

St. Aaron Revisited – The Finnish excavations at Jabal Hārūn near Petra¹

The 1990s have witnessed a considerable expansion of archaeological activities in Petra and its vicinity, and the new information allows now for more substantive statements concerning the Byzantine period (fourth - early seventh centuries AD) occupation in the city. A particularly important contribution was made by the ACOR's Petra Church Project (1992-1997). The project has uncovered the well-preserved remains of a large ecclesiastical complex dated to the later fifth through the early seventh century AD, which included a basilican church, baptistery and the adjacent structures (Fiema *et al.* 2001). Christian monuments in the Petra area (Schick 2001) are also more closely investigated now. In this context, of particular importance is Jabal an-Nabī Hārūn (the mountain of the Prophet Aaron) located ca. 5km southwest of Petra, and referred to as the Biblical Mount Hôr by the early explorers of the area. According to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, the mountain is considered the place of burial of Moses' brother Aaron. Currently, the peak of the mountain is occupied by the 14th century Muslim shrine — *wali* (Palestine grid: 188.64E, 969.667N; UTM: 731200E, 3356470N) which contains a sarcophagus believed to contain Aaron's remains. Furthermore, there is an extensive ruined architectural complex located ca. 70m below and ca. 150m to the west of the peak with the shrine, on a wide plateau of the mountain and at ca. 1270m above sea level. The extant historical information, albeit limited, and the results of the early explorations at the mountain indicated that a Byzantine monastery should be located there.

Historical Information and Previous Exploration

Extant historical information concerning the occupation at Jabal Hārūn has been fully presented elsewhere (Peterman and Schick 1996; Frösén *et al.* 1998). Only few, more significant records are mentioned here. Eusebius,

the fourth century Church historian, mentioned Mount Hôr near Petra (*Onom.* 1904: 176, 177). Some Byzantine records refer to Mār Hārūn as a place frequented by monks during their walks around the Dead Sea during Lent, but it is not certain whether this toponym can be identified with Jabal Hārūn located farther south (Schick 2001: 2). An important information was provided by Al-Mas'ūdī (mid-10th century) who specified Jabal Hārūn as a holy mountain of the Christians in the possession of Melkites (al-Mas'ūdī 1894: 143-144). The place was visited by the Crusaders during the expedition of Baldwin I to Transjordan in 1100: "...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 of Chartes 1913: 2.5, 381). Other Crusader records mentioned the presence of a church there (e.g., Gilbert the Abbot 1879: 255; *Gesta Francorum* 1866: 523). The last reference is that by Magister Thetmarus who noted a church and two Greek monks living there in 1217 (Thetmarus 1851: 30-33).

The mountain was mentioned in passing by some 19th century explorers, among them Burckhardt, Irby and Mangles (1823: 433-439), and Palmer (1871: 1-5). Only in the early 20th century, important observations were made there by Musil (1907: 113-118, 161) and Wiegand (1920: 136-145). The latter concentrated on the structure of the shrine, dated by the dedicatory inscription to 1363. Wiegand provided a plan and the description of the shrine, noting pieces of church-related, marble furnishing and *opus sectile* pavement, either reused in the shrine construction, or discarded nearby. He proposed that the extensive masonry upon which the shrine was constructed represented the remains of a large memorial church built on the central plan and associated with side rooms. As for the ruined architectural complex on the plateau below the

¹ I am thankful to Prof. Jaakko Frösén, FJHP Director, and the entire FJHP team, including the Swiss az-Zantūr Project experts, for their

comments and advice. All errors of omission and interpretation are mine.

mountain's summit, some explorers admitted a possibility that the ruins related to a Byzantine monastery. However, it was the 1991 exploration by Russell, Peterman and Schick, which resulted in a first sketch-plan of that site, its description, and a proposition that the ruins should most probably be identified with the monastery of Saint Aaron mentioned in historical sources (Peterman and Schick 1996: 473-480).²

This proposition was further reinforced by the information provided by the Petra Papyri — the sixth century Greek Byzantine papyri found in a room adjacent to the Petra church. The texts are mainly legal documents concerning transactions and registrations of property, and settlements of disputes involving several families of Petra during at least two generations. They also mention local towns, churches, and dwellings, as well as the agricultural hinterland of Petra, which prompted the scholars working on the texts to attempt to relate the revealed information to the archaeological remains and toponomastics in and around Petra. Papyrus Petra inv. 6 (Papyrus Petra Daniel C. and Nancy E. Gamber), dated to June 15, 573 (or earlier), mentions “the House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron” outside of the city of Petra (Gagos and Frösén 1998: 476-477). This institution is mentioned in the will of a person, as one of the two beneficiaries in the event of his death (*donatio propter mortem*). Because of the occurrence of the terms *Hagios Oikos*, in Greek, and *Domus*, in Latin, and of the title of *Hegoumenos*, the papyrus almost certainly refers to a monastery of Saint Aaron near Petra.

The Finnish Jabal Hārūn Project - Objectives and Results

The combination of this information with the aforementioned religious tradition associated with Jabal Hārūn, and the results of the early exploration in the area, would strongly suggest that the architectural remains on the high plateau of the mountain, which were otherwise recognized as remains of a monastic complex, can indeed be identified as the Monastery of Saint Aaron. However, the ultimate confirmation of this hypothesis could come only through the archaeological excavations of the ruined complex. To this effect, the Finnish Jabal Hārūn Project (FJHP) began the comprehensive investigation of the site and its environs in 1997. The project is directed by Prof. Jaakko Frösén, University of Helsinki, and sponsored by the Academy of Finland. The participants include archaeologists and cartographers from the University of Helsinki and the Helsinki University of Technology, respectively, as well as archaeologists and conservators

from the USA, Sweden, and Italy. The FJHP maintains close cooperation and exchange of information with the Swiss az-Zanṭūr Project in Petra.

The FJHP is designed as a multi-season and interdisciplinary investigation. The most important goal of the Project is the study of the spatial and temporal variations in human occupation in the area of Jabal Hārūn throughout the ages, with the special emphasis on the extent and nature of occupation at the site tentatively recognized as a Byzantine monastery. Furthermore, the Project investigates patterns of human adaptation in the area, the palaeoenvironmental variations, aspects of land-use, ancient agriculture and resource exploitation. Ultimately, the Project will address the issue of the relationship between the Jabal Hārūn area and the city of Petra, from the Nabataean through the Early Islamic periods. To meet these objectives the project utilizes archaeological excavations and survey, cartographical fieldwork and research, architectural studies, geoenvironmental exploration, paleoethnobotanical and paleozoological research, and ethnoarchaeological survey (see Frösén *et al.* 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001a; 2001b). So far, the Project has conducted four full excavation seasons (1998-2001) at the site (FIG. 1). The excavations partially exposed a large church and a chapel, and some auxiliary structures and rooms. This center which, in addition to its monastic function, most probably served as a pilgrimage center dedicated to the veneration of St. Aaron, appears to have existed between the later fifth and early eighth centuries AD, if not later.

The Site Description

The surface of the site of the complex — which measures ca. 62m N-S x 48m E-W — featured installations, such as small windbreaks, enclosures and ovens, all resulting from recent activities. Generally, the complex can be divided into four main components or wings situated around three courts (FIG. 2). Instead of being roughly rectangular, as the early sketch-plan suggested, the complex is more trapezoidal in form. The asymmetrical location of the western wing versus the eastern, southern and northern parts of the complex may indicate that the former is not contemporary with the other three components. The central location is occupied by the church and a chapel, the former preceded by a narthex and then by a court with a cistern cut in the bedrock. Farther west is the western wing — a long, N-S oriented composite structure that consists of separate rooms. One of these rooms is a solid stone-filled compartment, ca. 6 x 5m, which appears as a podium or platform. Directly north of

² Note also the results of the most recent investigations of the cultic character of Jabal Hārūn, by M. Lindner, *Von Isis zu Aaron. Archäologische Wallfahrt zum Jabal Harūn (Jordanien)*. I am

thankful to M. Lindner for sharing with me this unpublished manuscript.



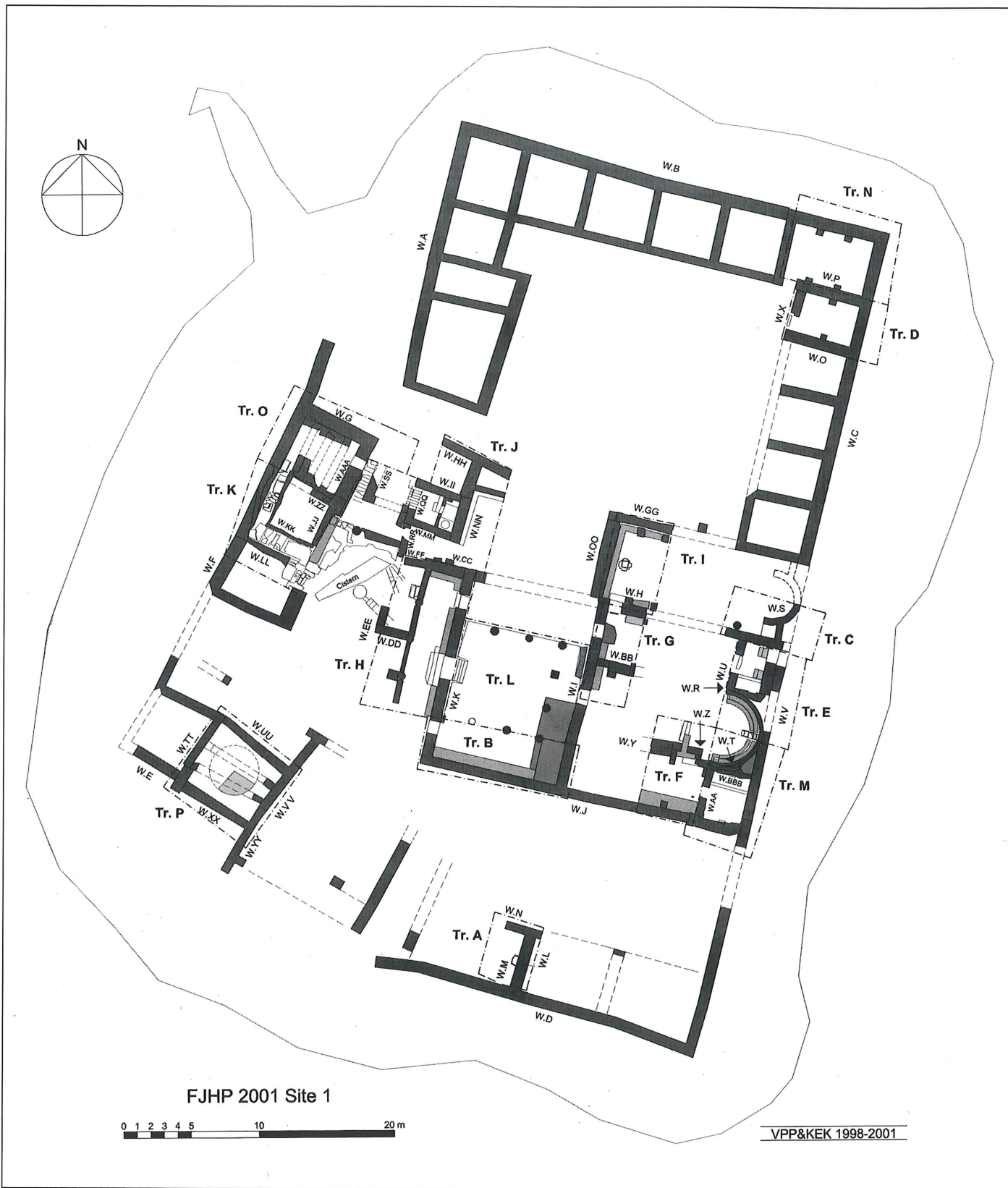
1. General view of the site after the 2001 excavation season (by J. Vihonen).

it are well-preserved remains of a room with three arches. This room features several phases of occupation, from the Nabataean through the Late Byzantine periods, including two major destruction episodes. The main architectural parts were reconstructed after each destruction, including two levels of a plastered floor. The excavations of this structure also revealed that the intentional filling up of the room to the south must have happened during the later phases of occupation at the site, and not during the Nabataean period, as initially proposed.

In the southwestern area, another room was fully excavated. This room, the space of which was spanned by two arches, was probably occupied during the Byzantine and the Early Islamic periods. Initially, there was a round, low platform built of flat stones in the central part of the room — probably a base for a basalt, rotating grain mill, the upper part of which was found nearby. At the beginning of the latest phase of occupation, a large, piled-up stone structure was built against the southern face of the northern wall and on top of the round plat-

form. The structure might have functioned as a supportive buttress, or a platform for special purpose. Directly south of the room, a narrow space was excavated that yielded well-stratified remains of an extensive midden. It contained large quantities of fish scales and bones (primarily, *Scaridae* - parrotfish), often in the matrix of very ashy soil, and associated with sherds of cooking pots. The midden was probably utilized in the later phases of occupation in the adjacent room.

North of the chapel is a large court surrounded on three sides by 14 rooms of a substantial size, resembling a caravanserai or a hostel for pilgrims. Both construction techniques and the material used there appear somewhat inferior to these used in the construction of the church. One room there was excavated so far. The room, spanned by a single N-S arch, had multi-phased occupation and it provided an excellent stratigraphic sequence of ceramic and glass material from the fifth and the sixth centuries AD. South of the church is another court, also limited by series of rooms on its southern side. Only one room was partial-



2. Plan of the monastic/pilgrimage complex at Jabal Härün (by K. Koistinen and V. Putkonen).

ly excavated there but its function in the complex remains undetermined.

Back walls of all these rooms (including the church) served as the enclosure of the entire complex. Although the main entrances were not excavated yet it is strongly suspected that there were two: one on the western side, north of the room with three arches, and another one near the southwest corner of the complex. The court with the cistern appears to have been the main communication hub of the entire complex, through which one could proceed from the southern to the northern court. The area around the cistern was paved with large flagstones representing two phases of occupation. Three channels carried out rain-water from the area of the church (and under the narthex) into the cistern. One of these was an elaborate construction with capstones and a settling tank lined up with hydraulic mortar. A few meters northeast of the cistern, there is a multi-roomed structure that featured several phases of occupation and an extensive evidence of remodeling and changes in function between the fifth and the early seventh centuries. During the later phases of existence, the central part of the structure received waterproof plaster and thus was probably related to some sort of activities including water storage. Still later, this area became a dump of lime slag and a collection point of stone tesserae and glass shards. As in other parts of the complex, the evidence of very late temporary or casual occupation is abundant here.

Phasing of the Church and the Chapel

Although the relative chronology of particular structures at the site is well established, and significant chronological indicators like ceramics, lamps, and glass were found in well-stratified deposits, it is not possible at this time to offer an overall chronological sequence for the entire site. The exception is the church and the chapel that form one unit and the excavations of which provided most of the information available so far. Following is a preliminary phasing of the occupation and modifications of these ecclesiastical structures preceded by brief comments on the pre-Byzantine phases at the site.

Nabataean-Roman Phases

Initially, the pre-Byzantine period at the site was known only from the Nabataean ceramics and a few architectural stones — limestone lintels with elaborate moldings, probably of first century AD date, reused in the church construction. The two rooms located in the western wing of the complex — the one filled up with stone, and the other with three arches — appear to be the only structures known so far at the site that apparently originated in the pre-Byzantine period. Their construction, evidence for external decoration, and the overall appearance would all strongly indicate a monumental Nabataean design. Their

function is uncertain, both during the Nabataean-Roman period and after these rooms were incorporated into the Byzantine monastic complex. But their elaborate character may suggest an initial sacral character. Obviously, such a function would have ceased in the Byzantine period.

Phase I: Early Church and the Chapel

Most probably the structure of the church belongs to the earliest phase of the Byzantine occupation at the site. In this phase, the church was a tripartite, monoapsidal basilica, internally measuring ca. 22.6m (max.) x 13.6m, with seven columns in each of the two rows. Comparing with the size of the Petra church, dated to the later fifth century AD, which is internally ca. 23.2m long and ca. 15.35m wide (Fiema 2001: 30), the Jabal Hārūn church is of close dimensions. Therefore, the ratio of the inner length to inner width, being 3:2 for the Petra church, is comparable for the Jabal Hārūn church. This length to width ratio is relatively typical for earlier churches in Palestine (fourth-fifth century), characterized by long and narrow aisles (Crowfoot 1941: 54, 61). In the Negev, monoapsidal basilicas with the inscribed central apse and quadrangular lateral pastophoria are considered comparatively earlier in date than triapsidal churches (Negev 1974: 400-411). The later fifth century date for the Jabal Hārūn church is also supported by the ceramic material recovered from the inner fill of the main walls of the church, which was not later than the mid fifth century.

The single apse, ca. 5.2m long at the chord, was flanked by two lateral pastophoria, similarly to the Petra church in its early phase. The south pastophorion contained a cupboard installation in its northern wall. Marble slabs, some of Proconnesian marble, were apparently taken from the disused monumental structures in Petra, and used to lay out floors throughout the church. The church may or may not have been preceded by a simple narthex in this phase. The early, marble-clad, rectangular bema was unusually narrow but fully contained within the nave, as in the Petra church. The apse had a two-tiered synthronon installation, which shows more affinities with the five-tiered synthronon of the Petra church (Fiema 2001: 77-78) rather than with these from the churches in the Negev (Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982: 157-158). On the other hand, the clearly preserved remains of the bishop's throne in the Jabal Hārūn church were accessed by the set of steps, centrally superimposing the synthronon tiers, as in the Central Church at Rehovot/ Khirbat Ru'aybah (Tsafirir 1988: 14, ill. 22). While the Jabal Hārūn synthronon is clearly an original installation, and not added later, as in the Petra church, the throne appears to have been added later. The one-to-three tier synthronon types are generally better attested before the sixth century.

Apparently, the chapel was built in the same time as



3. The cruciform baptismal font (by Z.T. Fiema).

the early church, and sharing the wall between them. Most probably, the original chapel was longer than its extant form, although possibly shorter than the church. The eastern end featured an apse flanked on the south by a high cupboard or cabinet with three shelves. Remains of a floor made of marble slabs have been found in the sounding in the apse. In the proximity of the extant western wall of the chapel, a roughly octagonal pit was chiseled out of the bedrock and the cruciform baptismal font with the masonry-built upper part was installed and further integrated with the bedrock using mortar (FIG. 3). The font is small in size: ca. 0.92m (N-S) x 0.89m (E-W) at the opening, and no more than 0.6m deep. No floor remains associated with this phase were found in this area of the chapel. Possibly, the font was almost entirely sunk below the floor level, but with an elevated rim.

The font belongs to the cruciform type which is usually masonry-built and generally earlier in date than the monolithic fonts (Ben-Pechat 1989: 173-174; 1990: 510; Piccirillo 1985: 355). A close parallel is the large canopied cruciform font found in the baptistery of the Petra church (Fiema 2001). Although cruciform fonts are unknown in Jordan north of the Mādabā-Mount Nebo area, these were popular in southern Palestine and especially in the Negeb where such examples include fonts in the East Church at Mampsis/Kurnub, the North Church at Oboda/‘Abda, and the North and South Churches at Sobata/Subayta; the first two masonry-built (Ben-Pechat 1989: Fig 1; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982: 174-200, for full presentation). With the proposed dating, i.e. the later fifth century, for the beginning of Phase I of the church and the chapel at Jabal Hārūn, the baptismal font there should be considered, together with that at the Petra church, as

one of the earliest known structures of this kind in Jordan.

Baptismal fonts are also known from the monasteries associated with a holy place or a pilgrimage center, and often in a non-urban location (Ben-Pechat 1990: 501-502). But the location of the font in the western part of the chapel, and the overall function of the chapel during Phase I remain puzzling, even if the western wall of the chapel was in that phase located farther west. In baptisteries with no apse, the font was usually located toward the eastern end of the room (Bagatti 1984: 305; Ben-Pechat 1990: 508-509), as to emulate the relationship between the community and the altar, symbolized by the font, e.g. the cruciform font near the eastern end of the apse-less Old Diaconikon at the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1976: 305-312; 1989: 156-157; Michel 1998: 405). The Jabal Hārūn chapel in this phase had an apse (and an altar?), yet the font was located far away from it. Presumably, some still not exposed installations or partitions existed between the font and the apse of the chapel during Phase I. The location of the Jabal Hārūn font may resemble that at the church at Karkur, north of Beersheba, where the font is situated in the westernmost of the series of rooms directly adjacent to the church proper (Figueras 1998: 263-264, Fig. 2). On the other hand, the Phase I architectural arrangement at Jabal Hārūn well reflects the requirement that the baptismal rooms should be attached to the church and provided with direct communication with it (Ben-Pechat 1990: 508-509). Such arrangement is again notable at the Horvat Karkur but not at the Petra church where the baptismal complex is located farther away from the church.

The collapse of the extant (later in date) western wall of the chapel revealed the rubble of the wall's core and

some ashlar which probably belonged either to the original (early) wall of the chapel, or to the structure of the baptismal installation. Fragments of painted plaster were still attached to some ashlar. In addition to some floral and geometric designs, Greek letters or parts of them were also preserved. One such stone contained a plaster fragment with the beginning of the line, reading ΠΡΟΔΡΟΜΟ [which can be interpreted as the epithet of John the Baptist — Πρόδρομος “the Forerunner” — well corresponding to the baptismal function of this part of the chapel during Phase I.

Phase II: Major Remodeling

It appears that a seismic disaster ended the Phase I occupation in the entire complex. The church was restored but also subdivided by a wall into the eastern and the western part. The eastern part, internally ca. 13m (max.) long, retained its ecclesiastical function but the columns were removed and replaced with free-standing pillars probably supporting E-W arches rather than architraves, as in the Lower Church (C101) at al-Ḥumayma (Schick 1995: 324-325). Throughout this phase numerous changes and modifications took place in the bema area. The bema itself was raised and laterally enclosed by two “counter-like” low walls, somewhat similar to those in Petra church in Phase V (Fiema 2001: 57-58), or in the sanctuary of the monastic church at Dayr ‘Ayn ‘Abāṭa (Politis 1993: 507, Fig. 6). Inside the apse, a *thronos* was inserted in the middle of the synthronon. A marble floor was laid out inside the apse, unfortunately, poorly preserved.

Inside the south pastophorion, a sandstone floor was laid out. Close to the northern wall, a large “tomb-like” underground space covered by slabs was discovered but found empty. The size of that space (1.30m long, 0.9m wide, 0.55m high) appears small for a burial, but an ossuary might be conceivable. Alternatively, the space could have been used as a storage bin. East of the “tomb”, and directly in front of the cupboard, a rectangular enclosure of thin sandstone slabs was constructed, with a round hole (diameter 0.16m) giving access to a sizable stone pithos-like container under the floor level. A stela-like construction made of sandstone and marble fragments, was set upright in the middle of the enclosure. Given the presence of the “tomb” next to it, the upright installation might have been some kind of a memorial stone. The contents of the container gave no indication what was stored there (liquid?), but an ecclesiastic function seems possible.

The western part of the original church, ca. 9m long, was apparently turned into an open court (atrium) with two original E-W rows of columns supplemented by the eastern row running N-S. In that row, instead of the northern column, a square pilaster was erected that probably served as a pedestal for an unknown object. Gener-

ally, the atrium must have had two porticoes located opposite each other, and probably one on the eastern side. Initially, the old marble floor was presumably still in use. Later, that floor was partially removed and replaced by the new (extant) floor that consisted of irregular sandstone slabs supplemented by broken marble pieces. This floor, laid out ca. 0.2-0.25m above the level of the marble floor, is markedly sloping westward, as opposed to the original floor. Apparently, heavy rains might have caused excessive flooding of the open atrium area. The new floor facilitated the channeling of rainwater out of the atrium, and toward the cistern.

During Phase II, a formal porch was erected — an enclosed space with a portico of four columns in the front. Whether this space should be considered a narthex, remains the question of terminology. The three channels that apparently discharged rainwater collected in the atrium, run under the mosaic floor of the narthex. Originally, the mosaic featured an almost symmetrical arrangement of designs on both sides of the central door to the atrium, including armed humans and wild animals. Comparable hunting scenes are well represented in the mosaics of the sixth century, e.g. the mosaics at the Hippolytus Hall (Piccirillo 1993: 23-24; 58-59; sixth century), or at the Old Diakonikon-Baptistery in the Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo (Piccirillo 1993: 135, 146; AD 530). The central medallion of the Jabal Hārūn mosaic — a complex geometric design of interlacing squares and ribbons (FIG. 4) — is strikingly similar to the central panel of the narthex mosaic in the sixth century church at Gharandal (Ricklefs 1997: 501-503, Fig. 5).

A new marble floor was laid out in the apse of the chapel and in the area of a new transversal bema located in front of it. On the bema, a large altar masonry base or pedestal was erected of which half was excavated (approx. dimensions: length ca. 0.88m, width ca. 1.4m, height ca. 0.78-0.97m). The structure is hollow inside, having a small compartment (0.54 x 0.45 x 0.65m) with the opening towards the apse. The marble fragment of an inscription, which reads ΑΡΩΝ, was found in front of the pedestal. The fragment could have belonged to a marble sheeting of the installation or to an edge of an altar table placed on top of it. The small compartment inside the masonry pedestal might have served as a depository of reliquaries that would be easily accessible and available for display on various occasions. This would be generally consistent with the practices observed in Palestine and Arabia during the Byzantine period (Donceel-Voute 1995: 198-200; 1996: 328). The appearance of the fixed altar location in Phase II is also consistent with the chronological observations concerning portable versus fixed altar installations. The fixed altar appears relatively late in the sixth century, and only at the end of that century special panels or mosaic arrangements clearly marked the em-



4. The central medallion of the Jabal Hārūn mosaic (by Z.T. Fiema).

placement of the fixed altar's supports (Duval 1994: 170, 203).

During the same phase, the baptismal font in the chapel was abandoned and backfilled, and the new floor in this part of the chapel completely covered the remaining part of the font. Probably, the installation of the masonry-built altar base in the apse and the abandonment of the baptismal font mark a significant redefining of the function of the chapel, perhaps in relation to the church or a chapel on the summit of Jabal Hārūn, recorded by Wiegand. It is impossible to establish its construction date but equally nothing prevents this upper church to be co-existent with the early monastery in Phase I. If the upper church originally housed important relics, its possible damage or destruction at the end of Phase I could have caused the translation of the relics down to the rebuilt chapel of the monastery. As such the chapel during Phase II would have become a memorial chapel and with that new function it might have been considered unsuitable to retain the baptismal installation and practices there. Unfortunately, this hypothesis cannot be tested as the remains at the summit of Jabal Hārūn are not accessible for exploration.

Phase III: Later Modifications

Phase II may also have ended by a disaster. Resulting changes in the church included the replacement of the pillars as roof support by pilasters and the N-S arches that spanned the spaces of the nave and side aisles. Accordingly, the spaces between the free-standing pillars were walled up and pilasters built against these walls and against the main northern and southern walls of the church. The bema area seems to have been enclosed by a

thick but poorly built wall. Secondary walls built directly on the pavements of the north pastophorion and in the area in front of the narthex may belong to this or later phases. Such secondary barriers and partitions are well-known from other Palestinian churches in the Umayyad period, e.g. in the church of St. Mary at Riḥāb, and in the Upper Church at al-Quwaysma (Piccirillo 1984: 338). A wall connected the pillars of the north row in the church of St. John the Baptist (#95) at Khirbat as-Samrā (Humbert and Desreumaux 1990: 261). Partitioning walls were built in the nave and the aisles at the Anchor Church (the Abbasid phase) at Tiberias, which effectively divided the interior into several rooms or compartments (Hirschfeld 1994: 126, 132).

A massive buttress was built on the atrium's side against the wall that partitioned the early church in Phase II. The buttress, built as a wall-enclosing space filled with layers of debris, stones and reused material (including column drums) is currently 2.18m wide and ca. 2m high. It stands directly on the upper (sandstone) floor of the atrium.

It seems that during that period the damage had been inflicted upon the mosaic floor. The iconoclasts had removed not only almost all tesserae forming faces but also main parts of human and animal bodies, and replaced them with plain large-size tesserae. The damaged areas appear as a result of a careful obliteration rather than a wanton destruction. Notably, this damage relates to the images of animals and ordinary people, in opposition to the eighth century Byzantine iconoclasm which specifically targeted sacred images. However, the perpetrators cannot be easily identified since the destruction phenomenon is also present in some Jewish synagogues in

the region (Piccirillo 1993: 42). At any rate, this kind of deliberate damage which, nevertheless preserves the mosaic in its entirety, is generally dated to the eighth century (late Umayyad-early Abbasid period), and is known from other churches in Jordan and Palestine (Piccirillo and Aliata 1998: 372-389), e.g. at the Church of the Lions in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1993: 211). The evidence of careful mosaic obliteration, as at Jabal Hārūn, should indicate that by the eighth century, the church would have been still functioning in the ecclesiastical capacity (Piccirillo 1993: 42).

Later Phases

It is uncertain which parts of the entire structure still retained their ecclesiastical function during the later phases of the church's existence. Structural integrity of the building is also not supported as the apse's semidome seems to have collapsed by then if not earlier. Notable is the evidence of the collection of marble fragments, glass and stone tesserae, and glass shards. Dumps or collection points of such material have been found in the south pateriorion, in the ruined apse of the church, in the cupboard next to the chapel's apse, in various spots of the atrium, and in other places of the excavated parts of the complex. Some spaces within the church and the atrium were temporarily or casually occupied during later periods, a fact exemplified by ashy spots, fireplaces and the abundance of bones (primarily, fish) in strata above the original marble floor. Finally, substantial stone tumbles, including the collapsed arches were documented everywhere. These episodes, either reflecting natural decay and deterioration of structural parts or subsequent seismic-related destructions, had definitely terminated the occupation in the church area.

Historical Observations

Although the Byzantine monastic presence at Jabal Hārūn was already indicated by the extant historical sources and early explorations, the activities of the FJHP have substantially contributed to a better understanding of the function and the significance of the site. Though direct evidence is lacking, the association of the monastic presence at Jabal Hārūn with a pilgrimage center related to the veneration of St. Aaron appears reasonable. The lack of literary evidence specifically mentioning pilgrimages to the Mountain of Aaron, either performed by Christian Arabs (Shahid 1998: 375-377) or foreigners may be disturbing when comparing with the neighboring Negeb which certainly benefited from the pilgrim traffic to Sinai (Figueras 1995). But the sanctity of the place continued to attract the pilgrimage traffic, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim, also in the Medieval period, and it continues in recent times. Therefore, the Byzantine period should not be considered an exception. Since one of the three main

itineraries to Mount Sinai would lead from Syria, first to Aila (Maraval 1995: 295), possibly on or following a general course of the *Via Nova Traiana*, detours to Jabal Hārūn could have been made. The presence of a large church with an associated chapel is certainly also an important indicator of the pilgrimage nature of occupation. Large, basilican churches are rare in the monasteries of the Judaeen Desert (Hirschfeld 1990: 63-65, Site 57; 1992: 130). Additionally, the rooms around the northern wing of the complex appear to be almost twice in size in comparison with known monks' cells in some Judaeen Desert *coenobia* (Hirschfeld 1992: 176-177). Most probably, these could be better interpreted as pilgrim hostel.

However, the revenues from the pilgrimage traffic would not have been the primary subsistence means for the permanent inhabitants of the complex. Complex water-management installations serving an intensive agricultural production and located down in the valley probably date to the Nabataean period but the continuity of their utilization during the Byzantine period is strongly implied. As such, these at least partially also relate to the monastic presence on the mountain. The discovery of the rotating grain mill indicates that flour was produced at the site. Apparently, the St. Aaron monastery had its own food production and processing base, as is expected in the case of a *coenobium*-type monastery. The overwhelming predominance of fish bones and scales in the midden discovered in 2001 is expected in a monastic/pilgrimage context, as this kind of monastic diet is well attested in ancient sources. Evidently, fish was either brought in by the pilgrims or imported by the monks themselves, or both.

The spatial and temporal variations in the occupation character throughout the complex will require special attention in the future excavation seasons. The ecclesiastical occupation in the Jabal Hārūn church appears to be much reduced in space during later periods, yet some parts of the church seem to have continued in that capacity. But other, non-ecclesiastical (?) structures at the site, feature considerable differences in the intensity and character of occupation, often reduced to casual/temporary character. A distinct feature, notable in almost all structures, including neglected or functionally modified parts of the church, is the presence of concentrations of material such as broken marble and glass fragments, and glass and limestone tesserae. Some concentrations may be interpreted as dumps of disused material but other as caches of material for remelting or burning for lime. In this respect, the later periods at the Jabal Hārūn complex reflect practices also noted on other Late Byzantine-Early Islamic ecclesiastical sites in Jordan. Even more elusive are the latest occupational periods for which the ecclesiastical occupation can be no more archaeologically confirmed. Certain phenomena are of particular interest,

such as the presence of Red Sea parrot fish (*Scaridae*) among these late remains as much as in the earlier deposits. This should indicate the continuity of the pilgrims' traffic to Jabal Hārūn, and the preservation of traditional diet, even during periods when the monastic/ecclesiastical structures there were seemingly no longer in use.

Although the post-Byzantine periods in the history of the Jabal Hārūn complex are particularly enigmatic, some chronological indicators have been recovered. Both ceramic and glass material support the continuity of occupation throughout the seventh century AD, and the extension into the early eighth century appears to be attested by the presence of certain glass types, and by the specific type of the iconoclastic destruction of the narthex mosaic. Even the later eighth century may be considered through the presence of some ceramic lamps, generally dated to the Abbasid period. At this point of time, no datable artifacts or structures uncovered by the FJHP can be unambiguously associated with the Crusader period, although some kind of ecclesiastical/monastic presence was implied by the Crusader sources. The solution of this most puzzling discrepancy between the historical and archaeological data will undoubtedly remain one of the FJHP priorities.

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