

Observations on the Byzantine Church at Jabal Hārūn near Petra, Jordan

The Finnish Jabal Hārūn Project (FJHP) is an interdisciplinary investigation of Jabal an-Nabī Hārūn (the mountain of the Prophet Aaron), ca. 5km SW of Petra in southern Jordan¹. Launched in 1997 with Prof. Jaakko Frösén as its director, the FJHP is sponsored by the Academy of Finland and the University of Helsinki. The Mountain of Aaron is particularly important in the social and religious history of the Near East. According to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, the mountain is considered to be the place of burial of Moses' brother Aaron. The peak of the mountain is occupied by the 14th century Muslim shrine (*weli*) with a sarcophagus believed to contain Aaron's remains. However, it is the extensive, ruined architectural complex located at ca 1270m asl, on a plateau of the mountain, ca 70m below and ca 150m to the west of the peak, which is the focus of the FJHP investigations. Byzantine historical sources related to Jabal Hārūn, while pointing to the sanctity of the mountain, are generally scarce. Several accounts concerning the monastic presence there are preserved from the Crusader period, but the information provided by the Petra Papyri, discovered in 1993, is the most relevant here. Papyrus Petra inv. 6 (Papyrus Petra Daniel C. and Nancy E. Gamber) dated to June 15, AD 573, mentions "the House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron" outside of the city of Petra (Frösén and Fiema 1994: 1-3).

The combination of this information with the religious tradition associated with Jabal Hārūn, and the results of the early exploration in the area, strongly suggested that the architectural remains on the high plateau, which were otherwise recog-

nized as remains of a monastic complex (Peterman and Schick 1996), could indeed be identified as the Monastery of Saint Aaron. However, the ultimate confirmation of this hypothesis came through the archaeological excavations of the ruined complex. During the past six fieldwork seasons (1998-2003), a large basilican church and a chapel, and some auxiliary structures and rooms were exposed (FIG. 1). The research on the data and finds provided by the fieldwork indicates that the complex, in addition to its monastic function, had most probably also served as a pilgrimage center dedicated to the veneration of St. Aaron. This monastic-pilgrimage center appears to have existed between the later 5th and the 8th century AD, if not later².

Analysis

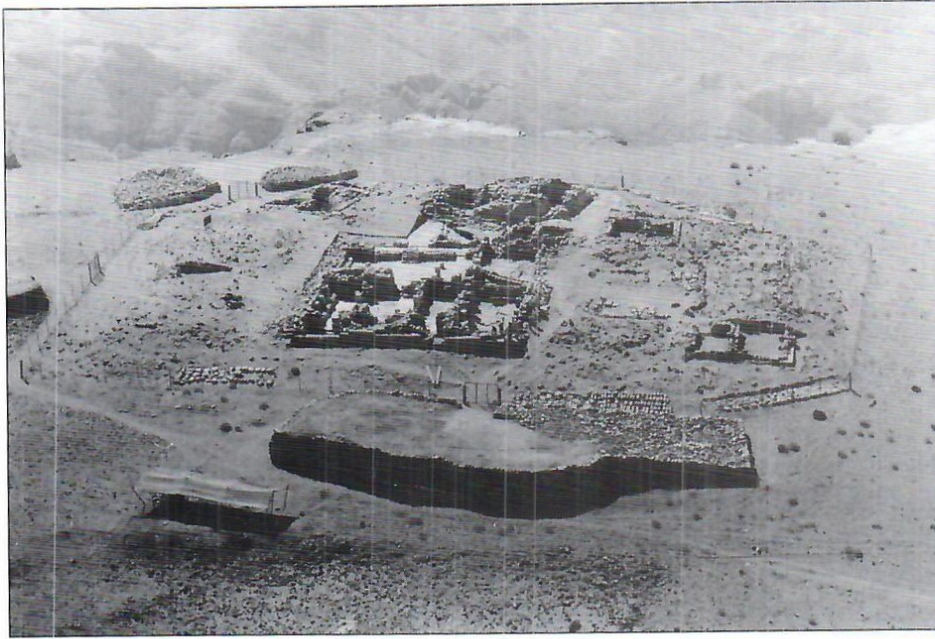
The site, which measures ca 62m N-S x 48m E-W, is an irregular quadrangle the extent of which is marked by the back walls of the structures. The central location is occupied by the church and a chapel that face an irregular court with a rock-cut cistern on the western side, and series of rooms surrounding a courtyard on the northern side. This northern part of the complex most probably served as a pilgrims' hostel. The southern side of the complex consists of, as yet unexcavated, rooms and spaces which seem to have flanked the main entrance to the monastery. The western side of the monastery is occupied by the large multi-roomed structure which seems to date to the Nabataean-Roman periods, and which was apparently later incorporated into the monastery.

The relative chronology of particular structures

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search" program of the Academy of Finland.

² For the results, see the yearly reports: J. Frösén *et al.* 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002 and 2003. Other major publications include Frösén and Fiema 2002, and Fiema 2003.



1. The view of the monastic site from the summit of Jabal Hārūn, looking west (photo by M. Mustonen).

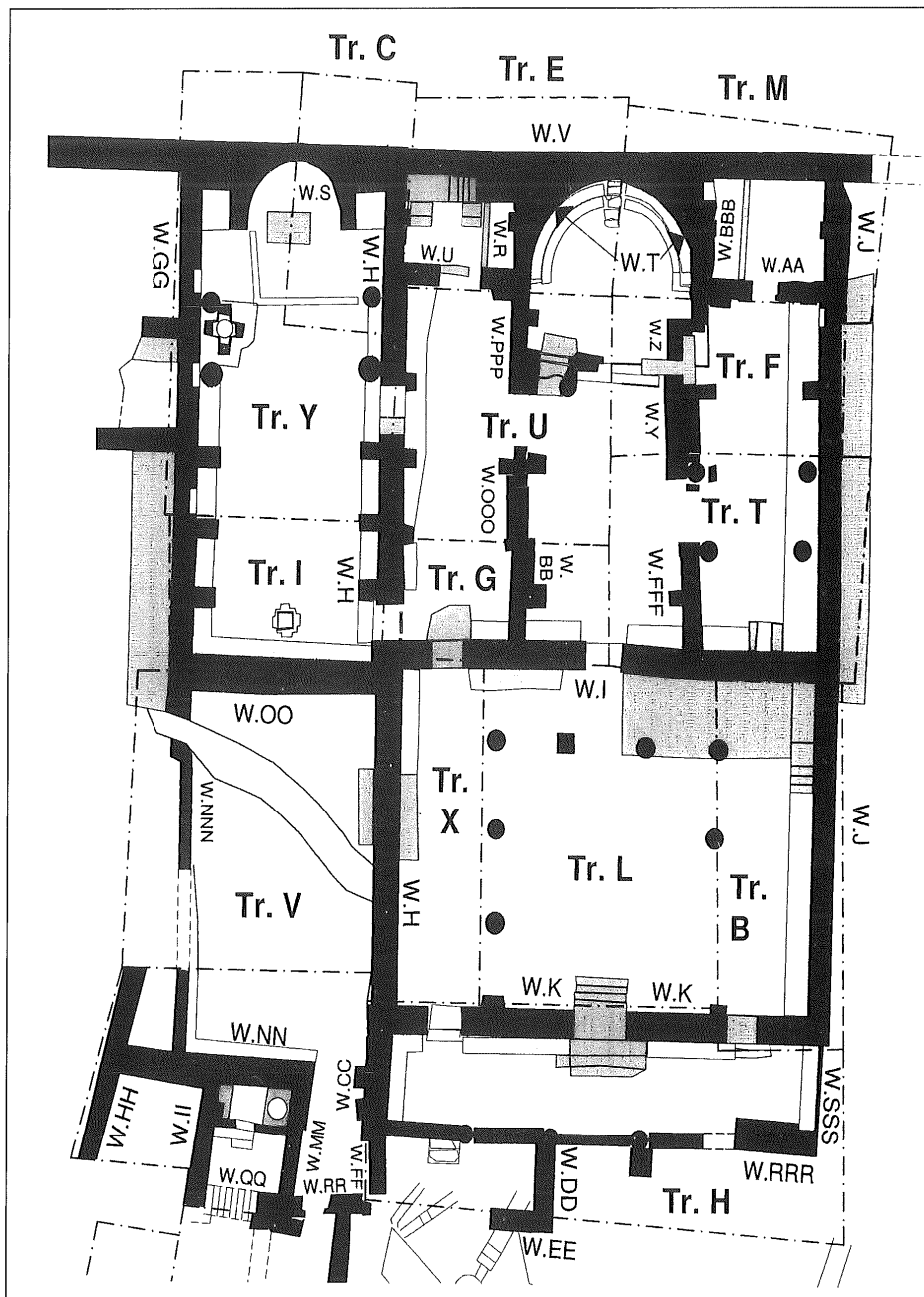
at the site is well established, and significant chronological indicators (ceramics, lamps, and glass) were found in well-stratified deposits. However, the overall chronological sequence is currently available only for the church and the chapel which form one, relatively self-contained unit (FIG. 2). Altogether 14 phases of occupation interspersed with destruction episodes have been recognized in the history of the church and the chapel. However, to simplify the presentation, only the four major phases are described here. It is clear that a better understanding of the history and phases of the existence of the Jabal Hārūn church will largely depend on the architectural, decorative and structural parallels. As such, whenever appropriate, comparison is made here with the Byzantine church of the Virgin Mary at Petra, excavated by the American Center of Oriental Research in 1992-97 (Fiema *et al.* 2001). That church seems to be the closest parallel to the monastic church at Jabal Hārūn.

Phase I (later 5th-early 6th centuries AD)

The early church was a tripartite, monoapsidal basilica, internally measuring ca. 22.6m (max.) x 13.6m, with seven columns in each of the two rows. Compared with the size of the Petra church, dated to the later 5th century AD, which is internally ca. 23.21m. long and ca. 15.35m. wide, the Jabal Hārūn church is of similar dimensions. Therefore, the ratio of the inner length to inner width, being 3 : 2 for the Petra church, is also comparable for the Jabal Hārūn church. This length to width ratio is typical

of earlier churches in Palestine (4th-5th century), characterized by long and narrow aisles (Crowfoot 1941: 54, 61; Smith and Day 1989: 84). The later 5th century date for the Jabal Hārūn church is also supported by the ceramic material, not later than the mid-5th century, recovered from the inner fill of the main walls of the church. The apse, ca. 5.2m long at the chord, was flanked by two pastophoria, similar to those of the Petra church in its early phase (IV). The marble floor was laid throughout the church (FIG. 3). The early, marble-clad, rectangular bema was fully contained within the nave, as in the Petra church. The apse had a two-tiered synthronon installation that shows affinities with the five-tiered synthronon of the Petra church. The clearly preserved remains of the bishop's throne in the Jabal Hārūn church were accessed by the steps centrally superimposed on the synthronon tiers. However, 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 (*infra*). The one-to-three tier synthronon types are generally better attested before the 6th century - an observation which also supports the 5th century date for the Jabal Hārūn church.

Apparently, the chapel was built at the same time as the early church, and they shared a wall between them. The eastern end featured an apse flanked on both sides by high cupboards or cabinets with three shelves each. The extant appearance of this area of the chapel seems to be associated with the succeeding phases. Only the remains of the marble floor and



2. The plan of the church and the chapel at Jabal Hārūn (by K. Koistinen and V. Putkonen).

fragments of wall plaster still attached to the lower parts of the apse's wall, all found in the sounding in the apse, can be safely associated with the early phase. In the western part of the chapel, a cruciform baptismal font with the masonry-built upper part was installed. The font belongs to the cruciform type which was usually masonry-built and generally earlier in date than the monolithic fonts (Ben-Pechat 1989: 173-4; 1990: 510; Piccirillo 1985a: 355). A close parallel is the large, canopied cruciform font in the baptistery of the Petra church, dated to the later 5th century AD. Cruciform fonts were popular in southern Palestine and especially in the Negev, e.g., in the East Church at Mampsis,

the North Church at Oboda/'Avdat, and the North and South Churches at Sobata/Shivta; the first two were masonry-built (Ben-Pechat 1989, note 10; Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982: 174-200).

Phase II (later 6th century AD)

A disaster, probably of a seismic nature, 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 parts. The former, internally ca. 13m (max.) long, retained its ecclesiastical function but most of the columns were removed. Only two columns were retained (representing each initial row of columns in Phase I).



3. The marble pavement in the church (photo by J. Vihonen).

These were now carrying long (ca. 4.5m) E-W arches supporting the roof of the reduced-in-length church. Although the bema must have lost most of its marble furnishing, it seems that its form was largely retained. Inside the apse, a *thronos* was inserted in the middle of the synthronon.

The western part of the original church, ca. 9m long, was turned into an open court (atrium) with two original E-W rows of columns supplemented by the eastern row running N-S. As no evidence for a western row of columns has been detected, the atrium must have had two porticoes located opposite each other, and probably one on the eastern side. Presumably, the old marble floor was initially in use. But later, that floor was partially removed and replaced by the new (extant) floor which 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 to facilitate the channeling of rainwater out of the atrium, and toward the cistern. Also in this phase, a formal narthex was erected - an enclosed porch with a portico of four columns in the front - which now preceded the atrium. The mosaic floor in the porch featured an almost symmetrical arrangement of designs on both sides of the central door to the atrium, including armed humans hunting wild animals. Such scenes are common in the mosaics of the 6th century, e.g., the mosaics at the Hippolytus Hall (Piccirillo 1993: 23-24, 58-59; 6th century), or at the Old Diakoni-

kon-Baptistery in the Memorial of Moses on Mt. Nebo (Piccirillo 1993: 135, 146; AD 530). The central medallion of the Jabal Hārūn mosaic - a complex geometric design of interlacing squares and ribbons - is strikingly similar to the central panel of the narthex mosaic in the church at Gharandal, tentatively dated to the 6th century (Ricklefs 1997: 501-3). However, except for the bordering chevron pattern, the geometric design in the center, and the occasional fragments of human or animal bodies, the designs are not preserved since the mosaic was heavily altered by later, iconoclastic activities.

Some changes also occurred in the chapel. The original western wall of the chapel seems to have suffered a destruction. A new wall was constructed further east, reducing the length of the chapel by ca. 3m. It seems that the baptismal font was still functional during this phase. A new marble floor was laid out in the apse and in the area of a new transversal bema located in front of it. The altar table was probably still a portable, or so-called "four-legged" installation.

Phase III (7th century AD?)

The following major phase of existence also seems to have followed a disaster. Resulting changes were major; in the church they included the functional replacement of the columns (although still retaining them *in situ*) as structural supports by free-standing pillars supporting E-W arches. Simultaneously, N-S arches, supported by the pilasters, spanned the

spaces of the nave and side aisles. The bema itself was raised and laterally enclosed by two “counter-like” low walls, somewhat similar to those in the Petra church in Phase V, or in the sanctuary of the monastic church at Dayr ‘Ayn ‘Abāṭa (Fiema 2001: 57-8; Politis 1993: 507, Fig. 6). On the left (northern) side of the bema, a stepped and plastered structure was constructed, fully integrated with the wall enclosing the bema. This structure must have supported the ambo.

During the same phase, the early baptismal font in the western part of the chapel was abandoned and backfilled. A new, also cruciform and masonry-built font was erected at the left (northern) side of the bema (FIG. 4). The font is well preserved and it also includes an integrated container between two of the arms of the cross. On the bema, a large altar



4. The cruciform baptismal font uncovered in the chapel in 2003 (photo by M. Mustonen).



5. The interior of the chapel. The masonry pedestal for an altar is in the center back (photo by M. Mustonen).

masonry base or pedestal was erected (FIG. 5). The structure is hollow inside, with a small compartment with the opening towards the apse. The marble fragment of an inscription, which reads APΩN, was found in front of the pedestal. The fragment could have belonged to an edge of an altar table placed on top of the pedestal. The small compartment inside the masonry pedestal might have served as a depository of reliquaries which would be easily accessible and available for display on various occasions. Although in this particular case, the reliquary would not be located in a shaft or fosse under the structure of the altar on the bema, as for example at Umm ar Raṣāṣ (Alliata 1994: 312-14; Michel 1994: 117, 119, note 15), but rather under the altar table, such cases are also known (Michel 1998: 394). The appearance of the fixed altar (as opposed to portable or four-legged installations) in Phase III is also consistent with the chronological observations. The fixed altars appear relatively late, i.e., after the 6th century and generally later (Duval 1994: 170, 203).

Phase IV (8th century AD and later?)

The changes related to this phase might have originated in response to another destruction. It is also possible, however, that these were simple but solid measures to further reinforce the structure of the church against potential earthquakes. Accordingly, the spaces between the free-standing pillars were walled up and pilasters built (or rebuilt) against these pillars and against the main northern and

southern walls of the church. In the southern aisle, two columns were used instead of the pilasters. Secondary walls built directly on the pavements of the northern pastophorion and in the area in front of the narthex may belong to this or later phases. Notably, such barriers and partitions are well known from other Palestinian churches in the Umayyad period, and dated to the mid-7th-mid-8th centuries AD. For example, to such belong the Church of St. Mary at Rihāb and the Upper Church at Quwaysma (Piccirillo 1984: 338) or the Church of St John the Baptist (#95) at Khirbat as-Samrā' (Humbert and Desreumaux 1990: 261).

Probably during that period (or earlier), 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, in the manner of a careful obliteration rather than a wanton destruction. This damage relates to the images of animals and ordinary people, in opposition to the 8th century Byzantine iconoclasm that specifically targeted sacred images. This kind of deliberate damage, which nevertheless preserves the mosaic in its entirety, is generally dated to the 8th century (late Umayyad-early Abbasid period), and is known from other churches in Jordan and Palestine as well as from the Jewish synagogues in the region (Piccirillo 1993: 42). Particularly notable and deliberate, but not complete damage, can be observed at the Church of the Lions in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (Piccirillo 1993: 221). The evidence of careful mosaic obliteration, as at Jabal Hārūn, should indicate that in the 8th century the church would have been still functioning in an ecclesiastical capacity.

Later Phases

Possibly, some parts of the entire structure still retained their ecclesiastical function during the later phases of the complex's existence. But the structural integrity of the building is not fully supported as the apse's semidome seems to have collapsed by then, if not earlier. The evidence of the collection of marble fragments, glass and stone tesserae, and glass sherds is noteworthy. Dumps or collection points of such material have been found in the south pastophorion, in the ruined apse of the church, in the cupboards in the chapel, in various places in the atrium, and in other places in 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, either reflecting natural decay and deterioration of structural parts or subsequent seismic-related destructions, definitely terminated the occupation in the church area.

Comparative Observations

On the basis of his work in central Jordan, M. Piccirillo has distinguished two main periods of ecclesiastical building activities. In the 5th - beginning of the 6th century, the construction concentrated on fulfilling the practical liturgical purposes. In the second half of the 6th century, new luxurious building projects and the beautification of older churches seem to have taken place (Piccirillo 1985b: 261). Chronologically, these two periods would roughly correspond to Phases IV-VI at the Petra church, and Phases I and II of the monastic church at Jabal Hārūn.

The comparisons between the Petra church and the Jabal Hārūn church are not only based on purely chronological distinction, superficial observations, and the geographical proximity of both places. There are some striking similarities between both churches which do not seem to be accidental. The dimensions of both churches, the manner of construction and initial decoration are largely comparable, which may imply the involvement of the same team of architects and builders. Perhaps this hypothesis may also explain the initial monoapsidal form of both churches and the cruciform baptismal fonts. Even in the later phases of existence (Phases VII, IX of the Petra church and later phases at Jabal Hārūn), when the ecclesiastical function of both edifices was considerably reduced or poorly attested, certain cultural phenomena are equally attested. These include the construction of simple, partitioning walls, or the evidence for collection of still useful material (mosaic tesserae, glass).

There, however, the comparisons end and some substantial differences occur in the history of both churches. The most important seems to be the overall function. While the Church of the Virgin Mary at Petra might have been a metropolitan church of *Palaestina Tertia*, the church at Jabal Hārūn must have retained its monastic-pilgrimage function until the end of its active existence. The difference

in the time-span of the ecclesiastical existence is also considerable. The Petra church may not have survived long beyond the end of the 6th century due to the disastrous fire and the subsequent ecclesiastical abandonment. As such, the early 8th century iconoclasm did not leave its destructive mark on the superb floor mosaics of that church. On the other hand, the Jabal Hārūn church appears to have continued long after the end of the 6th century, albeit in a gradually reduced and seemingly impoverished form.

Important in comparative terms is the transition between Phases IV and V of the Petra church and Phases I and II of the church at Jabal Hārūn, which probably may be assigned to the early through later 6th century AD. There is no evidence for a destruction of the early church (Phase IV) at Petra. Reflecting on the two periods distinguished by M. Piccirillo (*supra*), the Church of the Virgin Mary indeed experienced a considerable spatial expansion, architectural re-definition, and it benefited from a sumptuous, although often careless and somewhat haphazard redecoration program. On the other hand, the Church of St. Aaron experienced a destruction at the end of Phase I. While the function of the church and the chapel was possibly somewhat redefined, the reconstruction resulted in a substantial contraction of the church's size (and of the chapel) and only a modest, pragmatic redecoration, primarily exemplified by the mosaic floor in the narthex.

At any rate, both churches experienced substantial remodelling at the beginning of Phases V (Petra church) and II and III (Jabal Hārūn church), whether or not prompted by a prior destruction. But the Petra church was transformed into a triapsidal church while the Jabal Hārūn church retained its original form. The transformation from mono- to triapsidal form, i.e., the installation of apses in places formerly occupied by the pastophoria, is generally dated to the early through mid-6th century. On the basis of the examples from the Negev, that change is said to have been linked to the re-emphasis on the cult of Martyrs and Saints (Margalit 1990), and the associated liturgical changes (such as the introduction of the rite of the Great Procession and Prothesis) which affected the overall architectural arrangements and the location of the reliquaries (Negev 1989; Margalit 1989; Duval 1994; Tsafirir 1988: 47-49). An alternative view concentrates on the variations in the organization

of the sanctuaries and in the deposition of the relics in triapsidal churches, and the resulting difficulty in associating an architectural form—mono- or triapsidal—with particulars of the specific cult and liturgical requirements (Rosenthal-Heginbottom 1982: 223-30, 233). It is certainly necessary, however, to distinguish between churches that were initially monoapsidal and underwent the transformation, and the new triapsidal churches which feature substantially changed, square-like proportions (wider but shorter) and which first appear in the later 6th century.

In this context, it is worthwhile to review the changes in the form and function of the Jabal Hārūn church and the chapel in Phase II, followed by further structural changes (support system) in Phase III. Wall I divides the original church into the western part (atrium) and the eastern part, the latter being a wide but shorter church proper. Initially, it was thought that this reduction in size, associated with the non-transformation into the triapsidal form, was specifically related to the lack of proper financing for the total rebuilding of the church, i.e., the execution of some kind of inexpensive reconstruction design. This argument is still at least partially tenable. After all, the Phase II church at Jabal Hārūn is not only smaller in size but also seemingly deprived of much of its marble furnishing. Destroyed or damaged marble chancel screens and posts were apparently not replaced, while their broken fragments were used as a fill in Wall I, or as replacements in the damaged marble floor. Overall, the Phase II church does not impress with wealthy furnishing and decoration, as does the Petra church in Phase V. However, the appearance of the Jabal Hārūn church in Phase II, somewhat simplified and depleted of costly marble decoration, should not entirely relate to a substantial impoverishment of the monastic community.

Attention should again be directed to the re-emphasis on the cult of Saints and Martyrs, evidenced in the 6th century. The installation of the new bema in front of the apse of the chapel at Jabal Hārūn in Phase II, and the construction of a large masonry-built altar pedestal in Phase III, seem to indicate a redefinition of the function of the chapel. Perhaps that redefinition remained in relation to a church or a chapel on the summit of Jabal Hārūn, recorded by Wiegand at the beginning of the 20th century (Wiegand 1920: 136-45), but no longer surviving (FIG. 6). It is not possible to establish its construction



6. Broken marble furnishing located near the summit of Jabal Hārūn; probably originating from a church explored by Wiegand (photo by M. Mustonen).

date. However, equally nothing prevents that upper church from being considered coexistent with the early monastery. If the upper church originally housed important relics, such as Aaron's, its possible damage or destruction at the end of Phase I or Phase II could have caused the translation of the relics down to the rebuilt chapel of the monastery. The substantial altar pedestal, empty inside, would best accommodate relics. As such, the chapel, at least in Phase III (if not earlier), would have become a memorial chapel. Notably, the construction of the new baptismal font in Phase III indicates that the baptismal function and practices there were not abandoned altogether. Rather, by their proximity to the bema and the altar, they seem to become even more liturgically interrelated.

Therefore, such changes would have made it unnecessary to transform the Jabal Hārūn church into a triapsidal edifice. The cult at Jabal Hārūn was overwhelmingly oriented around Aaron. If his relics were now housed in a chapel, which was an integral part of the ecclesiastical building of the monastery, that made the church a memorial edifice as well, without a compelling need to display or venerate any other holy relics in there. The potential presence of other relics in the ecclesiastical complex at Jabal Hārūn cannot be totally excluded

either but there would have been no liturgical need to transform the church's pastophoria into side apses to accommodate such relics. Thus the northern pastophorion had retained its original function also in Phase II (and later), probably as a sacristy.

However, some less understood changes occurred in the southern pastophorion. An enigmatic installation there, which appears as an underground crypt or storage, should date to Phase II, but its function is unclear. Notably, during the 2000 season, small fragments of monochrome (red on white) painted plaster with Greek writing were found adjacent to the walls in this room. The Greek letters revealed a fragment of Psalm 91 (no. 90 in the Septuagint)³. The text may allegorically refer to the famous plague of the Justinianic period, which began in AD 541–2, and affected large areas of the Near East and Europe. Although there are no extant sources indicating the occurrence of the plague in Petra, it is possible that during that time someone quoted the psalm, writing it as a prayer on the wall inside the church, perhaps seeking a measure of comfort in its pronouncements. On the other hand, a less dramatic explanation would relate the text to the new function of the pastophorion, perhaps that of a funerary chapel for the inhabitants of the monastery. In such case, the installation in the southern

³ Psalm 91: 4–7

“He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,

nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you”. For detailed description see J. Frösén 2002 in Frösén and Fiema 2002.

pastophorion may, perhaps, be interpreted as an osuary.

Finally, returning to the partitioning of the church at the beginning of Phase II, this change does not need to be viewed as a reduction of the church in size, resulting solely from its destruction and the subsequent lack of funds for a proper reconstruction. In fact, by this partitioning, the church complex received a well-defined atrium that would better serve the needs of the pilgrims than the poorly defined Phase I courtyard located around the central cistern. Furthermore, the shorter, yet wide, church would better fulfill the architectural design related to the newly introduced rites of the Great Procession and Prothesis. In its form, the Jabal Hārūn church of Phase II much resembled new basilican churches built in the later 6th century, which, while featuring 3 apses, were also characterized by more square-like proportions.

The interpretive observations offered above necessarily remain preliminary hypotheses, and will probably remain so even after the end of the fieldwork. Nevertheless they offer some new insights into the history of the Jabal Hārūn church, while integrating this structure into a larger framework of the ecclesiastical architecture of the Byzantine East.

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