

THE HERMIT LIFE ON AL-LISĀN PENINSULA – RESULTS OF THE SWEDISH DEAD SEA EXPEDITION: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Richard Holmgren and Anders Kaliff

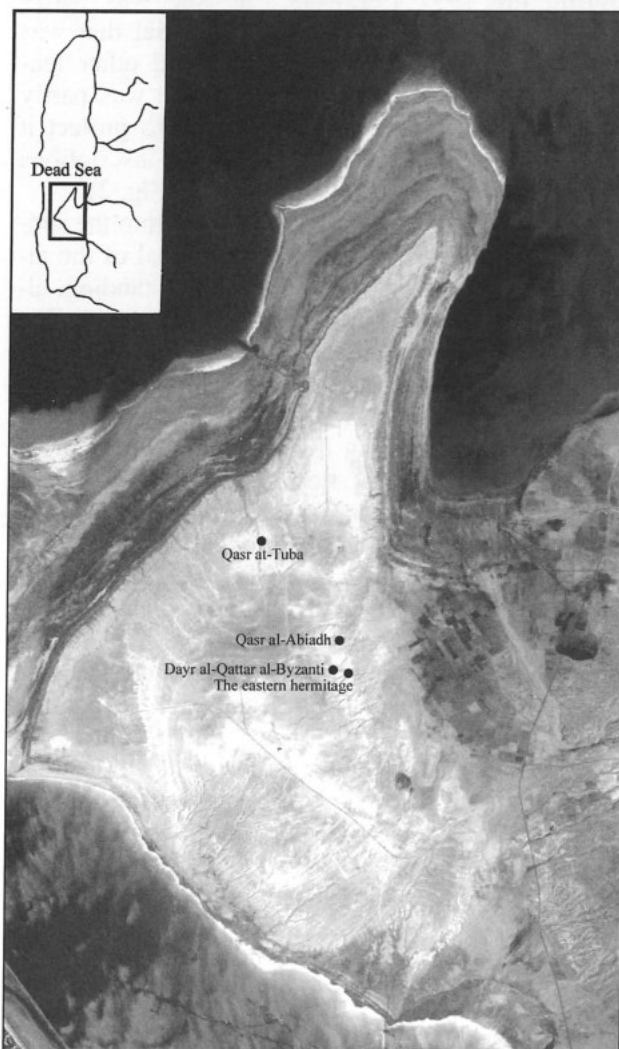
With Contributions by Jan Svensson

Preface

This preliminary report is based on the results of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition to al-Lisān peninsula in November-December 2002. Presented here are also selected material from earlier seasons that have been processed during the last years, not published before. The primary objective of the 2002 field season was an overall inspection of the maintenance of the partly excavated church/monastic site of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bizantī (JADIS no. 1907.007) besides a complementary documentation of a recently discovered hermitage, here referred to as Qaṣr al-Abiadh. The latter comprised a thorough mapping and documentation of the structure among its numerous wall inscriptions found within. Qaṣr al-Abiadh is yet another addition to the earlier documented hermitages in the surroundings of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and the larger hermitage of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 321-340). The church and the hermitages in its vicinity represent a hermit society similar to the well-known desert monasteries in Egypt and the Judean desert. Qaṣr al-Abiadh has the potential to shed valuable light on early Christians and other local communities in this area, where hermit dwellings and tombs are scattered over large parts of the al-Lisān peninsula, sometimes in clusters as *laurae* (Fig. 1).

The Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is an independent archaeological project, initiated in 1994 by the authors of this report, who also function as field directors. The project has earlier been associated with the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm, but is now linked to the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Uppsala University. Apart from the documentation of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Bizantī, the main goal of the Swedish Dead Sea Expedition is a study of the different hermit dwellings and other monastic activities in al-Lisān area in a long-term perspective (approx. 300-900AD). This preliminary report will focus on some of the excavations and documentation work performed in the

late 1990s as well as on the 2002 documentation of the palaeographic material discovered in Qaṣr al-Abiadh. The fieldwork of 2002 had yet another important goal: to investigate the need for restoration and protection of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and other monastic sites of al-Lisān. This work has been re-



1. Satellite image of the al-Lisān peninsula, with the major sites discussed in this paper marked respectively (National Imagery and Mapping Agency CNES/SPOT Image 1992-1994 ©).

ported separately to the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (letter dated 25-04-2004).

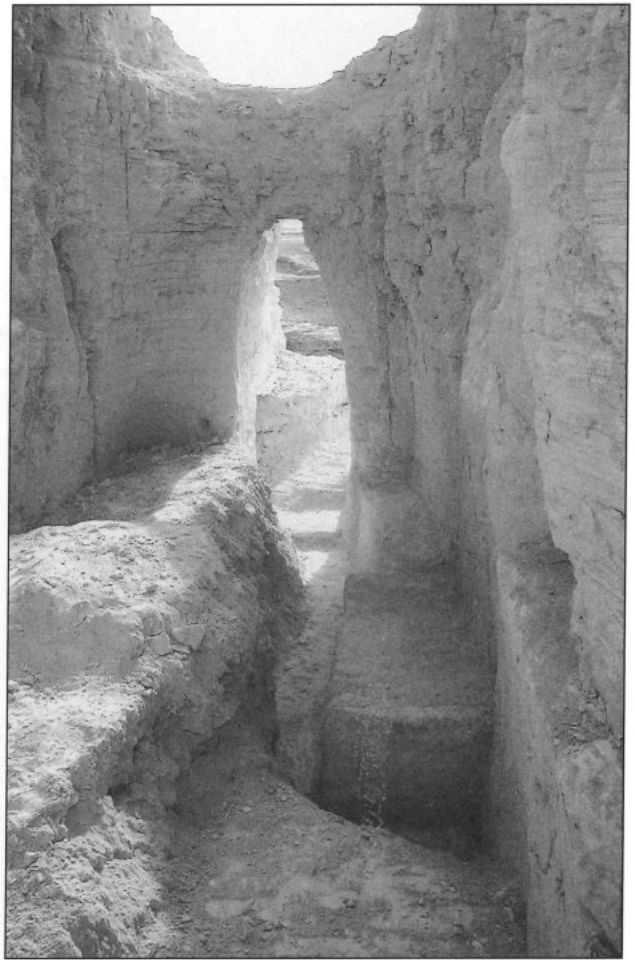
In the text below we will first present the work at the newly discovered site of Qaşr al-Abiadh. In addition to the palaeographic material discovered, we will also present a papyrus fragment found during the 1996 excavation of Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba. The text will then proceed with a presentation of the hermitage east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, partly described earlier (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 332-333). Conclusively a discussion will present a short tentative interpretation of the monastic sites on al-Lisān, based on the results made so far.

Presentation of Qaşr al-Abiadh

The hermitage of Qaşr al-Abiadh is located 800m north of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanṭī. It was documented by our team for the first time in 1997. During the 1997 fieldwork, the site was partly cleared from debris and eroded material that was threatening vulnerable inscriptions and other features. After the documentation the site was partly covered with softer material in order to protect it from further damage. The accessible inscriptions were documented in December 2002 (Fig. 2).

The hermitage with its rooms is cut into the sediment ridge of a small rift valley, typical of the al-Lisān area. Part of the structure is still standing, although with a partly collapsed superstructure. The site in general is in a weak condition due to natural erosion and geological activities. The typical beach rock (soft laminated marl) of the al-Lisān is excellent for constructing dwellings and other structures. Qaşr al-Abiadh showed evidence of severe recent illicit excavations, at least in its upper strata. This, besides the natural erosion, has severely damaged the site and makes an urgent need for restoration and documentation. To avoid further damage, only the accessible parts of the site have been documented. Beneath debris and eroded material were discovered some scattered fragments of pottery, strips of palm leaves, tuft of camel hair, rope stumps, nutshells, smaller bones and textile fragments. There is still a great potential to recover more well-preserved finds and other features in the non-investigated parts of the collapsed building, much depending on the extension of earlier looting activities.

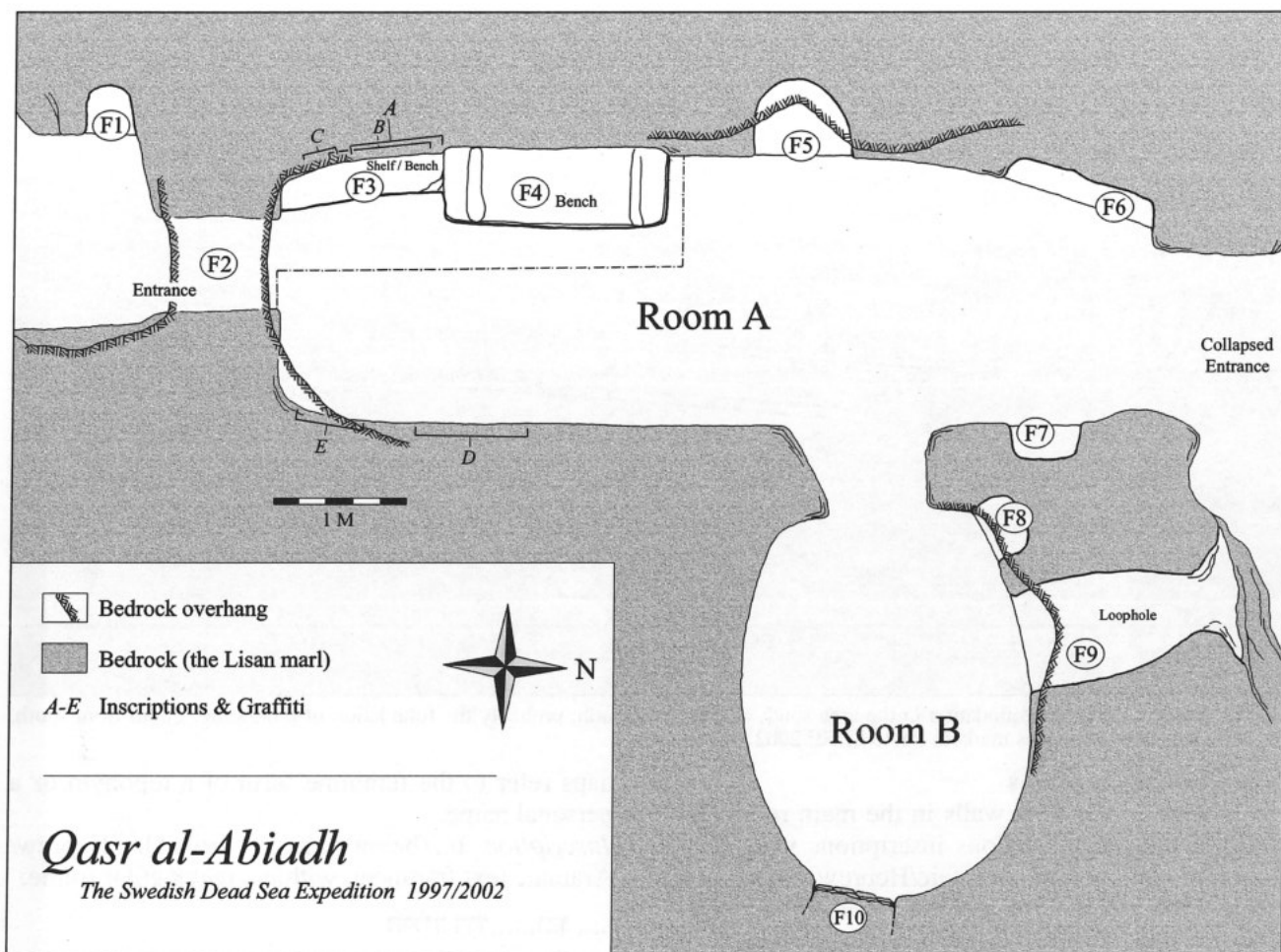
The architectural plan of Qaşr al-Abiadh consists of a larger room/hall measuring 6 x 2.5 meters in a north-south direction (room A) with an adjacent oblong smaller chamber towards the east (room B). An additional space towards the north possibly comprises of the remains of yet another entrance. The latter is badly damaged as an effect



2. Photo towards south, showing the inner of room A of Qaşr al-Abiadh during the documentation. Photo SDSE 1997.

of the erosion and collapse into the nearby wadi. Room A had an original height of 2.5-3 meters, now with some standing marl-walls up to a height of 2-2.5 meters. Room B is connected to the previous room by a narrow passage. The northern part of room A, as well as its superstructure and the possible entrance from the north, is furthermore badly damaged. The entrance in the north and south respectively, make an analogy to Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba and probably had a practical functional. Still today this gives a cooling flow of air through the chambers and the passage. This must have been of vital importance for the hermits, dwelling in this extremely hot environment.

The narrow main entrance from the south (F2), as well as the hall it leads into (room A), has a lancet shaped section with a pointed vault. The natural cave has preserved the entrance vault, whilst the section of room A could be reconstructed through the still standing walls and fragments of the collapsed superstructure. As such, the architecture could be described as a smaller version of the her-



3. Plan showing the inner structure of Qasr al-Abiadh, with the two different rooms (A-B), features (F1-F10) and the inscriptions marked (A-E). SDSE 2002.

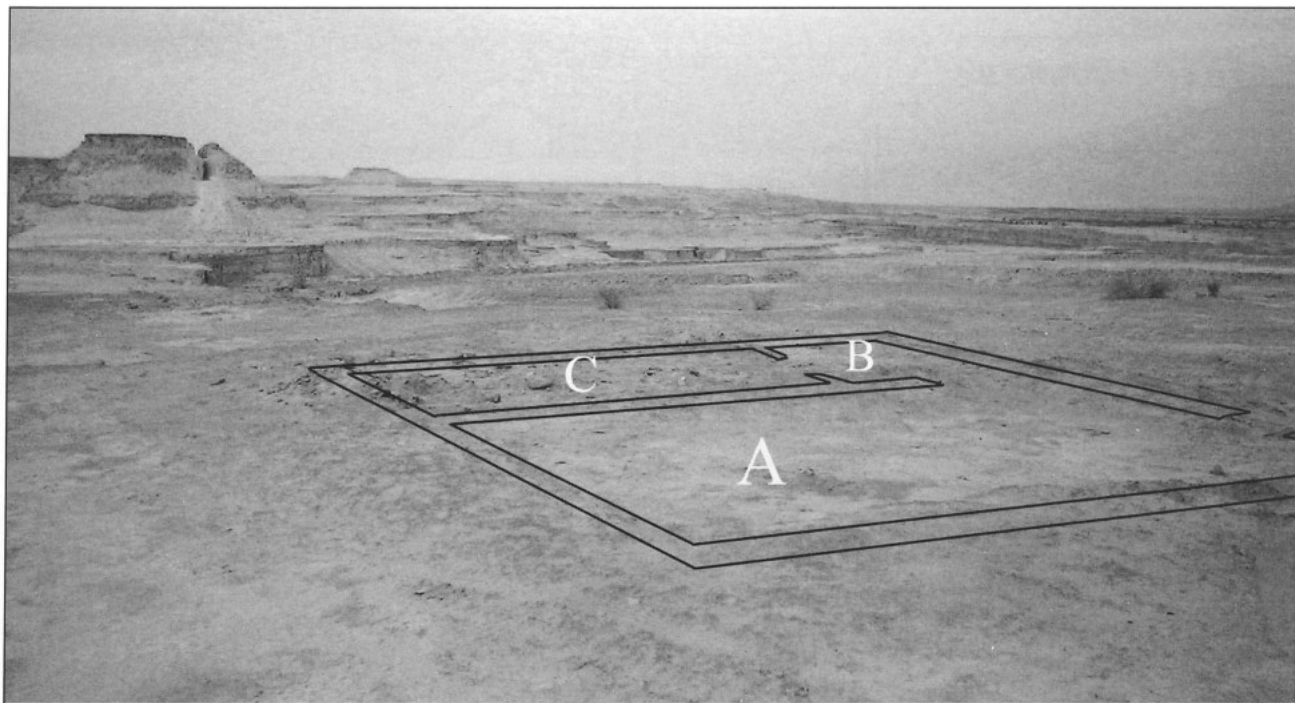
mitage of Qasr aṭ-Ṭūba (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 333-336; see also Abel 1929; Politis 1995).

In the western wall just outside the southern entrance a small niche was located (F1). A low bench (F4) with an adjacent shelf (F3) can be seen along the western wall, in the southern part of room A. The bench is a mud-brick construction covered with a smooth plaster reinforced with dried reed. In the western wall, north of F4, one vaulted niche (F5) is situated as well as a shelf (F6). Another small niche (F7) can be seen in the northern part of the eastern wall of room A. In the smaller compartment, room B only one niche was present besides a loophole construction (F9) and a blocked passage (F10) (Fig. 3).

The larger hall of the earlier documented Qasr a-Ṭūba, with its documented liturgical installations, showed clear evidence of having functioned as a chapel. There is reason to believe that the larger room in Qasr al-Abiadh held the same function. The artefacts and installations found, as well as the palaeographic material, suggests a combination of

a hermit dwelling and a place of worship. This combination is not unusual in the early monastic system. The hermit cell has been discussed as a miniature church where the hermits celebrated the Eucharist in solitude. This was experienced as a corporate solitude where the whole church was present in the solitary. The famous saying of Evagrius of Pontus can be quoted in regard to this: "The monk lives separate from all and united to all" (Lozano 1987: 145).

In an open area approximately 100 meters south of Qasr al-Abiadh the foundation of a possible building was detected during 2002. Besides the church complex of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Biṣanī, this is the only freestanding construction found so far on the peninsula. The structure was visible as a rectangular stone foundation, approximately 5 x 6m, consisting of three inner sections (A-C). In the south-eastern corner a possible entrance can be distinguished. Any possible connection between this structure and Qasr al-Abiadh or any other activity in the area is yet to be determined (Fig. 4).



4. The rectangular stone foundation in the area south of Qaṣr al-Abiadh, probably the foundation of a building. Photo from south, with the stone structures marked. Photo SDSE 2002.

The Wall Inscriptions

Alongside the marl walls in the main room (A) of Qaṣr al-Abiadh, various inscriptions were documented. Greek and Aramaic/Hebrew letters and other inscriptions are present, besides different crosses and graffiti. Among various shapes of crosses the usual Latin cross is found, here predominantly depicted with triangular endings on each of the arms which makes the crosses resemble the Saint George cross. Furthermore a version of a probable Jerusalem cross is present (see below). The preliminary interpretation of the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek text fragments follows the interpretation of Jan Svensson, made for this report (2003).

Western Wall of Room A

Inscription a: Cluster of graffiti on the western wall showing a rectangular frame depicted with a central cross stretching vertically and horizontally from its margins. The geometrical cross symbol with its composition might suggest a depiction of a Jerusalem cross. Underlying the latter, one can discern three horizontal strings of text among a variety of scattered Greek letters. The three inscription lines most probably repeat the very same phrase on each row. On the basis of the perhaps best preserved initial characters in the central row and the final part of the upper row, the phrase ΚΑΙΘ (Y) ΣΗΑΓΙΑ can be a tentative interpretation — “Kaithys the Holy”. This definite article would per-

haps refer to the feminine form of a toponym or a personal name.

Inscription b (below a): A probable Hebrew/Aramaic text fragment, within a rectangular frame:

..... הוליד דוד.....ובן
ים.....

The first line, due to a tentative interpretation, begins as follows: “David became father of...”. In the second line only two letters are discernable, possibly representing the Hebrew plural form — *im*.

Inscription c (north of a and b): a short inscription in Greek — ΚΑΙΘΥΣ (Kaithys). This is possibly a proper name related to the phrase found in inscription a. If alternatively interpreted as two words, it could moreover be a fragment with the meaning ΚΑΙΘΥΣ[ΙΑ] (and sacrifice) or ΚΑΙΘΥΣ [ΙΑΣΤΗΡION] (and altar).

Eastern Wall of Room A

Inscription d: An Hebrew/Aramaic inscription in three lines, with the upper line as a possible heading

להחש
 חש.....
 ביש....בשש

A suggested interpretation for the heading is: “Belonging to the one who is fleeing” or “Belonging to the one who is in a hurry”. The same let-

ters are repeated at the end of line two, *chet* and *shin*. As such, also this line could refer to someone who is fleeing. The first and the last word of line three, contains *bet* and *shin* and this form in Hebrew could have the meaning "to cheat", "to disappoint", "to make ashamed" or to "wither".

Inscription e (south of d): Cluster of crosses in different appearances and sizes: Latin crosses, Greek crosses, one of them inscribed within a circle. Present are also scattered Greek letters, possibly remains of proper names, but not possible to interpret. Inscriptions of Greek proper names have parallels from Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba, as described by Konstantinos Politis (1995). The preliminary report concerns the removal and conservation of some inscriptions found on the walls. One of the inscriptions mentions four Greek names, "Agapios", "Konstantinos", "Makarios" and "Ioannis", perhaps the hermits that dwelt at the site during some period. Although more fragmented and difficult to interpret, it is probable that some of the inscriptions from Qaşr al-Abiadh also refer to hermits once living in this location. Alternatively, names inscribed in this manner originate from pilgrims visiting the dwelling place of important hermits.

Besides the inscriptions described above, there are also some minor and scattered clusters of fragmentary inscriptions in the same room. The fragments consist of separate letters and parts of crosses, as well as unidentified marks and lines, not possible to interpret at present.

Some of the inscriptions in Dayr al-Abiadh can be correlated to the inscriptions found in the hermitage located about 300 meters east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 332-333). These inscriptions were documented in cells labelled nos. 1-3. Along with these carvings were several crosses as well as a building, alternatively a reliquary, depicting a Jerusalem cross within. The latter demonstrate resemblance to inscription "a", in Qaşr al-Abiadh. Among other cell-carvings, a group of letters forming the name ΗΛΙΑΣ (Elias) was documented. Considering the inscriptions and graffiti of Qaşr al-Abiadh, a stylistically similar depiction can be noticed at the former, suggesting the same hand.

Although fragmented, many of the inscriptions of al-Lisān are remarkably well preserved, especially regarding the considerable time they have survived exposure to the open air, let alone the soft material they are inscribed in. This of course raises the quest for a thorough preservation plan for the wall inscriptions in the al-Lisān area in particular,

but also the remains of the early monastic activities in general (Fig. 5).

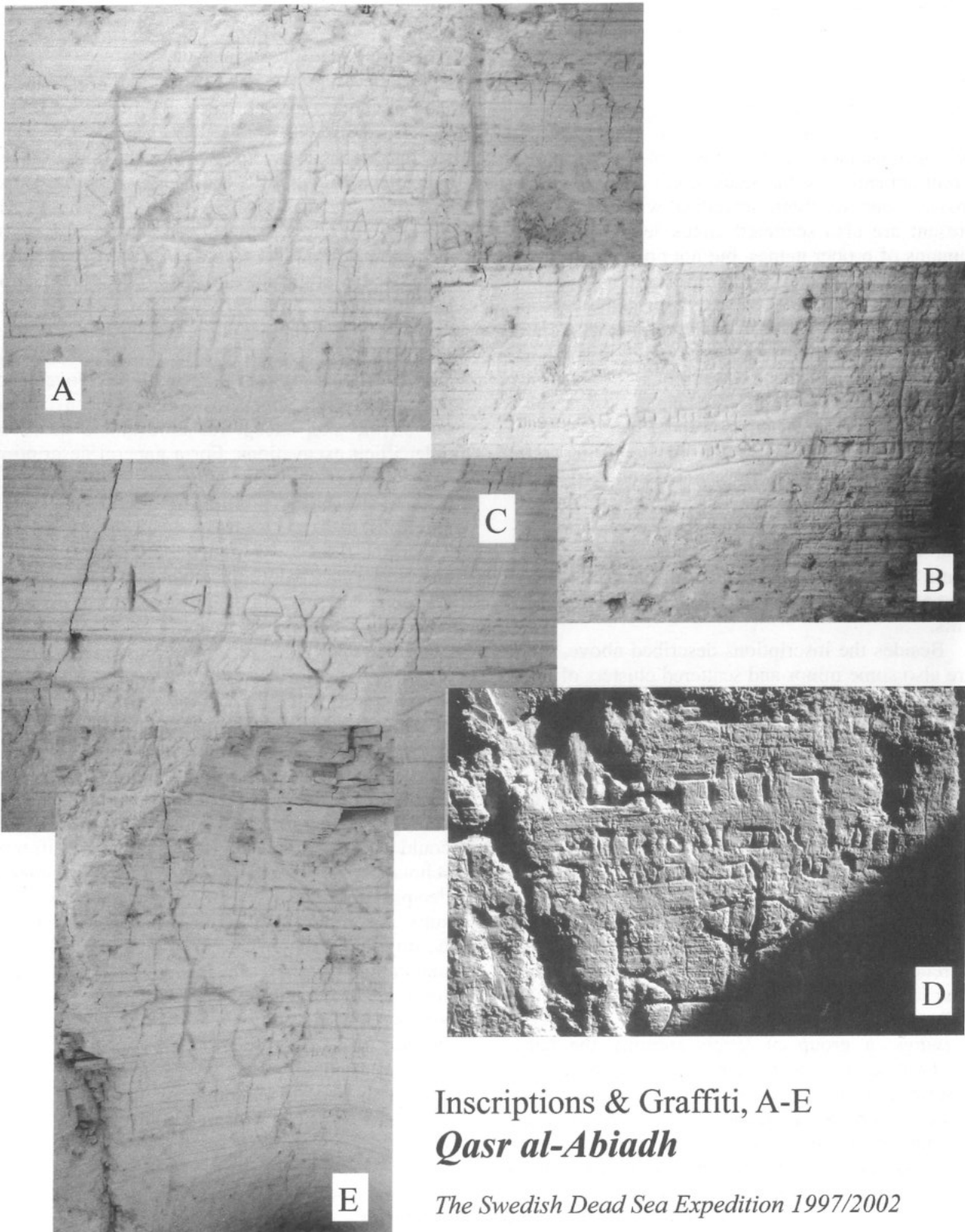
The Papyrus Find of Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba

Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba is located about 3km northwest of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār (approximately 34.5°N-S and 65°E-W). The hermitage and the connected chapel are cut into a bastion-shaped sediment formation in one of the rift valleys leading down to the Dead Sea. The site was discovered in 1928 by F. M. Abel (1929) while exploring the al-Lisān area. In the 1929 edition of *Revue Biblique*, Abel published a plan of the site and a short description, apparently after a brief survey in the field. Our excavation and documentation of the site show a partly different shape of the hermitage and also additional rooms. Before our work in November-December 1996 no excavation had been carried out on the site, except for unfortunate traces of older illicit excavations. For a general description of the excavation and documentation of the site we refer to the earlier preliminary report (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 333-336).

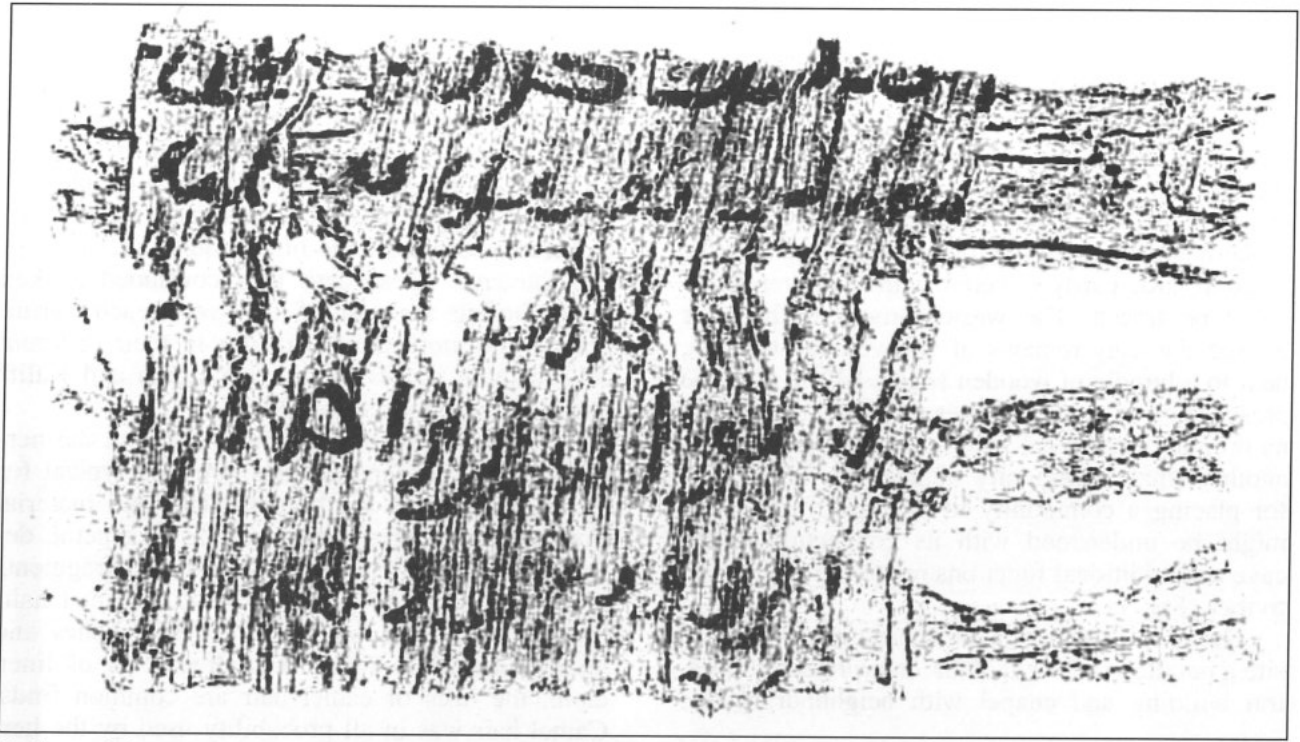
On the floor level immediately south east of a cistern, located below the floor level, a small rectangular papyrus fragment was found. The piece measures 8 x 5cm, where six lines of text are discernable. The fragment is most certainly part of a larger papyrus, because a continuation of the text can be traced at the far right as well as on the lower part of the piece. The papyrus is the first ever discovered on the al-Lisān peninsula and may therefore be of vital importance to the understanding of the local monastic activities. Depending on the nature of the text, the papyrus could also be of great general interest. Different scholars have put forward several ideas in order to decipher the letters, so far without conclusive results. A common first impression suggests a Greek writing, but a somewhat closer study reveals some unparalleled strokes, which might suggest an early form of Arabic script. The papyrus remains enigmatic and up to now there is no satisfactory suggestion for its interpretation. Despite this we have decided to publish the papyrus in this preliminary report, in hope of encouraging other scholars to present a plausible interpretation of the text (Fig. 6).

Documentation of the Hermitage East of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār

Extensive documentation has also been carried out at the nearby hermit dwellings in the surroundings of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, located on the slopes of the rift valley. In a small wadi 300 meters east



5. The various inscriptions, documented on the walls of room A in Qasr al-Abiadh. The photos present the documentation of the inscriptions as approached in the field, without emphasizing on any particular interpretation. Photo SDSE 2002.



6. Photo of the enigmatic papyrus fragment from Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba. Photo SDSE 1998.

of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, a smaller excavation was performed inside a cave. The latter is interpreted as a possible hermit dwelling, were its three adjacent cells were additionally documented in 1996. These hermit cells, cut out of the slopes of the nearby ridges, may form the pattern of a *laura* and a smaller hermit society of its own (e.g. Hirschfeld 1992 and Patrich 1995). The documentation of wall inscriptions from three of the cells, briefly mentioned above, was presented in the preliminary report covering the results from 1995 and 1996.

The cave extends about 50 meters into the saline bedrock beneath the marl sediments. A thick layer of sediment covering the floor showed that the cave had been undisturbed for centuries. A narrow passage leads from the entrance into a larger chamber of a considerable height, in all a larger version resembling the artificially constructed interiors of Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭūba and Qaṣr al-Abiadh.

A trial sounding of the floor sediments was carried out during the 1997 season. Two small trial trenches, measuring one by one meter each, were dug in the sediments covering the cave floor of the large hall. The material was cautiously excavated and sieved, to make it possible to detect small bones and other materials besides artefacts. The finds from the test squares were not very extensive. Apart from traces of soot and ashes only a few animal bones were found. Only a minor part of the cave has been investigated so far but the am-

bition is to make a more thorough documentation and measurement of the cave.

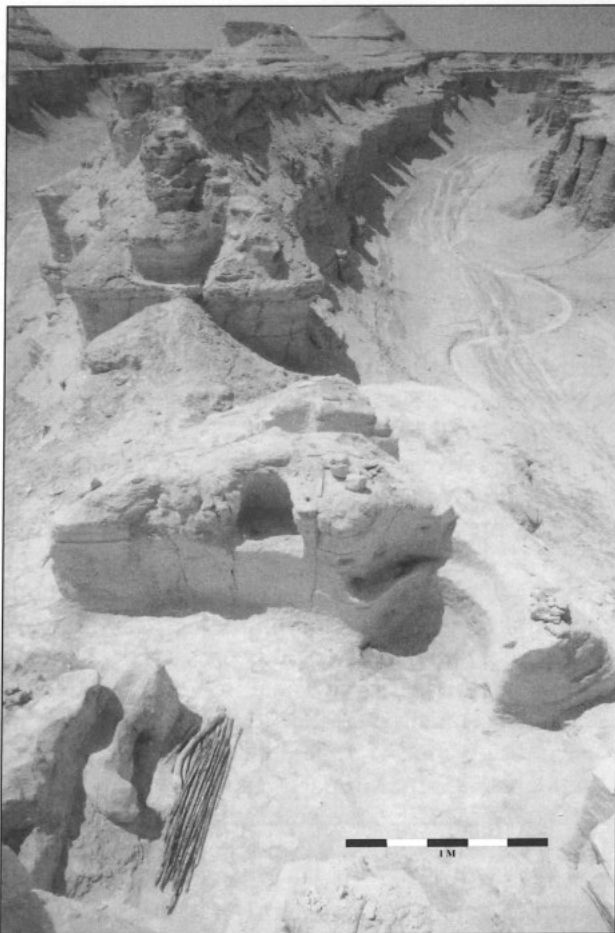
During the fieldwork of 1997 yet another structure was discovered, on the top of the ridge on the opposite side of the cave entrance. The three cells with wall inscriptions, as well as the structure on the top, were excavated and documented. Cell 2 and 3 are partly well preserved, with some of the chambers or cells relatively intact. In other parts of the dwellings the superstructures had collapsed, leaving a considerable risk of the still standing structures to fall in near future.

Cell 1 consisted of two different chambers; one larger and partly collapsed chamber besides one smaller preserved cell with inscriptions on the walls. Cell 2 and 3 were both partly preserved together with their wall inscriptions, also presented in the report of 1997 (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 333). The floor levels of the preserved chambers were carefully sieved, leaving a considerable scarce find material besides the elsewhere well attested fragments of rope, plaited work and bone fragments. A preliminary analysis of some recorded sherds dates the pottery material to the fifth and sixth centuries AD. A connection between the pottery (often deposited in the upper rubble) and the other find material cannot yet be determined for certain.

The structure on the top of the ridge, consisting of one chamber and a small courtyard, was totally

collapsed. The site had to be cleared from debris and wind-blown sand in order to document its inner structures. Beneath was discovered the remains of one large, irregular room, originally cut out of the marl and customized with a plaster floor. There are two narrow openings in the walls, in the eastern and western part of the room respectively. On the western and southern side of the hermitage a smaller courtyard, partly covered with a plaster floor, could be traced. The western room furthermore housed the ashy remains of an oven-construction, next to a bundle of wooden sticks still *in situ*. The presence of an oven indicates that this site was not an ordinary hermit cell, but rather the centre of yet another small community of its own. The reason for placing a community to this specific location might be understood with its connection to the cave and additional functions related to pilgrim activities (Fig. 7).

The oven is of particular interest and makes the site a parallel to Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba, interpreted as a central building and chapel with neighbouring her-



7. Photo showing the described structure in the hermitage east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, probably the centre of a small hermit community. Photo SDSE 1997.

mitages. In both cases the cells cut out of the slopes of the nearby ridges form the pattern of a *laura*. The hermitage east of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār could be interpreted as a centre within a small hermit community of its own, despite its close geographical connection with the monastic centre of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār. According to the Rules of Gerasimus, the hermits gathered to celebrate the liturgy only on Saturdays and Sundays. These days they consumed cooked food. During the rest of the week each hermit prayed and worked individually in their different cells without access to fire (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 336; c.f. Svensson 1997).

The relatively poor find material from the hermitages, its cells and chapels, are also typical for the ascetic life of the hermits. The find material from the hermitages is very similar in general, despite the papyrus find of Qaşr aṭ-Ṭūba: fragments of pottery, strips of palm leaf, tuft of camel hair, fragments of rope, nut shells, smaller bones and textile fragments. Apart from fragments of linen cloth, the tufts of camel hair are common finds. Camel hair was in all probability used by the hermits for the clothing, a custom relating to John the Baptist: “And John was clothed camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins: and he ate locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). The practice refers to the Prophet Elias (2 Kings 1:8), where John the Baptist in turn is presented as Elias *redivivus* by Jesus (Mt 17 :12, 13). Both were understood as prototypes for the hermit life.

Discussion

The results of the excavation in Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, performed in 1997, support the hypothesis that the site could be identical with a bishopric from the 4th century — probably named Sodoma. In the councillor list of the church meeting of Nicea in 325, bishop Severus of Sodoma is mentioned, among the bishops of the province of Arabia. In the list of fathers gathered at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and at the Synod of Jerusalem in 518, the bishop of Sodoma is lacking, but instead the bishop of Zoara turns up (Abel 1938: 198-201). The reading of Sodoma was challenged already in the 1930s, and it was suggested that Sodoma was a misspelling of Soadon. It has also been proposed in the past that Sodoma refers to a general area around Zoara, and not to a bishop seat. At the time when the existence of a bishop of Sodoma was questioned, the church at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār was not known. The problem concerning bishop Severus of Sodoma can be reasonably solved by the presence of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as a bishop church. Our argumentation for Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as Sodoma has recently been further discussed

and supported by the Finnish historian Joonas Sipilää: "The argument is quite convincing, including the suggestive geology of the area and the Roman road passing south of it. The site does not appear to be dictated by economic considerations. Rather, it had a strict religious function in line with the tradition to mark out biblical events. The placing of the bishop seat of Sodoma on the Lisan Peninsula and, consequently, in to the province of Arabia solves the problem of Severus" (Sipilää in print).

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī and the surrounding hermitages can be an analogy and a predecessor to Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāta near Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi, which has been identified as the basilica at Lot's cave, according to the Byzantine tradition (Politis 1992, 1993). The hermit communities on al-Lisān, including Dayr al-Qaṭṭār, may have been built in line with the same Old Testament tradition, concerning Sodom and Gomorrah (c.f. Abel 1929: 248). An early dating of the original church at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār is supported by the discovery of older walls and hermit dwellings on the spot as well as by Late Roman pottery found during the 1997 excavation. Apart from the find material, an early date is also indicated by the Roman road passing near the site and already mentioned by Alois Musil in his famous travel account (Musil 1907: 164).

There is evidence pointing at Dayr al-Qaṭṭār as the location of the earliest and most important hermit dwelling in the al-Lisān area. It is probable that the earliest phase of the hermit community on al-Lisān can be dated to the late third or early fourth century AD. The crypt of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār (Holmgren and Kaliff 1997: 329) is likely to be an early hermit cell, later incorporated in the church of Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and used as an ossuary. This crypt may originally have been the cell of one of the early hermits settling in this area, later revered as a holy person. The tomb of the founding father was sometimes later marked by a special building, or he was buried in the cave in which he had spent his life (Patrich 1997: 44). The shape of the crypt, resembling the hermit dwellings in the vicinity, indicates that this is the case. This interpretation could furthermore find its parallel to the original function of the cave in the eastern hermitage. A tentative explanation for the cave is that it originally served as a dwelling for one of the first hermits to settle on this spot. Later the cave may have turned into a tomb. The inscriptions and graffiti in the adjacent hermitages indicate that the place eventually developed into a pilgrimage.

Dayr al-Qaṭṭār has remained a monastery into the Early Islamic periods, a common phenomenon recognizable in several Byzantine sites in today's

Jordan (e.g. Kaegi 1992: 88 ff). One such example resembling Dayr al-Qaṭṭār is the sanctuary of Saint Aron (Jabal Hārūn), where a Christian place of worship later was converted into a Muslim shrine (Peterman and Schick 1996). The function of the Dayr al-Qaṭṭār and the surrounding hermitages during the Islamic period still remains uncertain.

Anders Kaliff and Richard Holmgren
The Swedish Dead Sea Expedition
C/o Department of Archaeology and
Ancient History
Uppsala University
P.O. Box 626
SE-751 26 Uppsala
SWEDEN

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