of approximately 4 m<sup>2</sup>. Since there does not appear to be any other area of the structure that would have been paved with mosaics, it can safely be assumed that these cubes are the remnants of the chancel and apse flooring. A very few brown and black mosaic cubes were also recovered, indicating that a small part of the mosaic had a pattern. In any case all that remains at present is part of the underlayment on the north side of the chancel.

In the rest of the chancel area only earth fill was found. A sounding was made on the south side to determine the history of the modifications to this area. The stone paving

of the nave does not continue under the raised chancel, but at a level slightly below that of the stone paving of the nave and aisles, a yellow rubble subfloor was found. It may be that this once had a marble floor above it. In a subsequent stage, the area of the chancel was raised with earth fill. Thus, like the chancel of the Petra Church, the chancel of the Ridge Church was raised during one of its modifications.

Three doors at the western end of the church lead to a 3 m deep narthex that is approached by steps leading up from a courtyard. Set into the narthex floor is a column base that is in line with the northern stylobate of the church proper; a second, identical, column base is set slightly to the north of the line of the southern stylobate. West of this are three steps that go down 1.18 m to another pavement, called here the courtyard, only part of which was cleared. The steps extend across the whole width of the church. A stone with a Latin inscription was found

used up-side-down as one of the steps (Fig. 3). The preliminary report on the inscription (by Zbigniew T. Fiema) says that Latin inscriptions are rare in Petra, and the paleography of the text would indicate a date not later than the third century AD, and possibly earlier. The text follows a typical commemorative formula, and the preserved (lower) part notes the later stages of the career of the person honored by this dedication. It was seemingly commissioned by a Lucius who was the signifer (standard bearer) for a praefectus (commander) of Ala II Ulpia Auriana, an army regiment stationed in Cappadocia. Since the dedication was set up in Petra, the praefectus, who is not named in the preserved part of the inscription, may have been a native of that city.

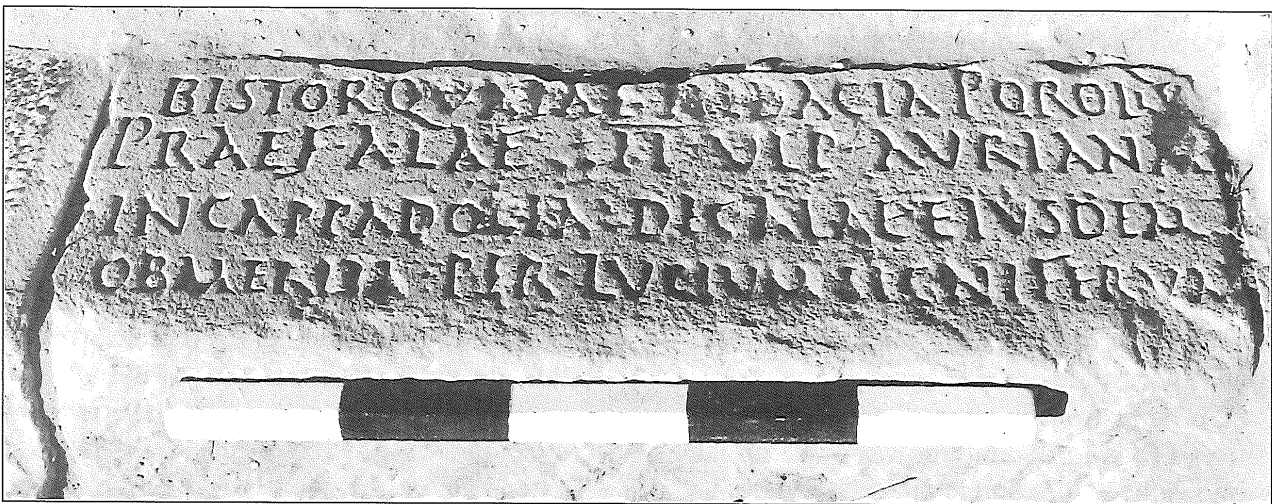
Below the steps is a courtyard. A door was found leading into this from the south and a second door was found in the south of the western wall of the courtyard. The paving of the southern area of the courtyard is about 8 cm higher than that of the central area. In the central area of the court, a column base and drum were found *in situ* to the south. On the northern side of this central area, there is a stylobate on which another column base with a drum above were found *in situ*. Also on that stylobate a column drum 71 cm high was found. The top of this had

been hollowed out. There is a similar hollowed-out drum in the atrium of the Petra Church. No floor for the northern section of the court has been located.

Because of the eroded condition of the building, very little has been recovered that can aid in dating it. On the basis of the mosaic fragments and the general form, it is preliminarily dated to the fifth - sixth centuries AD.

### Pre-Ecclesiastical Phases

As noted above, a large cistern of Nabataean construction was found under the nave of the church. It most likely was in the courtyard of a Nabataean building. No traces of a floor of the Nabataean period have been found, however, in probes below the floor of the church. One probe, above the cistern, reached the roof of the cistern with no intervening level between the roof and the church floor. It is possible that when the church was built an earlier floor was removed. In the area of the south pastophorium, which is eroded below the floor level of the church, what appear to be purely Nabataean deposits have been located and will be explored in future seasons. Some of the Nabataean building materials reused in the church may have come from a building at the site, but can just as well have come from structures anywhere in Petra.



3. Latin inscription reused in the steps of the church.

### Post-Ecclesiastical Phases

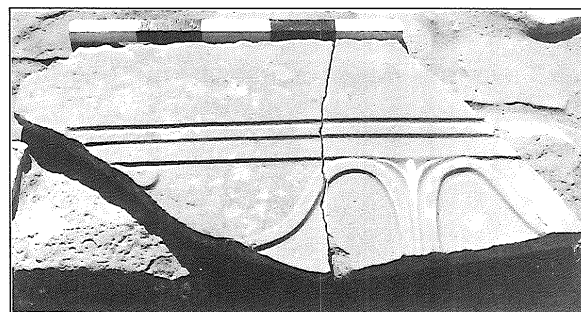
The post-abandonment history of this structure may be quite complicated. The depredations that it has suffered cannot all be due to erosion. Almost no architectural elements were found in the fill of the interior of the structure itself. Indeed, compared to the post-abandonment history of the Petra Church that is down the slope, the absence of materials attributable to the superstructure is striking. Thus far the evidence consists of the following:

- 1) On the southern side of the narthex an area of about 2 m x 2 m of burned material was found above the floor. Mixed with the ash were a number of nails and pieces of lead. Some of the stones of the paving of the southern side of the court had been removed and in and around the removed stones, quantities of burned materials were also found. These may indicate an occupation of the site not long after its ecclesiastical function ceased as the stone floors had not yet been covered by wind-blown debris.
- 2) On the northern side of the lower court, a layer of hundreds of water-washed cobbles was found mixed with wind-blown sand. These stones can only have come from the wadis below the structure. They were located at a point that looks almost straight down into the Wādī Abū 'Ullayqa (the least defensible entry to Petra) and raise the possibility that they and perhaps some of the now missing architectural elements of the structure were used as missiles against enemies approaching from below. A local informant stated that at a site farther to the east, and also above Wādī Abū 'Ullayqa, there is another point where the route can be cut; quantities of such stones are also found there. We may here be seeing only the faintest glimpse of an incident or series of incidents during the long dark age of Petra.
- 3) Large quantities of mosaic cubes were found in concentrations at the western end

of the northern aisle and in the fill above the steps to the west of that. Additionally, a partially restorable marble chancel screen (Fig. 4) was found in the same area of the concentration of mosaic cubes in the western end of the northern aisle, indicating deliberate displacement of materials from the chancel area. It is now thought that when the ridge was cleared for agricultural use in relatively recent times, the area of the courtyard was probably still a depression and thus elements were dumped into it to level the area. It is likely that this leveling activity also led to the destruction of the mosaic in the raised chancel. The consequent debris was shifted to the west to fill the lower area.

The fill in the lower courtyard produced numerous architectural fragments that may or may not have formed part of the church. Among them were eight parts of an engaged column (or a pair of them), including a base and a fragmentary capital. These may originally have been part of a door or a niche in the as yet unexcavated western wall of the central part of the lower courtyard. Two parts of a carved Nabataean entablature with triglyphs and circles in the metopes were also recovered. It is possible that the engaged column(s) framed a doorway over which was this entablature. The rest of the entablature has not been identified. Another find was a miniature sandstone cornice (51 cm x 59 cm), again in the Nabataean style; traces of red paint are still visible on it. These elements are safely dated to the first century AD.

Thus the destruction of the building may



4. Part of a marble chancel screen.

have been due to a combination of erosion, deliberate dismantling, and agricultural clearing.

### Restoration

Much of the southern wall of the structure was already eroded below floor level. Towards the western end, two courses above the floor remained in a few places. Almost the whole length of the southern wall was consolidated to the line of the pastophorium. Stones that had fallen from it to the south were replaced to bring the whole wall up to two courses above the floor level. This was then consolidated with lime and sand to prevent further erosion. The displaced column base that was found at its probable original location at the western end of the northern stylobate was also set back in place. Two stones identified with certainty as belonging to the southern stylobate were restored as the fourth and sixth stones from the east on that stylobate. One drum and a capital found on the southern slope were restored above the *in situ* second column base from the east of the northern stylobate. These are most likely not their original locations but they are safe where they are. One column drum was restored above the *in situ* column base with an *in situ* drum above it on the northern stylobate of the lower court. This drum was found adjacent to the *in situ* features and is most likely restored to its original location.

Finally, a large column drum (H: 66.5 cm; W: 78 cm) found on the northern side of the central part of the lower court was restored above the *in situ* column base on the northern side of the narthex. The drum is slightly wider than the top of the column base (W: 72 cm) and thus does not appear to fit over that base. However, given the random nature of the reuse of older elements in this structure,

and given that the drum was found less than 2 m from that base, and, finally, given that there is no other possible place for that drum, it likely did come from the column of the north side of the narthex.

Finally, the area surrounding the structure was surveyed to a distance of approximately 30 meters. Forty-two architectural elements were located on a plan and most were moved up to the Ridge Church, many to a lapidarium on the consolidated southern wall of the structure. While it is not at all certain that all of these elements formed part of the original building, they are safer where they are now than they were on the slopes.

### Acknowledgments

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