

A NABATAEAN SANCTUARY NEAR PETRA; A PRELIMINARY NOTICE

The Site. The hitherto unrecorded site described here lies to the S. W. of Petra, close to the eastern foot of Jebel Harun, the summit of which, crowned with the shrine of Aaron, dominates the whole region¹. Jebel Harun is separated from the mountain immediately to the north, Jebel el-Barra, by the Wadi Wigheit², the upper tributaries of which curve round and cut into the lower slopes of the former mountain. One of these secondary wadis has cut a deep, narrow ravine for itself, only a metre or so wide in places, and perhaps averaging 12 metres in depth; it is reminiscent of the famous Sik, though in miniature (Pl. VIII Fig. 1). The ravine is dark and forbidding; passage along it is made difficult by the presence of oleander bushes and other trees, while the floor of the chasm is the gravel bed of a stream. The appearance of this floor, and of the rock walls of the ravine, indicates that in winter a raging torrent of water rushes down to the main wadi, while local informants reported that in most years pools of water remain in the wadi throughout the dry season also.

Immediately south of the ravine is a small isolated hill, the local name of which seems to be Jebel Ma'iz. The hill has the typical rugged configuration of the Petra region, and has precipitous sides, especially on the north, where vertical or overhanging cliffs occur, and there is a suggestion of deliberate quarrying. Between these cliffs and the lip of the ravine there stretches, for perhaps 200m. or more, a level terrace, in some places no more than a narrow ledge a few metres wide, but elsewhere a broad platform (Pl. VIII Fig. 2 Pl. IX Fig. 3). For the most part the terrace is bare and the rock surface is exposed, but in a few places there is a thin covering of sandy soil and débris. It is in these places that occurs the evidence for the ancient occupation of the site: the denuded remains of walls, fallen building blocks (some with the Nabataean diagonal dressing), an isolated column drum, and many Nabataean sherds, both painted and plain. There are signs also that the spot has been frequented much more recently, probably by goatherds, and a well-worn path runs along the terrace, presumably to join the main track out of Petra to Ras en-Negb and the Arabah.

The most important evidence for Nabataean association with this site, however, lies in the great number of graffiti found there, the occurrence of at least one Dushara symbol, and the existence of a relief of a seated female figure. We shall now briefly describe these remains, emphasizing that it is a provisional description only, based on the inadequate notes of a brief visit.

¹ Reports of the site were first brought to the present writer in the autumn of 1959, and it was then visited by Mr. W. O. Lancaster on the writer's behalf. During the 1960 season of excavations at Petra it was visited first by Mr. A. Millard and later by Mrs. C. M. Bennett and Mr. Ahmad Shishtawi, accompanied by the author. On this final occasion the notes and photographs were made on which this preliminary note is based. To the above mentioned persons I proffer my best thanks for much help.

² The 1/100,000 map of Jordan (Gharandal Sheet) is the only map which names the wadi. I follow the spelling there. The map reference of the site is 1901. 9694.

The Graffiti. (Pl. IX Fig. 4 and Pl. X Figs. 5-6). These are to be found in great profusion on the vertical sides of Jebel Ma'iz, on the bare rock surface of the terrace, and on the sides of the ravine below. In the short time spent at the site in 1960 it was not possible to do more than take a few photographs of some of these graffiti, and a full record of them will demand the attention of a trained epigraphist. All the graffiti noted were in the Nabataean script, though there occurred also other markings, such as the outlines of feet, which are common throughout Petra and elsewhere. Some of the graffiti were truly incised; others, perhaps the majority, had been produced by the 'pecking' technique. Several instances were noted where graffiti overlapped one another. The inscriptions had withstood the action of the weather to varying degrees; some were fresh and clear and could be photographed readily; others were fainter, but would easily produce impressions on latex rubber; still others could probably only be copied by hand, and that with difficulty. No attempt is made here to interpret them or discuss their significance. It is merely hoped that the photographs reproduced (which show but a small proportion of the total number of graffiti) will indicate the wealth of epigraphic material discovered, and will arouse the interest of specialists.

The Dushara Symbol. Little needs to be said about this. It is to be found recessed in the western side of the ravine, and consists of a plain block carved in high relief, some 1.25 m. high and .60 m. broad at the base, tapering slightly towards the top. It was not possible to examine it closely or in detail, but it is of a type common enough in the Petra region.

The Relief. (Pl. XI Fig. 7) This is carved in the vertical face of Jebel Ma'iz at a point where the terrace is at its widest (near the figure in Plate VIII Fig. 3). The relief is of a seated female figure, well preserved except for the head and part of the arms, which have been destroyed. The figure is dressed in a mantle and a chiton, the folds of which can be seen between the feet. The carving is competently executed, and the folds of the chiton, especially the slight ruffle over the left foot, are quite pleasing. The figure is in a niche, the upper part of which is badly weathered. Below the feet is a slightly recessed panel, perhaps originally intended to hold an inscribed plaque of metal or marble. The height of the relief, from the base of the panel to the shoulders of the figure, is .93 m.

It is difficult to decide without further study whether this relief is simply a funerary monument, or is the representation of a goddess. Nothing quite like it elsewhere in Petra is known to the writer³, though a number of smaller, cruder reliefs have been published by Dalman and others.

Several sculptures from the Hauran resemble our figure closely, however, though these do not help much either with the problem of attribution or that of date⁴; while the

³ Another relief of a seated female figure is reported to exist above the Wadi Siyagh, in the centre of Petra, though the writer has not seen it, and can find no published reference to it.

⁴ Dunand, *Le Musée de Soueïda* (1934), p. 52 and Pl. XXIII (No. 80), and p. 83 and Pl. XXXIV (No. 169).

fragment of a statue found at Rumm is not dissimilar⁵. It is to be hoped that the study of the graffiti found in the vicinity of this new relief will shed some light on the problems it raises.

Significance. Until a more complete survey of the site is made only a few general remarks can be made here.

In the first place, the resemblance should be noted between this new site in the Wadi Wigheit and two other sites in Petra, the Sidd el-Ma'ajin⁶ and the Qattar ed-Deir⁷. The former of these is a narrow, shady ravine, very similar to the chasm we have described, while the latter is again a small sheltered wadi, with a spring of clear water gushing out from near a rock terrace. Both places have been termed sanctuaries or cult places, both on account of the great number of religious symbols or graffiti that are found there, and of the relative fertility and attractiveness of their secluded ravines. It is tempting to see in the Wadi Wigheit site a similar sanctuary; a place, if not of organised cult, then at least of popular reverence. The awe in which the ancient Semites generally held living water and trees is well known⁸, and even today the ravine has a suggestion of mysteriousness about it which may well have appealed to the Nabataean imagination. Our own imaginations must not lead us on too far, however⁹, and we must admit that it remains to be seen whether there is, at the Wadi Wigheit, a true 'water sanctuary', after the manner of the 'Ain Shellaleh sanctuary in Wadi Rumm, or whether the remains here are of a more secular nature.

Finally, a further word must be said about the location of this new site. Although in a sense secluded, the spot is by no means remote, for it lies close to the main route out of Petra to the southwest. This route, leaving the city by the Wadi Thughra, passes near to the foot of Jebel Harun (and to our site), and then, climbing the col immediately south of the mountain to Ras en - Negb, joins the Wadi Abu Kusheibeh in its descent to the Arabah. This is the main road to the Negb, to Gaza and to Egypt; it was one of the most important arteries of Petra's trade, though its very existence has sometimes been ignored by those who think of the Sik as the only entrance into Petra¹⁰. This, however, is another matter; the point to be made here is that the Wadi Wigheit, whether holy place or not, was accessible to all who used this road; and it is of those travellers that we must think when we study this new collection of graffiti.

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⁵ Savignac and Horsfield, *Révue Biblique* 1935, pp. 261ff and Pl. IX.

⁶ For location, see Canaan, *J.P.O.S.* IX (1929), Map. Sq. J - K III; for description, Dalman, *Petra und seine Felsheiligtümer* (1908) p. 308-314, and Nielsen, *J.P.O.S.* XIII (1933) p. 186f.

⁷ Canaan, *op. cit.*, Map. Sq. D IV - E V; Dalman, *op. cit.* p. 253-255; Nielsen, *J.P.O.S.* XI (1931) p. 230 f.

⁸ See, for example, Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (1894) p. 135, 166ff., etc.

⁹ Nielsen's cautionary remarks about interpreting every religious symbol as a sanctuary should be born in mind; cf. *J.P.O.S.* XI (1931) p. 230.

¹⁰ Up until 1948 this route was not infrequently used by visitors to Petra; e.g. Laborde, *Arabia Petraea* (Eng. Ed. 1836) p. 143ff; Jarvis, *Antiquity* XIV (1940) p. 138 ff, and Map.