

A Doric Frieze from Petra

This article briefly discusses a Doric frieze, which was uncovered at Petra in 2000 and 2001 during excavations carried out by Basel University Department of Archaeology, under the patronage of the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLFA). The frieze will then be used as a starting point for further thoughts on Nabataean architectural sculpture¹.

The frieze, preserved in a fragmented state, originally stood above the main entrance of a lavish Nabataean mansion on the southern terrace of az-Zantūr (EZ IV), a rocky peak to the south of the city-centre of Petra (FIG. 1; main entrance marked with arrow)².

The main entrance of this palatial dwelling was situated in front of a religious area, with no apparent architectural discontinuity between the two. An altar with a three-part stairway and possibly a small temple, which was only partially excavated, were integrated within this sacred area. Seemingly, the northern outer wall acted as the entrance façade of the house as well as constituting part of the temenos wall of the sanctuary.

From the associated artefacts, one can conclude that the Doric frieze collapsed during the great earthquake of AD 363. The archaeological evidence enables a tentative reconstruction to be put forward. Thus, the frieze, which was approximately 3.7m. long, would have been made up of six metopes and was supported by two shallow pilasters with Nabataean capitals. It was made out of two different types of local sandstone and, as the stucco

remains testify, was painted.

Each of the metope fields contained the bust of a deity set in a profiled, circular frame, approximately 33cm. in diameter. The busts belong to the Graeco-Roman tradition and can thus be identified. The two better-preserved busts portray the gods Athena (FIG. 2) and Ares (FIG. 3). Both are characterized by their attributes: Athena wearing the aegis and helmet, and Ares carrying a helmet and a sword belt beneath the chlamys. Further fragments hint that the other metopes were also decorated with busts: recognizable are Artemis, with a quiver, and perhaps Hermes, with a hat. The evidence suggests that gods and goddesses were arranged in couples on the frieze, turning their heads to each other.

The interpretation and comparison of this figurative decorated frieze is rendered more difficult by factors including the secondary usage of local parallels, as well as the state of preservation of the monuments at Petra and in the surrounding area. Furthermore, the written sources only offer a partial insight into different aspects of Nabataean culture³.

Nonetheless, one can still conclude that bust reliefs were a common feature at Petra⁴, even when the particular monuments cannot be completely reconstructed owing to their state of preservation. This is the case for the closest parallel for the frieze from EZ IV, *viz.* the Doric frieze from Qaşr al-Bint, which is only partially extant, even as part of the best-preserved temples in Petra⁵. The temple's sacred area was positioned at the west end of the Col-

1. The author would like to thank the leader of the excavations, Dr. B. Kolb, as well as the initiator of the Project, Prof. Dr. R. A. Stucky, for the permission to work on the Doric frieze discussed in this paper and their suggestions on the subject. Andrew Lawrence is thanked for the English translation of the manuscript.

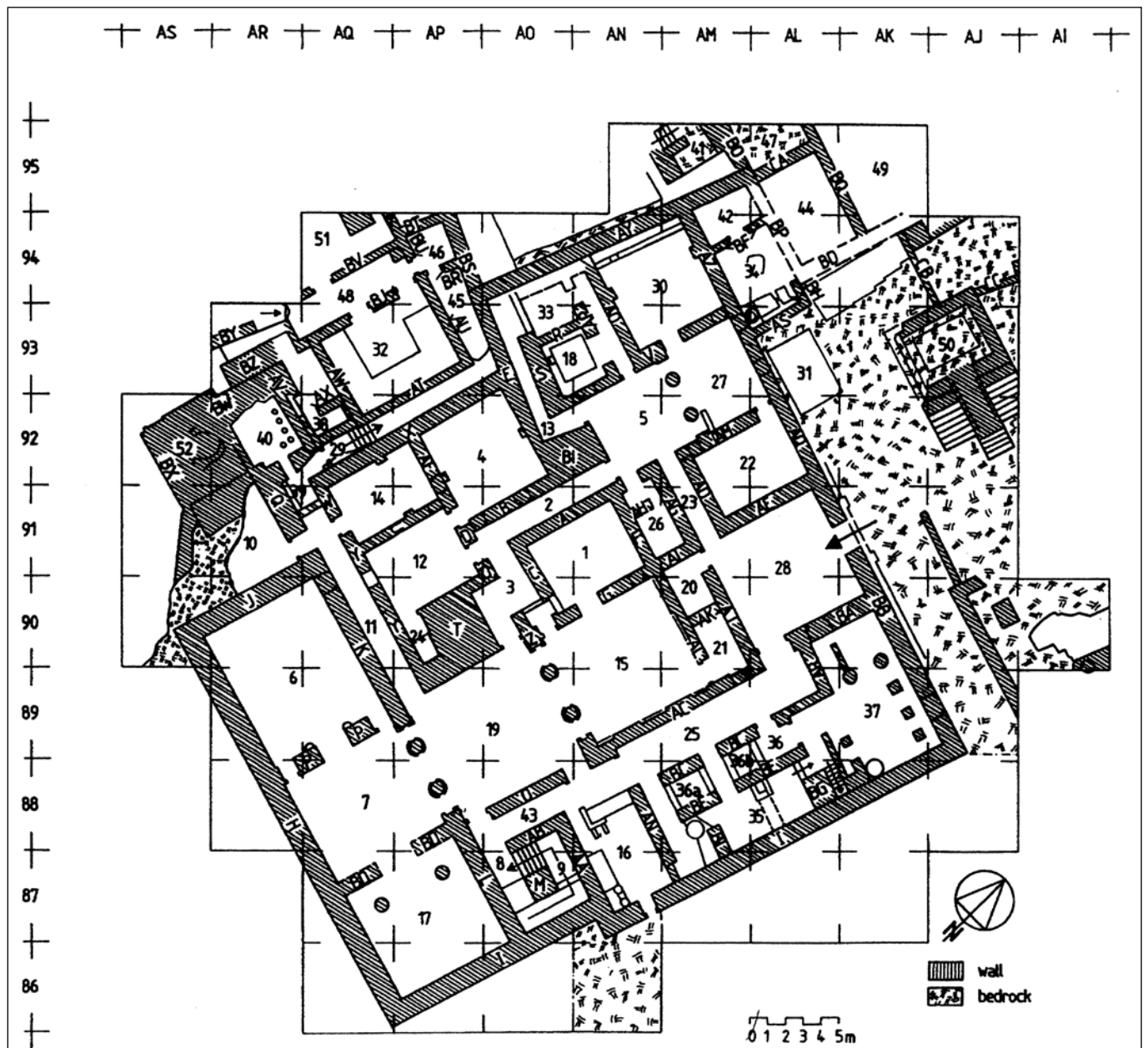
2. The frieze has been mentioned in the preliminary reports of the

excavation campaigns: Kolb and Keller 2001 and Kolb and Keller 2002. A comprehensive publication of the architecture of ZEIT and the frieze is in preparation.

3. On the sources see Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003.

4. See Wenning 2004.

5. Zayadine, Larche and Dentzer - Feydy 2003: 51-58.



1. Schematic plan of the structures at EZ IV (Drawing: B. Kolb).

onnaded Street. Here, the metopes were decorated with rosettes on one part, and with round-framed busts on another. Despite the difference in size, the mouldings of the medallions show the same design as the frieze of EZ IV. Chisel traces show that the busts, which are still *in situ* on the building, were vandalized; only one male bust fragment with a radiant crown is preserved. It must have fallen off the building before the defacing took place.

A comparable set of metopes decorated with

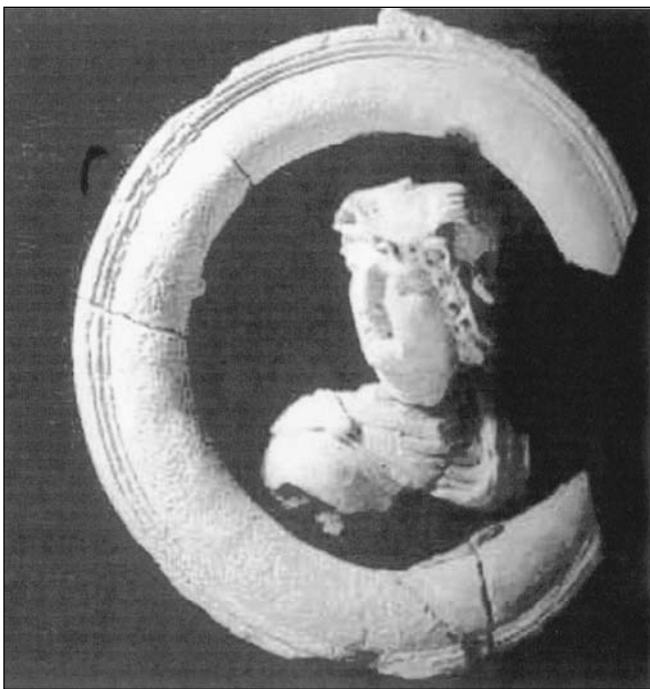
medallion busts can be found on three blocks recovered during the excavation of the Byzantine 'Petra Church', where they were built-in secondarily⁶. The fragments show a triglyph and metope accordingly. Owing to the heavy modification, the busts can only be roughly identified. Here too, the original number and positioning of the busts cannot be reconstructed, and in this case it is also unclear to which monument they originally belonged.

The same applies for a series of blocks discov-

6. Roche 2001: 335.



2. Bust of Athena (Photo: O. Jäggi).



3. Relief medallion with bust of Ares (Photo: O. Jäggi).

ered in a secondary fill near the Temenos Gate of Qaşr al-Bint ⁷. They show that the deities decorating the frieze of EZ IV also appeared on other monuments at Petra. Busts of various of gods, set in rectangular frames, can be identified with on account of their attributes — Ares, Athena and Hermes amongst them.

These few examples have illustrated some of the difficulties encountered in studying the monuments at Petra. Regarding the number and the positioning of the gods, no close parallels can be drawn with the frieze of EZ IV. This could lead to the presumption that this frieze was a citation of a more complex iconographic programme, albeit on a smaller scale.

In view of the assumed pairing of the deities on the frieze, as well as the recurring importance of a 'divine pair' within the written sources ⁸, it would be tempting to interpret the busts as visualisations of the said couple, which combined different functions in themselves. However, every interpretation must be viewed against the backdrop of Nabataean architectural sculpture in general. Here, the motives have often a universal meaning and promulgate messages such as blessing, luck and fertility which are immediately graspable and can be understood on various levels. For example, many busts in Petra and the surrounding area have the cornucopia as an attribute ⁹, and some of the anthropomorphic busts depict personifications of planets and the signs of the zodiac. This has been demonstrated recently by convincing interpretations of series of busts which adorned the neighbouring sanctuaries of Khirbat adh-Dhariḥ and Khirbat at-Tannūr, approximately 100km. north of Petra.¹⁰ Bust reliefs were used in various contexts, amongst them the decoration of tombs and votive niches. Comparable practice also occurred outside the Nabataean kingdom and should probably be included within a more widespread late Hellenistic phenomenon, which must be analyzed in a broader context.

The frieze of az-Zanṭūr is exceptional, not only because its figural decoration is well-preserved in comparison with other monuments at Petra, but also because it offers information on the original architectural setting and date; this is very rare for monuments from Petra and the surrounding region. On the basis of archaeological evidence from the excavation, the frieze can be attributed to the first phase of the residential building, which has a *terminus post quem* of 20AD.

From a stylistic point of view, the frieze eclectically combines high Hellenistic as well as late Hellenistic traditions, a common phenomenon in the

7. McKenzie 1990: 134-135, Pl. 60-62.

8. See Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 76ff. and Healey 2001: 80ff.

9. Wenning 2004: 171.

10. See Villeneuve and al-Muheisen 2000: 1546f. and McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes 2002.

late first century BC and early first century AD. The busts portray a certain portliness, which can be seen as characteristic of late Hellenistic sculpture, especially in the Near East where such voluptuous features were a sign of wealth and luxury. Furthermore, elements of the constitution of the faces and hair can be traced back to Ptolemaic sculpture. This is in no way surprising when one takes the Alexandrian influence on numerous monuments at Petra into account.

As the above examples have shown, difficulties resulting from the poor state of preservation of the monuments and the fact that architectural sculpture was often re-used complicate the dating of the relief sculpture of Petra, in the sense that one must rely exclusively on stylistic criteria for dating. This unfortunate situation often gives rise to unsatisfactory dating, which proclaims a linear stylistic development and, in doing so, fails to do any justice to local circumstances. It is necessary to consider the exceptional position of Petra that resulted from its very rapid rise, along with the discernable co-existence of different cultural traditions. This impedes and hinders any dating methods based exclusively on over-simplified models. A detailed analysis of this subject cannot be given within the confines of this paper but the problem needs to be pointed out.

Generally speaking, a geographically differentiated examination of Nabataean architectural sculpture is essential for any undertaking in this field. Distinctive local creativity can be discerned, that was not determined by chronological developments or by the use of different types of stone, but which was the result of slightly different cultural traditions. Different regions were under varying degrees of Nabataean rule and were thus influenced differently in a cultural sense. This presumption is underlined by the written sources. These can be seen as an account of how the Nabataeans evolved from bedouin clan traditions and how the resultant social structures — which worked against any sort of tight-knit administration — continued to exist within the Nabataean kingdom¹¹. This diversity manifests itself in the material record as an absence of any uniform ‘official’ art. Stylistic compari-

sons between the different regions, with the aim of chronological classification, therefore rapidly become equations with too many variables.

To conclude, the Doric frieze of az-Zantūr — which has been briefly discussed here — makes an important contribution to our understanding of the architectural sculpture of Petra, as it provides information relating to style, architectural context and dating. The unsolved problems have only briefly been touched upon. In general, these attest that architectural sculpture from Petra and the Nabataean kingdom requires not only geographically differentiated study, but must also be seen in the context of a broad perspective.

Bibliography

- Hackl, U., Jenni, H. and Schneider, C. 2003. *Quellen zur Geschichte der Nabatäer. Textsammlung mit Übersetzung und Kommentar*. NTOA 51. Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag.
- Healey, J.F. 2001. *The Religion of the Nabataeans. A Conspectus*. Leiden: Brill.
- Kolb, B. and Keller, D. 2001. Swiss-Liechtenstein Excavation at az-Zantur/Petra: The Eleventh Season. *ADAJ* 45: 311-324.
- 2002. Swiss-Liechtenstein Excavation at az-Zantur/Petra: The Twelfth Season. *ADAJ* 46: 279-293.
- McKenzie, J. 1990. *The Architecture of Petra*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McKenzie, J.S., Gibson, S. and Reyes, A.T. 2002. Reconstruction of the Nabataean Temple Complex at Khirbet et-Tannur. *PEQ* 134: 44-83.
- Roche, M.-J. 2001. Figurines, Sculpture, and Reliefs. Pp. 350-358 in Z. T. Fiema, C. Kanellopoulos, T. Waliszewski and R. Schick (eds.), *The Petra Church*. Amman: American Center of Oriental Research.
- Villeneuve, F. and al-Muheisen, Z. 2000. Nouvelles recherches à Khirbet edh-Dharih (Jordanie du Sud, 1996-1999). *CRAI*: 1525-1563.
- Wenning, R. 2004. Nabatäische Büstenreliefs aus Petra – zwei Neufunde. *ZDPV* 120: 157-181.
- Zayadine, F., Larché, F. and Dentzer-Feydy, J. 2003. *Le Qasr Al-Bint de Pétra. L'architecture, le décor, la chronologie et les dieux*. Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

11. See Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 61.