

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SEASON OF CENTRAL PETRA EXCAVATIONS

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Introduction

The Department of Archaeology at al-Hussein Bin Talal University started its initial fieldwork in the centre of Petra under the supervision of Dr. Adnan Shiyyab. The site chosen for excavation is located on the northern bank of Wādī Mūsā immediately to the west of the nymphaeum; it is further situated on the lower slope of the hill that accommodates the Petra church and faces the market and colonnaded street area (**Fig. 1**). An unexcavated site was chosen to address two project goals: to train the students of archaeology and to uncover new archaeological materials.

The excavator, according to field observations, believes the site will be important, reflecting to some extent the development of the Nabataean culture, particularly the flourishing stage of the city and state during the first century

BC and the first century AD extending through the Roman and Byzantine periods. Some walls and fallen stones are evident on the surface and well-built, rectilinear walls have been partly exposed due to the erosive effects of floods from the nearby valley. Moreover, pottery shards of the Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine periods are distributed extensively throughout the site.

The work started on 28/6/2007 and continued until 10/8/2007. Throughout this period, a surface survey was carried out, photographs were taken, surface features were documented and a contour map was made. Two areas within the site were chosen for digging and five grids (5x5m each) were planned in order to examine the nature of the site and understand the relation between the architectural features that can be seen on the surface and those which are still underground. Additional goals of the excavation



1. The excavation site (looking southward).

were to understand the stratigraphy of the site as well as to uncover any archaeological remains.

The preliminary results of our excavations follow:

Area A

Square 001

A wall built of large, dressed stones was found at the eastern side of the square. Excavation reached a depth of 2m along this wall. The wall (running north-south) intersects, at a right angle, with another wall (running east-west) uncovered at the southern side of the square. It appears that the two walls were constructed in two different structural periods since the lower courses of each wall have different types of stones and the construction methods in these courses differs from those in the upper courses. Between the southern and eastern walls and in a northwest direction, a small oval-shaped structure was uncovered. Its walls are constructed of mud and small, undressed stones. Considerable portions of the walls and the floor are covered with plaster, indicating, it could have been used in a later period to collect rainwater (**Fig. 2**).

Square 002

In this square a wall running north-south and parallel to the wall in square 001 was uncovered. The wall is built of dressed stones held in place by mortar and small stones. The lower courses of this wall were constructed earlier than the upper courses which appear to belong to a later period.

The walls in squares 001 and 002 appear to be parallel and linked and could have been

constructed during the same period and might represent a larger structure or a structural unit which could not be identified in this season.

Ceramics, complete ceramic objects, and a few coins were found in square 002.

Square 003

This square was situated a little to the north of squares 001 and 002 in an area where some architectural elements were visible on the surface. These elements might also be linked to the architectural features in the above mentioned squares.

In this square the digging process led to the discovery of a wall running west-east. Nine courses of this wall were uncovered and the bedrock was still not reached. The two upper courses are different from the lower courses in terms of their nature and the dressing method used; however, they all seem to have been built during one period. The western part of the wall was constructed of dressed stones vertically laid whereas in the eastern part there is a projection which looks like an apse (**Fig. 3**). In front of this possible apse and on the level of the sixth course, the team discovered a square platform (partly excavated) which will be excavated during the next season. The exposed stones of the assumed platform are marked by some decorations. Its lower course has a square hole closed from inside while the upper surface is covered with mortar. The presence of the platform in front of the suggested apse may indicate a functional link between the two features.

Square 004

Square 004 was located at a site with notice-



2. The southern and eastern walls border the oval-shaped structure in Sq. 001.



3. Apse-like structure with a platform in Sq. 003.

able architectural features on the surface east of Squares 001 and 002 and southeast of Square 003. In this section, a wide, rocky surface about 9m square was discovered. This surface ends on a wall (running east-west) in the north side of the square. The wall consists of six courses built of dressed limestone ashlar. The bedrock could not be reached along this wall due to the presence of a significant number of mud bricks. This wall also intersects another wall in the west side of the square. The latter wall was constructed of dressed stones in its southern end and was covered with mud bricks in its northern end in order to hold and protect the ceramic pipes. The pipes were vertically and horizontally laid and can be easily seen. At the level of the third course of this wall, small arches join it to the wall in the western baulk. Future work will focus on this area to understand the function of the arches and their relation to the wall in the baulk (**Fig. 4**).

Three arches in the northern part are built of perfectly constructed dressed stones. The arches were laid not on the wall but on a stone beam projecting from the wall. It was difficult to trace the end of the vaulted area during this season because it continues northward outside the square and the excavator lacked sufficient time to dig another square along that side (**Fig. 4**). The depth of the vaulted area is about 2.5m and its length (within the square) is about 3.5m, its floor is paved with undressed and unshaped stones. The roof of the three arches mentioned above is made of well dressed slabs extending outside the square.



4. Vaults and ceramic pipes in Sq. 004.

The fourth arch appears not to be related to the other three arches as it is wider and has different stones and is laid on the wall perhaps indicating that it belongs to another architectural phase.

On the southern side of the square, a wall was uncovered which is linked to the wall in the western side. This wall is built of undressed and unshaped sandstones like the stones of the walls in the western and northern sides. The stones in the upper part of this wall seem to have been affected by high temperatures strongly suggesting that it is probably a fireplace used to heat what preliminarily seems to be a bath. The lower part of this wall is coated with rectangular mud bricks. The latter are linked with three rows of square mud brick posts. Each row of these posts consists of a number of square mud brick courses. These rows stand immediately on the floor extending eastward and southward. One aspect of next season's work should be to clarify the function of this structure which was possibly a public bath in the centre of Petra. The relation between the mud brick posts and the arches resembles the plan of the bath found in al-Ḥumayma¹.

Area B

Square 001

Area B is clearly demarcated from area A due to the presence of a large number of stones remaining from the destruction of what appears to have been a free-standing structure between the two areas. Because it was quite difficult to dig in the area of destruction as it would have required significant manpower and special machines and equipment, a suitable square was located near the demolition area. Digging to a depth of approximately 1m did not result in archaeological strata, but only soil and pebbles. However, the work did lead to the discovery of a wall approximately 1m thick running north-south. The external face (eastward) of this wall is built of mud bricks while the internal face is built of stones. The latter have some holes and shallow channels that run horizontally along the wall. A marble floor running parallel to the wall was found in the western part of the square. The marble tiles are white and grey; some tiles are complete

1. Oleson, John Peter: (1990) Humeima Hydraulic Survey 1989,

Preliminary Field Report: Jordan. *ADAJ* 34: 285-311.

with a length of 30cm. Despite the fact that the marble tiles received a great deal of destruction due to the pressure from the ground, most of the tiles are still in place. The marble floor extends in different directions and continues outside the square. Further work and investigation in the next season should help to understand the site which appears to be one of the more significant sites in Petra. Rows of stones were also uncovered in this square which are horizontally linked to the wall, but neither the stones nor their masonry resemble the stonework of the wall and this might suggest that this feature is from a later phase (**Fig. 5**). Digging continued between the eastern baulk and the external face of the wall to a depth of about 1.5m but the bedrock could not be reached in this season while the floor between the internal face of the wall and the western baulk is paved with marble tiles, and the latter might extend outside the baulk.

The archaeological features in this square are difficult to identify; they appear to belong to different architectural phases. The mud brick wall is one phase, the wall which has holes and channels is another phase and the rows of stones that run horizontally towards the main wall in the square may belong to a third phase.



5. Three structural phases (marble floor, a wall and irregular walls) in Sq. 001, Area B.

Conclusion

The major purpose of the fieldwork was to answer critical questions concerning the specific site which is located in the centre of Petra near the colonnaded street. The site contains archaeological remains worthy of investigation; nevertheless, the site has not previously been studied although excavations in Petra started as early as the 1930s.

It is quite difficult to answer questions regarding the site's function and nature based on preliminary results obtained during the first season. However, the available evidence allows for some hypothesizing: part of the site may have been a public bath as indicated by the existence of the vaults and mudbrick posts in what appears to be the heating room.

There is also evidence from square 003, indicating the presence of a possible apse in one wall. Additionally, a platform was found in front of the assumed apse. The proposed apse may somehow be functionally related to what was subsequently discovered in square 004. A bath is most likely the main feature in the latter square and the use of the apse is probably related to the use of the bath.

All of the above conclusions are preliminary and remain subject to further modification and clarification based on the findings of future seasons' excavations and the analyses of ceramics, marble, coins and soil samples. It is also worth noting that the architectural features discovered throughout the digging areas clearly point to two or three construction phases as in area B, square 001. Such findings underscore the potential significance of the site and support the long-term utilization of the site for further archaeological research.

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