

Petra: North Ridge Project

The American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) began excavations on the north ridge of the city center of Petra in late 1994.¹ Before discussing the results, however, it is necessary to say a few words about the history of Petra. Prior to the 1990s, it was known that the heyday of Nabataean culture in Petra was brought to an end by the great earthquake of 363 AD. It was thought, after the city was inhabited by only a small population (Browning 1994: 58-59). ACOR's excavation of the Petra Church and the discovery of the Petra Papyri in the early 1990s showed that there was a relatively wealthy population of what might be called gentleman farmers associated with a richly decorated church that was probably built in the mid-fifth century (Fiema *et al.* 2001). The latest of the papyri are dated 582/83. After the deposit of the papyri in a room in the Petra Church complex, it burned and subsequent stratigraphic layers in the church appear to reflect the use of part of the building as habitation; there was some evidence of scavenging of the site. The dating of those activities was uncertain but generally thought to be in the late sixth to early seventh century and effectively brought to an end by an earthquake in the mid-seventh century.

With that background in mind, we can turn to the north ridge area above the Petra Church (FIG. 1). The first phase of the excavation included clearance of the Ridge Church. In the course of that project, it was discovered that the north ridge seemed to have been used by the military. Although direct evidence is somewhat ephemeral, mere logic would dictate that the site was of military significance. From the top of it there is a 360 degree view over the city center and, more importantly, there is a clear view of the "back entrance" to the city, Wādi Abū 'Ullayqa. Military inscriptions, figurines that may originally have come from a military installation, and other hints seem to confirm that the very top of the ridge, now almost bare bedrock, was used by the military. While this was in use, the north ridge area was also being used as a ce-

metery and the hill is literally honeycombed with shaft tombs. Two of these, dubbed North Ridge Tombs 1 and 2 have been excavated (Bikai and Perry 2001). Tomb 1 dates to the first half of the first century, and Tomb 2 to the second half of the first century, they each yielded exceptional collections of Nabataean ceramics.

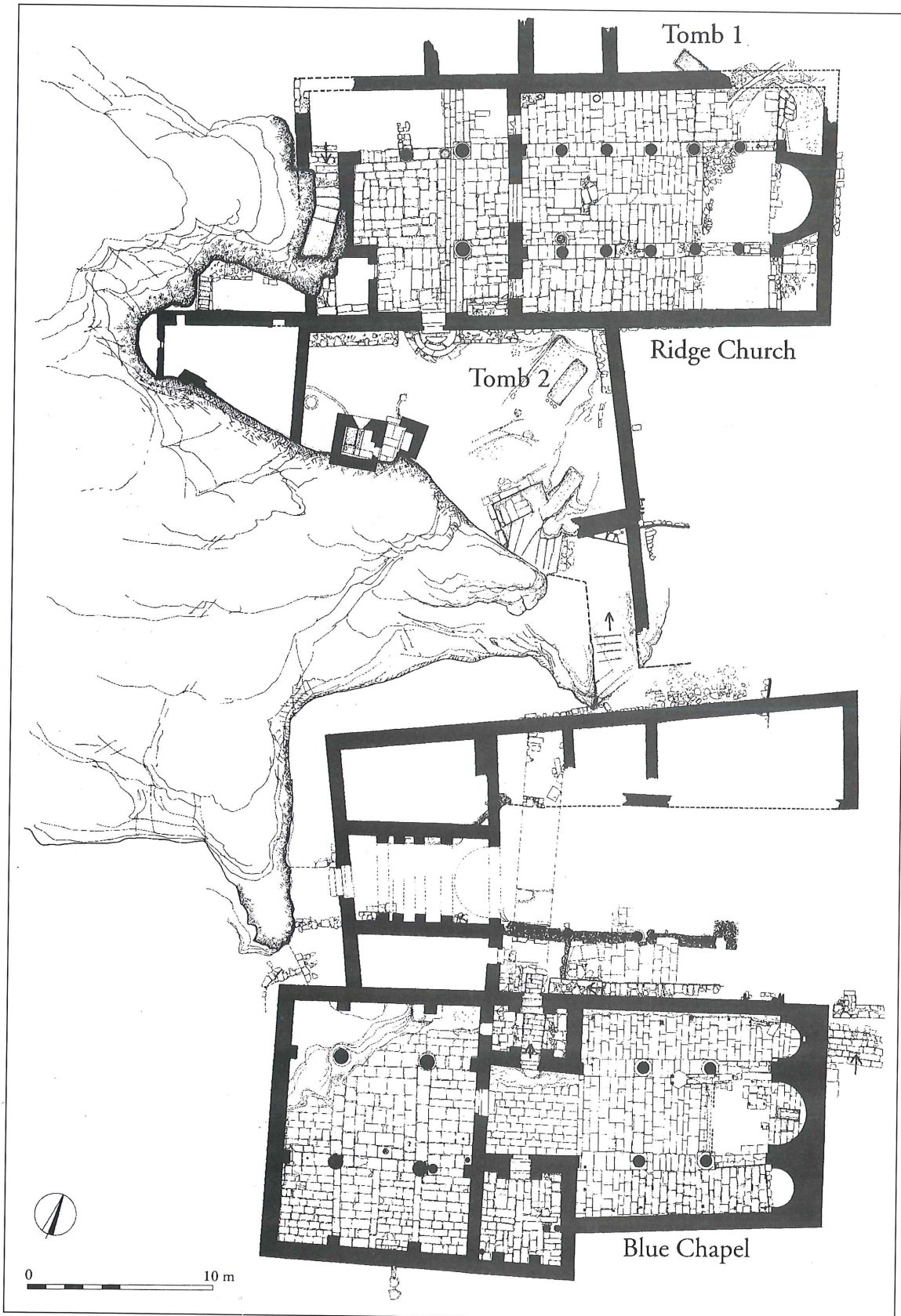
The 2000 and 2001 excavation seasons at the site focused on a large building on the slope between the Ridge Church and the Petra Church. As many of the walls are of classic Nabataean construction, it had been hoped that Nabataean levels could be excavated. As it turned out, any quest for those strata almost immediately uncovered shafts that lead to more first (and perhaps second) century tombs. It has thus been difficult to determine how the site was used between the time that those tombs were in use and the earthquake of 363 AD, which seems to have led to a change in the use of the area. However, it is possible that the large building that is now called the Blue Chapel Complex was originally also part of the military use of the site. It could, for example, have been a barracks.

The first activity that we can document after the 363 AD earthquake is the construction of the north wall of the Ridge Church. Parts of that building most certainly predate the earthquake, but late in the fourth century whatever had been there was converted into a church with a single apse and two lateral pastophoria (FIG. 2). The date is relatively clear as during the construction of that wall, Tomb 1 was discovered and, presumably, looted of its valuables. It was then sealed by the building of a pillar in the shaft — a pillar to support the north wall. The Ridge Church is a small, rather simple structure. Late in its history the chancel was raised and blocky mosaics were installed in the altar area. In the sixth century, wall mosaics were installed but of these almost nothing remains.

To the south of the church, there was a piazza. Across from the entrance to the church was a small structure now believed to be an ossuary tomb of, perhaps, a military fig-

¹ ACOR appreciates the assistance of the Department of Antiquities at Petra and of the numerous students, volunteers, as well as assistant

directors Virginia Egan and Megan Perry and architect Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos.



1. Ground plan of the North Ridge excavation area. Drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos, Pierre Bikai, Patricia M. Bikai, Virginia Egan, and Megan Perry.



2. View of the Ridge Church. Photo by Patricia M. Bikai.

ure. It is thus possible that this area remained in the hands of the military into the Byzantine era and that the Ridge Church somehow served them. South of the Ridge Church was a stairway, cut into bedrock in the Nabataean period but paved by the Byzantine era, and south of that is the Blue Chapel Complex. This is divided into upper and lower parts connected by a narrow stairway. We know a lot about the lower (southern) part, but less about the upper part, so we will look at that lower section first. Although the lower part incorporates walls from earlier structures, in its present configuration it cannot be earlier than the late fourth century as it uses architectural elements from Nabataean monuments that were destroyed in the earthquake of 363 AD.

As noted, access to the lower structure is down a narrow staircase with two doors in it. This is the only known entrance to the lower part of this building so immediately one has to say that it is not likely that this building was open to the general public. At the bottom of the staircase is a hall that had a vaulted ceiling. From the hallway, one

could go straight across to a room with a flat ceiling supported by arches. Alternately, one could turn right and go into a large courtyard. The arches of this were supported by pilasters and columns. The center of the courtyard was open and there is no evidence for a second floor. Returning to the hall, the eastern end of it has no door. It simply opens into a small chapel which, but for two things, would hardly merit mention in the endless catalogue of Jordanian Byzantine churches. The first is the remarkable colonnade (FIG. 3). The four columns were probably originally part of a Nabataean monument. The Byzantine builders carefully marked the elements before they moved them. Each shaft consists of a plinth, a base, three column drums, a lower capital and a two-part upper capital. In rose-red Petra, this blue Aswan granite stands out as do the beautifully simple limestone capitals. Once the builders had these columns, they sought out other blue materials: blue marble for the pulpit and chancel screens and blue sandstone for the floor.

The blue granite columns were one of the unusual



3. View of the Blue Chapel during the excavation, the foundation for the bishop's throne is at top center. Photo by Patricia M. Bikai.

things about this monument, the other is that this may have been the residence of the bishop of Petra. What is the evidence for this? First is the limited access down the stairway suggests that this is a private chapel, not a public one. It is close to the Petra Church, which most likely functioned as the cathedral church. Finally, it has, in the apse, the base for a throne for a bishop. None of those pieces of evidence is conclusive, but together they suggest that this may be the bishop's residence. To look at this from a different perspective we now need to return to the upper area of this complex. The first question that must be asked is whether the two parts of what we have called a complex are in fact two parts of one unit or two different buildings. We will probably never know the answer to that question as excavation in the upper area is extremely difficult because of the presence of Nabataean tombs immediately under the floor. It is possible that the two structures form a single unit and that the upper part functioned as a monastery or as a hospice for pilgrims or both. If so, then the chapel was for their private use. This would not negate the possibility that the bishop was in residence in part of the complex.

As far as we now know the chapel functioned into the seventh century. At some point, however, it was abandoned. The marble furnishings were left in place but if there were many portable goods they seem to have been removed. After a rather brief period or possibly even im-

mediately, the building was occupied by a group who can only be described as scavengers. They are present on this whole hillside with clear domestic installations and evidence of looting in the form of piles of glass, lead, and iron. In the area of the north ridge, their main activity seems to have been the looting of the shaft tombs that honeycomb the bedrock. They knew how to find those tombs and anyplace where bedrock was near the surface level of the Byzantine era, they probed. In the upper part of the Blue Chapel Complex, the sandstone bedrock had been leveled out and a nice limestone floor laid on it either in the Byzantine period or earlier. Everywhere that bedrock was close below, that floor was lifted and the immediate area around a probable shaft contained a scattering of Nabataean pottery, the remnants of looting activities. A relatively small group of persons were involved and we actually know some things about them: they used large, heavy storage jars, indicating that they had to haul water and store it, i.e., that there is no longer a functioning public water system in Petra. The group on this hill probably relied on water from the spring in Wādī Abū 'Ullayqa. They also used rather heavy basalt mortars. The weight of the mortars and of the storage jars indicates at minimum a semi-permanent presence on this hill. They ate, among other things, parrot fish, the only nearby source of which is, obviously, the reef at al-'Aqaba so they were in contact with al-'Aqaba. They were probably also engaged in some

sort of subsistence agriculture as there is at least in one case an attempted clearance and building of a retaining wall that could be agriculture related. Their dwellings seem to be the ruins themselves: in the atria of the Petra and Ridge Churches and inside the Blue Chapel itself.

It had been thought that the activities of this population were rather short lived as there is no real depth of deposit associated with their activities. The earthquake that brought down the columns in the Blue Chapel is now dated by C¹⁴ to 748/49 AD. While the chapel itself was no longer habitable, other parts of the building still were usable, including the hall west of the chapel. The presence of Mamluk pottery under the collapse of the vaulted ceiling in the hall indicates that the earthquake that destroyed that part of the building happened several centuries later than the one that destroyed the chapel itself. There are candidate earthquakes in 1456-59 AD and 1546; the earthquake of 1293 AD is probably too early (Ken-Tor *et al.* 2001).

Our knowledge of the history of Petra, a Petra that was dying but not quite dead, has been extended a few more

centuries. The population that lived in those centuries, though they were few in number, left their mark. If you walk from the Ridge Church toward the Conway Tower you will see dozens and dozens of looted tombs. No doubt the recent inhabitants of Petra have been active there, but they are rifling through the scraps left by the ancients who were the ones who really destroyed Petra.

Bibliography

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