

Archaeological Information from The Petra Papyri

The excavations of the sixth century Byzantine church starting in 1991 in the city centre of Petra (Fiema *et al.* 2001) attracted the attention of scholars because Byzantine Petra had remained largely unstudied. After ten years of work and new excavations in the city centre, the situation has radically changed.

As is well known, a large number of charred papyrus rolls were found in December 1993 in a room that had once belonged to an earlier large building and was later incorporated into the church. A fire destroyed the church and affected that area of the building complex where the papyri were kept (Koenen 1996a: 513–531; 1996b: 177–188; Fiema *et al.* 1997: 145–163 and 171, with further references).

The quantity of readable text in the charred papyrus scrolls has been a treasure trove of information about life in Petra in the sixth century. All texts are in Greek, with just a few lines of Latin on one roll. Numerous Latin loanwords are used, as well as numerous toponyms in early Arabic, all written in Greek letters.

The earliest secure date preserved in the texts is AD 537, and the latest is AD 592 [these are the new corrected datings of PPetra inv. 68 (AD 537), to be published by A. Arjava, and PPetra inv. 71.1–2 (AD 592), to be published by the Michigan team] — a period of more than fifty years of Petra's history that is rather poorly documented by excavations or literary evidence. Some of the scrolls probably dated to before or after this period, but the dates have not been preserved.

The analysis and publication phase of the work is underway, conducted jointly by teams from the University of Michigan and the University of Helsinki, headed respectively by Dr. Ludwig Koenen and myself. The final publication of the documents will start now, some eight years after the discovery of the scrolls.

Conservation work on the carbonised Petra papyrus rolls was completed in the laboratory at ACOR in 'Ammān by May 1995 by the Finnish conservation team (Lehtinen 1997: 1099–1101). In most cases, the outer

windings of the rolls were destroyed, but the crust, sometimes containing the beginning of the roll, is well preserved in many cases. From the 152 rolls or fragments of rolls that have been opened, more than 20 yield partially continuous text segments and about another 20 provide us with fragments with substantial information. Simultaneously with the opening of the rolls, both teams started the decipherment of the papyri and Dr. Zbigniew T. Fiema continued the analysis and interpretation of the archaeological material, and advised both teams on the history and topography of the area. Nevertheless, this is not yet the right time for a full analysis and interpretation of the historical facts gleaned from the charred archive. I would just like to present some points which may interest archaeologists working on Byzantine Petra.

As it is well known, Petra is situated at the crossing point of several important caravan routes. In addition to trade, the route between the Red Sea and the northern part of Syria-Palaestina leading to the Mediterranean was also an important military route, the '*Via Nova Traiana*' during the Roman period, and it later served as a pilgrims' route to the holy places of Palaestina and the Sinai, as well. There was a stopover for the caravans in Petra, using the attractive city and its hinterland as a place of recreation. There was enough water and a collecting and watering system that was needed for the maintenance of agricultural productivity.

According to tradition and based later on Flavius Josephus (in the late first century AD) and as stated by, e.g., Eusebius (in the fourth century), this is also the place of Mount Hor where Aaron, Moses' brother, died and was buried on the top of Jabal Hārūn, within sight of the city — even if this identification has been heavily criticized by scholars.

Needless to say, Petra was the flourishing centre of the Hellenized Nabataean culture during the Hellenistic period. The Nabataean kingdom was annexed to the Roman Empire in AD 106 on behalf of the Emperor Trajan, and Petra was chosen to be the capital of the new Province of

Arabia. Emperor Hadrian himself visited Petra in 130 and gave the city his name Hadriane, and later on, Elagabalus made Petra an imperial Roman Colony: *Augustocolonia Antoni(ni)ana*.

But what had happened by the middle of the third century? The large and deep economic crisis of the whole Roman world may have put the trade with the eastern regions under pressure. Maybe the changing trade routes and the rise of the rival centres also had something to do with the supposed decline of Petra. But, what happened to the wealthy Nabataeans? Even their language disappears from our historical sources during the fourth century. Nevertheless, early in the fourth century the emperor Diocletian reorganised the administration of the Empire, and Petra became the Metropolis of the Province Palaestina Tertia, also called Salutaris.

On May 19, 363 a severe earthquake destroyed a good deal of the city. But we have to remember that, with the exception of the earthquake and some scattered pieces of information, before the evidence from the new excavations and before we were able to read the evidence from our carbonized texts, we had to build up a picture of the city after the earthquake mostly on *argumenta ex silentio*.

We have been told that on July 9, 551 a devastating earthquake reduced most of what remained of Petra to heaps of rubble and that it was never rebuilt and all records came to an end.

The carbonized archive covers a period of at least 55 years, between 537 and 592. Thus the earthquake of 551 happened right in the middle of the period of our archive. However, the documents of this archive were written in the prosperous city of Petra (Αὐγουστοκολωνία Ἀντωνιανή, ἐπίσημος καὶ εὐαγὴς μήτηρ κολωνίων, Ἀδριανὴ Πέτρα, μητρόπολις τῆς τρίτης Παλαιστίνης Καλουταρίας — the Antonine imperial colony, the distinguished holy mother of colonies, Hadrianic Petra, the Metropolis of the Third Palestine Salutaris). This fact seems to be in clear contradiction with the earlier *communis opinio*.

The information obtained from our documents about the people of sixth century and the rural hinterland has clarified some aspects of Petra's economic and social history which, in turn, fill in major blanks in the history of southern Palaestina at that time. Rather than precipitous socio-economic decline, the texts seem to reflect the active and rich life of the city and its agricultural surroundings — like earlier times — when Petra's wealth was based on long-distance trade. It is true that the scrolls indicate agriculture being the backbone of Byzantine Petra's society and economy, but this is exactly what long-distance caravan trade needed.

The texts found in Petra belong to an archive, or dossier, of one wealthy family. They are economic and legal documents dealing with real estate or other property.

They are contracts, agreements, settlements of disputes, and registrations.

Names of settlements other than Petra, such as Augustopolis belonging to the same administrative district and Zadakathon (modern Şadaqa), are mentioned, together with numerous places around Petra and Augustopolis (which has been identified as modern Udhrūh, located some 10km east of Petra).

Other settlements to the west of Petra are also mentioned — and this is very important. One of the documents (inv. 4) is a sworn settlement about a division of inherited property between a certain most honourable (εὐδοκιμώτατος) Dorotheos and a certain most excellent (θαυμασιώτατος) Flavius Dusarios son of Valens (who seems to have been in a very high position under the praetorian prefects) — so we have both Dorotheos and Dusarios on the one hand — and the key figure of our archive, Theodoros son of Obodianos on the other. The document was written on May 10, 538. It was not written in Petra but in Colonia Gaza ([ἐ]ν κ[ο]λωνίᾳ Γάζῃ), and also dated according to the era of Gaza. In this document one can also read the names of Berosaba, Domaeitha, Chapharnaas, and Eleutheropolis (modern Bayt Jibrin), all of them situated to the west of Wādī 'Arabah. Theodoros' honorific title is θαυμασιώτατος (most excellent) and he is described as 'originating from the city of the Petraeans but now living in this illustrious city of the Gazaeans' ὁρμώμε[νος μὲν] ἀπὸ τῆς Πετεραίων πόλεως δ[ιά]γων [δὲ] [τ]ὰ νῦν ἐπὶ τῆδε τῆς [Γαζαίων] λαμπρᾶ[ς πόλε]ως. The property consists of inheritances of several persons.

One of the fascinating things discovered in the documents is the very close nature of the links between social traditions here and in southern Palestine to the west of Wādī 'Arabah, as is seen when comparing the Petra Papyri with the Nessana Papyri. Even the Arabic names used for plots of land and parts of buildings are very similar or identical, which is not surprising in view of what we have been able to document about the close political and cultural ties that have linked the people of the two areas.

Churches and other public buildings are also mentioned, such as the Chapel of the Saint and Glorious Martyr Kyrikos in Zadakathon (modern Şadaqa) (inv. 83), the Church of the Saint and Glorious Martyr Theodoros in Augustopolis (invs. 47, 49) and in Ammatha (inv. 64+66), the Church of our Blessed and All-Holy Lady, the Glorious Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary in Petra (invs. 6a, 49, 82.5), the Church of Saint John and Peter, probably in Petra (inv. 25a), the Hostel or Hospital of the Saint and Gloriously Triumphant Martyr Kyrikos in Petra (inv. 6a), and the House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron outside of the city (inv. 6a).

Particularly interesting information coming from the texts concerns the survival of Nabataean culture during the Byzantine period: Traditional Nabataean names ap-

pear among the more common Christian, pagan Greek and Roman (Latin) names. Typical Greek names are, e.g. Epiphanius and Kyriakos, and Latin names are, e.g. Romanus and Severus. Nabataean names include Obodianos, as well as Dusarios.

Thus, the scrolls indicate that the Nabataean tradition was at least still alive in Petra during the sixth century, well after the use of Nabataean writing seems to have ceased in the fourth century, maybe with the earthquake of 363. It seems that the Nabataeans did not disappear from Petra by the fourth century. Probably they adjusted to the subjection to Roman rule, adopted Greek as the official language, and converted to Christianity, but maintained enduring elements of Nabataean identity, culture and language — names, at least.

In fact, also a variety of topographical names of the fields, orchards and houses to the south and to the west of the city seem to represent a Greek transcription of names in early Arabic. Whatever the precise meaning of such names is, the phenomenon indicates the importance of this language among farming communities around Petra at this date. It is significant that the people, using Greek in their documents, named their houses and fields in their own Arabic language, which points to the people's self identification, far beyond the parameters of the written language. There were Arab tribes, not only nomads but farmers, around Petra, and maybe little by little the Nabataeans may already have been supplanted by, or integrated with other Arab peoples before the coming of Islam. Some of those names still exist today and are still in use in Wādī Mūsā some 1500 years later.

Perhaps one of the most interesting documents is inv. 10, studied by the Michigan team. It is a division of property among three brothers, Bassus, Epiphanius, and Sabinus, grandsons of a certain Bassus who appears in other texts. The scroll was skillfully and very professionally produced.

The scroll is noteworthy for several reasons: The information it provides about ancient society and legal practices in Petra, about the nature of the wealth of the families in question, about the personal names used, and about the names used for places and for buildings, houses and parts of houses. Not only the place names but also the names for buildings and parts of buildings consist, for the most part, of Arabic words and names that were written in Greek letters. Now the new material, even though it is in Greek — or maybe better just because it was written in the Greek alphabet — provides a valuable new body of knowledge about the Arabic language of the sixth century, especially about its vocalization.

One of the largest and best preserved papyrus scrolls excavated at Petra, inv. 83, has been studied by the Finnish papyrologists Maarit and Jorma Kaimio. The roll of ca. eight metres contained approximately 700 lines of text

on the settlement of several disputes between two men, and reveals interesting aspects of conflict-resolution and the adjudication of legal disputes in the Byzantine period in south Jordan.

The two men involved in the dispute, known from other Petra papyri, were Theodoros son of Obodianos (the most important key figure of the whole archive), and Stephanos son of Leontios. The disputed properties were not in Petra, but in the nearby town of Zadakathon (modern Šadaqa); the agreement was confirmed with oaths exchanged in the Chapel of the Martyr Kyrikos situated in the same town.

Theodoros and Stephanos owned houses that were adjacent to each other. This caused some disputes between them, especially when Stephanos began to build a water-channel to his home from a spring owned by the neighbour. The dispute was not resolved in court, but rather by an arbitration hearing before two trusted men. Among the disputed issues were: The right to draw water from the spring, the building of water-channels and the use of drains, and the access through the houses, along with mutual accusations of stealing building materials and not paying an old debt related to the sale of a vineyard. Some of the contentious actions had been undertaken by the respective fathers of the litigants, as far back as 53 years prior to the date of the scroll, in the early sixth century.

This roll also mentions the name of the Ghassanid leader Abū Karib ibn Jabala, well known from literary historical sources (especially from the contemporary history of Procopius). He became phylarch of Palaestina Tertia after the Ghassanid Arabs, who ruled this region, reconciled with Emperor Justinian in 528. His position as a phylarch is mentioned in inv. 83 though he probably acted as a private mediator in an earlier dispute. The date of the writing of this scroll can probably be determined to the year 574.

One of the scrolls, inv. 6, measuring over four metres in length, was probably compiled on June 15, 573. In the body of the document, there are six identical copies of a donation (last will?) by Obodianos son of Obodianos who is lying sick and promises all his belongings to: 1) the Sacred House (ἅγιος οἶκος in Latin *domus*) of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron (τοῦ δεσπότητος ἡμῶν τοῦ ἁγίου ἀρχιερέως Ἀαρών), location not mentioned, and 2) the most distinguished hospital or hostel (εὐαγέστατος ξενεῶν, ξενῶν, ξέοδοχίον) of the Saint and Triumphant Martyr Kyrikos (τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ καλλινίκου μάρτυρος Κηρύκου), situated in the same city (ἐν τῆδε τῇ πόλει).

The early mentions (573) of both a monastery (if it really is a monastery) and a hospital are interesting. It has to be noted that the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Sinai, for example, although known from ca. 300 as a dwelling (*koinobion*) of monks, was founded and completed as a fortified enclosure or a real monastery for the first time in

548 by the emperor Justinian, and that the 'systematic' building and founding of hospitals along the pilgrim routes started, also according to the orders of Justinian, only after the worldwide famine of 536 and especially at the time of the great plague first reported in Egypt in 542.

When the charred and carbonized remains of over 150 rolled-up scrolls were discovered in the collapsed remains of the Byzantine church in late 1993, scholars assumed that this single largest collection of written material from ancient Jordan would clarify many aspects of Byzantine society and economy in sixth century southern Palaestina. As you have seen, *that* expectation has been more than fulfilled to date, with the complete conservation and initial reading of all 152 fragments of scrolls.

The scholars working on the scrolls have now started relating the documentary texts to the topographical surroundings and to the many unexamined archaeological remains in and around Petra.

At least from the point of view of the governing class of the rich land owners, Petra and its hinterland was still functioning throughout the sixth century. As stated before, according to our archive, land-ownership was the backbone of Petra's society, and not, for example, long-distance trade. Our archive may be one-sided and the picture may be misleading, but there is no doubt that agriculture played a major part in Petra. The importance of agriculture in the area of Petra came as a surprise to us, but travels around Petra easily reveal that the land could have sustained agriculture of the type just described, even if today it is almost nonexistent. There are many springs and cisterns, some of them still in use, and a traditional water management system.

Perhaps agriculture, spreading throughout the hinterlands of Petra, had made the city less dependent on the fate of trade and trade routes. But, on the other hand, this kind of hinterland was a *condicio sine qua non* for an important crossing and service point of the caravan routes, as well as military or pilgrimage routes. It has to be admitted that the earthquake of 363 had done severe damage to the city — this can, indeed, be seen in many places in Petra — and its consequences may have reduced the population, but on the other hand, as the Petra church and the papyri show, this did not bring an end to the viability of the city. To a large extent, the city was rebuilt and was a

place that attracted people. As I pointed out, there is no sign of the big earthquake of 551 in our archive.

As stated before, according to prevalent tradition, Mt. Aaron is the burial place of the High Priest/ Prophet Aaron, Moses' brother. An Islamic shrine built during the 14th century over the remains of an earlier church at the summit symbolizes the mountain's sacred status for the three monotheistic faiths. A complex of buried buildings on a terrace just below the summit almost certainly was the house (monastery and church) of St. Aaron, of which we have the earliest mention in our carbonized scroll (inv. 6) in 573 (?).

A Finnish archaeological project aims at a full understanding of the topography, history, epigraphy, and environment of the mountain and its immediate surroundings. It has already identified a large-scale ancient wadi and terrace irrigation system around the sides of the mountain that may be the largest in southern Palaestina. Last year's reconnaissance surveying and mapping under the leadership of Mika Lavento aimed at a better acquaintance with the area (see M. Lavento's contribution in this volume). From 1997, the work has continued with a team of archaeologists and graduate students from the University of Helsinki, with Zbigniew Fiema as chief archaeologist, and cartographers from the Helsinki University of Technology. The first seasons of fieldwork clarified some aspects of the mountain-top site, revealing at least three churches. But this is already another account (see Z.T. Fiema's contribution in this volume).

References

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