

AI-MADRAS — PETRA AND THE PANEION AT BĀNYĀS: THE *OPEROSA ANTRA*

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The High-Place dedicated to the cult of Dhū ash-Sharā at al-Madras, Petra, is one of the best known, thanks to its meticulous recording by Gustaf Dalman (1908: 117-137; Brünnow and Domaszewski 1904: 209-214, hereafter Br.; Merklein 1995: 115-120; Wenning 2004: 41). Its general location is a little south to the eastern part of the as-Siq and it is approached, as are most of the cult-places and other monuments of Petra, by a staircase carved in the sandstone. The ascent leading to al-Madras begins at Wādī Mūsā below the 'Obelisk Tomb' (Taylor 2002: 89) and takes advantage of a side-valley going up. After about a third of the path has been climbed, next to an undefined installation (not recorded by Dalman; two stepped concentric semicircles, 3m, 0.9m attached to a one step lower 'threshing floor' 3 x 5m; Wenning forthcoming) the typical rock-cut Nabataean stepped path is picked up. The width of the staircase, measured where the steps were not weathered is exactly 2m (compared to narrower steps higher up at al-Madras, below the 'Treppenfelsen' (Rock Stairway) Wenning 2001a: 15, and narrower steps to Jabal an-Numayr: Nahmé and Villeneuve 1999: 77). In curves the steps are widened to 3m and more. At Petra the number and width of the staircases is in direct relation to the importance of the site. Therefore, for the sake of comparison we may recall the widths of the stepped rock-cut paths of al-Khubtha (at least three paths from different directions, 0.5m; the main one from near the Palace Tomb 3.0+m), an-Numayr (one path 0.9m), al-Madhbaḥ (at least three paths, down to the theatre ca. 1.2-2.8m), Jabal Hārūn (one path, from the south ca. 0.5m) and Umm al-Biyāra (one path, 0.3, 1.0, 2.2m). Returning to the path leading to al-Madras, it can be surmised that wherever the ascent is now eroded by the many side wadis, originally it was constructed with retaining walls. Reaching the cult-place itself one is surprised to acknowledge that it is arranged on a mountain, which is completely enclosed and 'protected' by higher massifs without the impressive views,

which are so typical to other mountain-top sanctuaries at Petra (Augé and Dentzer 1999: 67; the hotels of Wādī Mūsā are glimpsed at from the top of the al-Madras ascent). The second unusual phenomenon of al-Madras, in comparison to other sanctuaries at Petra, is that numerous cult installations are spread along the mountain's more or less leveled crest to the length of at least a hundred meters. Therefore, Dalman divided al-Madras (from southeast to northwest) into the following cult-zones: Südterrasse (south terrace), Südhof (south courtyard), Treppenfelsen (rock stairway), Mittelfelsen, Mittelhof, Nordplateau and Nordhof (Dalman 1908: fig. 36; **Fig. 1**).

The Rock-Scarp

Our concern in the present paper is not the entire al-Madras complex, but only one architectural element [No. 71] in Dalman's 'Nordplateau' (1908: 121-124, figs. 36-42). The central and natural feature of the North Plateau is a roughly north-south, narrow, vertical, 'knife-shaped' rock-mass, about 30m long, 10-15m wide and 10-15m high (compass bearing along the east face 40°). The rock-scarp is flanked from the east and from the west by natural platforms toward which it presents its two vertical surfaces (the west platform, which will not be dealt with in this paper, shows the remains of quarrying that served as foundations for built-up structures). Thus, nature has created here the perfect setting for the carving of cult-niches, indeed the west face of the rock is punctured by fifteen votive niches of all forms and sizes which have been described in detail by Dalman. This impressive rock-wall was rightly designated by him as "der beste Beweis für den sakralen Charakter des Platzes" (1908: 121-123, figs. 36, 39; Br. Pl. IV and fig. 246; Merklein 1995: 115). The opposite eastern side of the rock-scarp, however, is much poorer in terms of the niches (**Fig. 2**). There are only a few: square or arched, flanked by pilasters and square niche within a rectangular one (Dalman 1908: 123). Roughly in the middle of the rock-scarp a square 'room' is

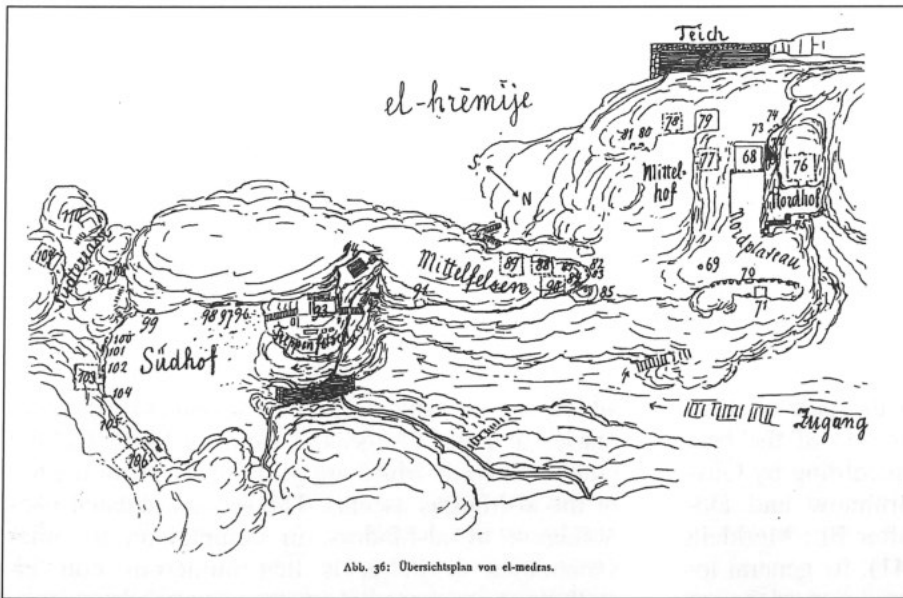


Abb. 36: Übersichtplan von el-mdras.

1. Al-Mdras, Petra, Schematic Map of the Sanctuary (after Dalman 1908: fig. 36).



2. Al-Mdras, Petra, The East Face of the Rock-Scarp (D. 71; Photo by Robert Wenning).



3. Al-Mdras, Petra, the *operosum antrum* (Photo by R. Wenning).

hewn out of the sandstone [Dalman No. 71]. In our view it is an ‘artificial cave’ — *operosum antrum* (Fig. 3). This ‘cave’ is the focus of our discussion. However, before we proceed, a few words on a possible ritual-court at the front are necessary.

The Court

As stated above, fronting the east rock-face there is a natural very flat court 4m wide. The plateau itself is sloping down only 6m further east. It is, therefore, quite possible that the Nabataeans took advantage of the natural setting and created here a court measuring 9 x 12.5m. Uncertain remains of a quarried corner are to be found in the southeast. In front of the south end of the rock-scarp there are the remains of a ca. 4m long wall (one stone wide — not exactly parallel to the rock orientation, azimuth 35°). Immediately at the foot of the rock, to the north of the *operosum antrum* there is a series of shallow rectangular basins and

cup-marks (Fig. 4, already noted by Dalman 1908: 123 d, e, f). From south to north: 1.03 x 0.6m, 0.15m deep; 0.4 x 0.75m, 0.15m deep; diameter 0.22m; after a distance of ca. 3m another cup mark



4. Al-Mdras, Petra, Basins and cup-marks to the north of the *operosum antrum* (Photo by R. Wenning).

diameter 0.2m, depth ca. 0.1m. Another bigger water-pool (2.9 x 2.8m, ca. 1.0m deep) is found further north (Dalman 1908: 123, No. 72 — this installation belongs to a different later context, cf. Reuben 2003: 95-96). The conclusion from the element above is inevitable: in front of the *operosum antrum* there was a ritual court with presumably various services that also included libations and /or purification by water (Wenning 2004: 46).

The *Operosum Antrum*

Room No. 71 was already described in great detail and identified by Dalman (1908: 123); Brünnow and Domszewski (1904-1909: No. 46) before him, as *Sacellum* (shrine; Merklein 1995: 115-*cella*). Our observations on this cave-room differ from those of Dalman only in minute details. The dressing of the walls and niches is rough. The room measures 1.90 x 1.90m and it has a flat roof (estimated height 2.5m — the arch-like opening on the façade is natural). In the center of the west (back) wall there is an arched niche 0.6 x 0.4m, only 0.14m deep — unfit for the insertion of a statue or even for a relief. To the left of the above niche there is a small depression (0.15m height, 0.08m deep) perhaps for the placement of a small oil-lamp. On the north wall of the room there is a flat relief of a rectangular niche flanked by rounded pilasters (0.29 x 0.53m, 0.03m deep) (Dalman 1908: fig. 41). In the space of this niche there was a relief (an 'Idol' or *Baetyl* according to Merklein 1995: 115) that was destroyed by iconoclasts.

As stated above, about four meters north of the quarried cave-room there is an arched niche inside a trapezoid quarried background (0.9 x 0.63m, overall depth 0.33m). About 5m south of the room there are the ruined remains of a niche within a niche (0.66m wide, 0.97m outside width, 1.10m high). Between the last niche and the cave-room there is a curved ledge, probably natural.

The east rock-façade in the center of the north plateau of al-Madras at Petra bears a remarkable resemblance to a rock-scarp with niches in the Sanctuary of Pan at Bānyās (hereafter: Paneion). Before this unexpected architectural parallel is taken advantage of, a short description of the remains at the Paneion is in order (Ma'oz 1994-99, 1998 forthcoming).

The Paneion at Bānyās

Bānyās is located at the southwestern foot of Mount Hermon, in the middle of the road from Damascus to Tyre and Sidon. The rare combination at one spot of a snow-capped mountain, forest, spring and cave, each a holy place in the ancient Greek re-

ligion, brought about the foundation of a rural cult-place to Pan inside the grotto at Bānyās. Since 'To Paneion' is mentioned already in 200BC by Polybius (*Histories* XVI 18), cult presumably begun here in the days Ptolemy II Philadelphus (presumably around 260BC) The sanctuary itself is located in the shade of an elongated rock-scarp (ca. 80m long E-W 30m high) at the foot of which there is a flat natural terrace, some 15m wide, which slope on its south side toward the Jordan sources located ca. 10m further down.

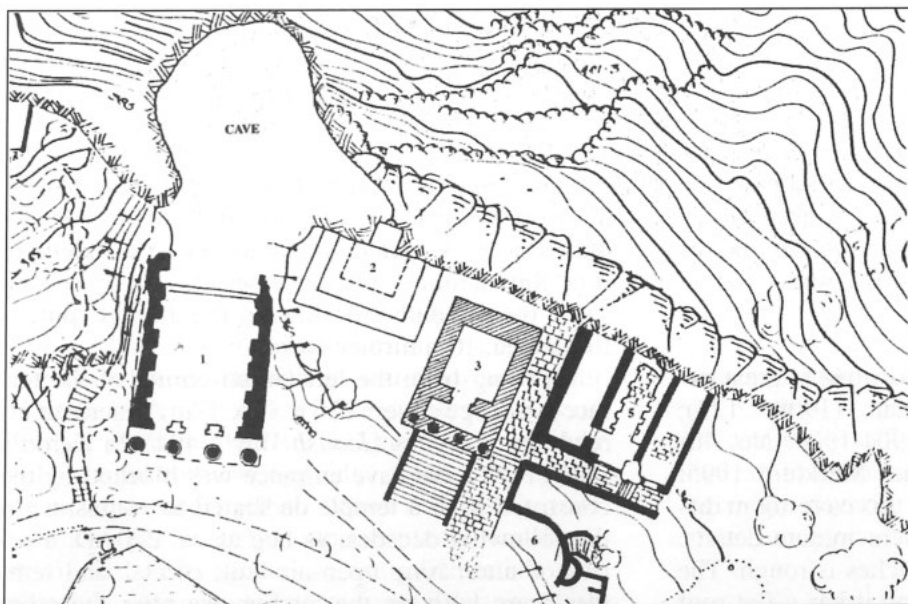
Opening from the left (west) corner of the terrace is a large cavern (26 x 30 x 17m) described already by Josephus (*Jewish War* I: 404). In Herod's time (19BC) the cave entrance was blocked by the construction of a temple dedicated to Augustus. In the following decades, as late as ca. 220AD, a series of alternating open-air 'cult-courts' and temples were built on the terrace one after the other from west to east. Our *operosum antrum* is found in the 'Court of Pan and the Nymphs' (hereafter: CPN; Fig. 5) which is located ca. 4m east and 5m higher than the *Augusteion*. It is followed on the east by the Temple of Zeus. CPN consists mainly of three elements: a) an *operosum antrum* hewn into the rock-scarp; b) the remains of a court fronting it c) Cult niches.

The *Operosum Antrum*

The center of the artificial cave is located ca. 6.5m to the east of the opening of the much larger natural grotto, in the exact center of the CPN (Fig. 6). It is quarried as a vault 3.1m wide and 2.8m deep (Fig. 7). Its vertical side-walls curve to form a barrel-vault ceiling, the apex of which is 3.1m above the floor. The back wall is vertical throughout. An undecorated semi-dome niche is carved in the center of the rear wall — 1.35m high, 0.82m wide, and 0.41m deep. The niche would have, most likely, accommodated a small statue of Pan (such as Bieber 1981: 146-8, Pls. 626-635). The floor of the cave is stepped and rising toward the back. At the foot of the cliff outside the cave, two more steps were quarried in the protruding rock-ledge. Horizontal rows of mortises, cut into the vertical rock faces of the interior of the *operosum antrum* no doubt anchored marble paneling. In contrast, the concave part of the vault still carries extensive patches of thick white plaster.

The Court

The plan of the court facing the artificial cave is restored thanks to rock-cuttings and traces of cement bedding (Fig. 6). The rock-scarp ledge immediately outside the artificial cave had been quar-



5. Paneon, Bānyās, Schematic plan of the excavations (Zvi Ma'oz).



6. Paneon, Bānyās, The Grotto and the Court of Pan and the Nymphs (Photo by Z. Ma'oz).



7. Paneon, Bānyās, the *operosum antrum* (Photo by Z. Ma'oz).

ried flat so as to form steps, as regular as they may have been, within the constraints of the preexisting rock-terrace. The court was most likely paved by flag stones. The two steps in front of the cave continue unbroken to the right (east) for a distance of about 5m, there it terminates in a curved line, no doubt the original shape of the rock-ledge. This termination marks the east end of the court. The rock steps functioned as benches or as offering shelves. In contrast, the rock-formation on the west of the artificial cave prohibited the quarrying of benches in this direction. Nevertheless, on this side the outer edge of the cement bedding of the floor is found roughly 5m to the west of the cave. Therefore the combined length of the court from the east to the

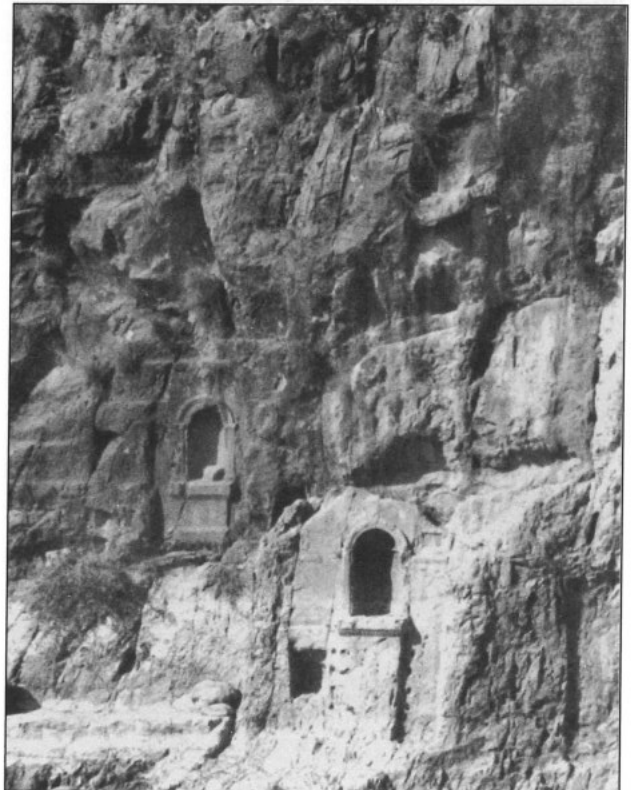
west can be restored as 13m. The original plan of CPN is further reconstructed on the basis of a rectangle of mortared floor-beddings (originally covered by pavers) which had survived in traces on the west and south sides. The location of the mortar-beds and rock-cuttings indicate that the court measured ca. 10m across — from the cave excavated in the rock-scarp to the outer edge of the mortar-bedding in the south. Inside the rectangle formed by the mortar-beds (ca. 10 x 15m), the Roman remains were almost completely destroyed or eroded by later strata of occupation. Rock bumps quarried flat and patches of mortar beddings survived here and there on different levels. These indicate the various levels of the original pavement of the court that would have ascended in converging (right-angled) wide steps toward the cave (an ascent which continued inside, above).

Rock-Carved Niches

The Court of Pan and the Nymphs included in its original stage, in addition to the artificial cave, a decorated rock-hewn niche quarried up on the face of the cliff (the additions of the second stage niches are discussed below). This niche is located 3.5m to the east of the artificial cave and its floor is 2.66m above the level of the upper bench along the cliff. The 1.07m high and 1.02m wide niche is standing on a massive molded pedestal, 0.87m high (inner measurements: width 0.56m and depth 0.35m). Rather unusually, the niche's semi-dome ceiling is not sculpted as a shell but is decorated by a pattern, which is reminiscent of *opus reticulatum* (Dodge 1990: 108-128). A small trapezoid pedestal (H. 0.22m) is quarried out from the natural rock at the bottom of the niche (wider at the back, 0.36m and narrow at the front, 0.15m). The pedestal inside the niche no doubt supported a statue, which would have been about 0.7m high.

Two identical niches were added to the CPN rock-scarp about a hundred years after its initial creation. One is found on the east edge of the court, the other right above the *operosum antrum*. The eastern niche is found 7.8m to the east of the vault and is in fact adjacent to the eastern edge of the two benches at the foot of the rock-scarp. There is a narrow vertical patch (ca. 0.66m wide) of unhewn rock that separates the benches from the carvings of the niche. Here the cemented 'frame' of the original court (above) would have been ended and the niche is therefore beyond and to the east of the original court. The addition of this niche is thus an extension of the court by ca. 3m to the east. The preparation of the niche include the smoothing of a vertical background rectangle (W. 2.35; H. 3.30m)

on the face of the rock-scarp. On it there is a high pedestal (H. 1.68; W. 1.04m), supporting a carved niche (W. 0.68m, H. 1.30m, depth 0.45m: Fig. 8). On either side of the niche there is a ledge for two *tabulae ansata* (0.4 x 0.28m; 0.3 x 0.2m; with outer frames 7cm and 10cm respectively). The pedestal is exceptionally high (Ma'oz 1998: 21, fig. 4). The niche itself, standing on the pedestal, is framed by two fluted *antae* on the sides (W. 0.13m), supporting a molded arch. In the half-dome ceiling of the niche a beautiful shell is carved. On the floor of this niche, there is a sunken, hexagonal attachment area for sculpture (0.01m deep). As mentioned above, on each side of the niche there is a *tabula ansata*, the one on the left was left empty. However, the *tabula ansata* on the right carries a now much-mutilated inscription. This is a dedication to Pan and the Nymphs of a statue of Hermes by the high-priest Victor, son of Lisymachos, in the year 150 to the era of Paneas — 148/9AD (Ma'oz 1994-99: 92; Isaac forthcoming; Hermes was considered the shepherd god of the Lebanon Beqa' as an inscription dedicating his statue testifies: Seyrig 1951: 114f., according to some Greek traditions Hermes brought forth Pan: Hesiod, *Homeric Hymns* XIX 1; Borgeaud 1988: 66). The second niche was carved right above the *operosum antrum*

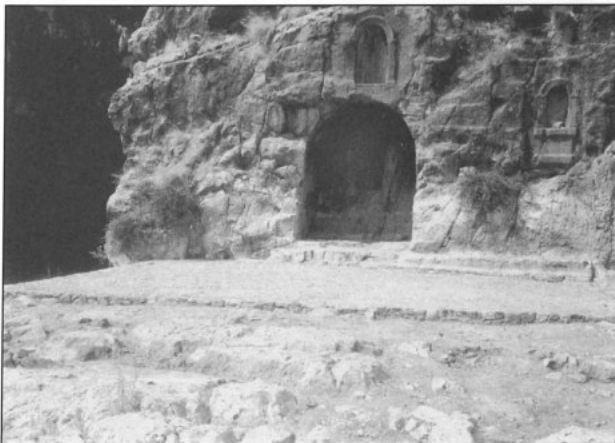


8. Paneon, Bānyās, the *tabula ansata* niche (bottom right) and the 'opus reticulatum' niche (upper left; Photo by Z. Ma'oz).

vault on the face of the natural rock-scarp (**Fig. 9**). Here there is no background carving and the area surrounding the niche was left at its natural rugged surface. The niche is standing immediately over a large *tabula ansata* (0.7 x 0.22m) with a well-preserved inscription. Otherwise, the carving and decoration of the niche (H. 1.60, W. 0.83m, 0.67m deep) is identical to the former niche. The inscription relates the dedication of a statue of the nymph Echo to Pan by the same person mentioned in the other inscription Victor, son of Lysimachos (Ma'oz 1994-99: 92; Isaac forthcoming). There is, therefore, no doubt that both niches were carved and added to this court at the same time — 148/9AD. A broken altar from the time of Elagabalos (218-222AD) was found in front of the operosum antrum in a Mamluk context (Isaac forthcoming). As well as fragments of other undated altars (one decorated by bucrania, compare: Ronzevalle 1937-38: 23-25). However, from the point of view of design and construction of the Court of Pan and the Nymphs only two stages are clear: the initial one (Paneon Phase Vb) and the addition of the niches on the rock-scarp in 148/9AD.

Baetyl

Finally, another rock-carved relief, found high up on the surface of the rock-scarp to the east of CPN, appears to have been a *baetyl*. It is virtually a flat engaged-semi-column standing on a square engaged-base. The relief is rather shallow and cannot be easily picked out from its background even in the late-afternoon light. In the one time we climbed to the carving the purpose was to clean the Latin inscription carved below the base (Z/PAN/LTA; Isaac forthcoming). Unfortunately no measurements were taken and the following are estimates taken from ground level: Height above the court ca.



9. Paneon, Bānyās, the niche above the *operosum antrum*, note the rock-benches at the bottom of the rock-scarp (Photo by Z. Ma'oz).

15m, height of column shaft ca. 0.6m, height of base ca. 0.4m, protrusion from background ca. 0.5m. The presence of *baetylia* in the various Semitic cults in the area is not infrequent (see provisionally: Moore 1903; Ronzevalle 1930-31; Sourdel 1952: 105-106; Soyes 1972; Wenning 2001c). However, I have not been able to find, as yet, a parallel neither for the shape of this *baetyl* nor for its peculiar position.

The Archaeological and Architectural Date

Stratified earth layers, which would have related to the Court of Pan and the Nymphs during its construction or occupation period, are completely gone. Nevertheless, such layers would have accumulated on the adjacent slope on the south side of the court. Thus, according to the latest group of pottery from the slope assemblage (Berlin forthcoming) our court would have been rather active during the first century AD (very few Roman sherds from this assemblage are dated later).

The only other evidence that can be brought to bear on the date of the Paneion CPN (and Petra al-Madras) is the comparison of the *operosa antra* architectural concept with its Italian precedents. Such a comparison would show that similar artificial caves were created in Italy mostly from the late first century BC. through the late first century AD (Lavagne 1988: 513-660; Helmsoll 1990:17-18; Settis 1973: 661-740; Neuerburg 1965: 31-40, figs. 15-33; Letzner 1990: 117-124, Pls. 1-12; Mielsch 1987: figs. 75, 77, 83, 86, 126-8; Rakob 1964; Meschini 1963; Jashemski 1979: 92-4, 151-3; Guilianì and Guatoli 1972; MacDougal and Jashemski 1987; Elderkin 1941; Hild 1896; Michon 1896: 1227-1237; Monceaux 1896: 129-132). That being the case, the concept of the *operosa antra* was imported to Paneion, in all likelihood, by one of the Herodian dynasts who was brought up in Italy, and who ruled Caesarea-Philippi-Paneas (Kokinos 1998: 271-303; Kindler 1983-4). Therefore, I hazard the guess that the CPN court and its artificial cave would have been donated to the Paneion either by Philip (4BC-33/4AD) or by Agrippa I (37-44AD).

The Paneion's Implications on Petra al-Madras

Vertical rock-cliffs with cult niches, such as the ones described above from Petra and Bānyās are rather rare in the Eastern Mediterranean. The only other example I found is in the sanctuary of Aphroditè at Hierados, Greece and it does not have an *operosum antrum* (Papakhaize, Vol. I, 1974, Photo 287). A Hellenistic artificial rock-carved cave dedicated to the cult of Pan was found at Thasos (Devambez 1976; compare the caves of Pan and

Nymphs: Levi 1926). The square artificial rock-cut 'cave-rooms', the *operosa antra* at al-Madras and the Paneion are therefore unique not only in the Levant but also in the eastern Mediterranean in general. According to Henri Lavagne (1988: 87-155) these artificial caves were invented or developed in third century BC. Egypt for the cult of Pan and the nymphs in view of the absolute dearth of natural caves in the topography of that country (for Greek images of the cave, see Borgeaud 1995). The heyday of their installation was the rule of Ptolemy II Philadelphus 283-246BC (Green 1990: 135-160). At that time they were furnished in the royal festivities 'Skene', according to the description of Athenaeos; excavated in the low rocky hill in the center of Alexandria (Strabo, *Geography* XVII 1, 10; Frazer 1972: 29.); and also in rocky cliffs in Egypt's Eastern Desert (caves and rustic *Panea* along roads; Bernand 1972: 16-20, Pl. 16, 1977: 59-213, 269-277, Pl. 34, 1984: 291). From Egypt the *operosa antra* were exported to Italian villa gardens where they served as shrines for Pan and the Nymphs and especially as a place of the Muses (Lavagne 1988). Thus, the Hellenistic *operosa antra* in Egypt and the first century AD examples from Italy and Bānyās bracket the possible date for this part of the sanctuary at al-Madras. In view of the above and the date of most of the early architecture in Petra (McKenzie 1990), al-Madras Nord-Plateau should be dated to the late first century BC through the first half of the first century AD. However, whereas at Bānyās inscriptions indicate that its artificial cave was dedicated to the cult of Pan, al-Madras, also by an inscription: "Dhū-ash-Sharā, the god from Madrasa" (CIS II 443; Merklein 1995: 117), is known to have been a sanctuary dedicated to the cult of Dhū-ash-Sharā — the god of the mountains/wilderness (Sharā), Dhū ash-Sharā — the one from Sharā (=the mountains of Petra/Southern Edom) (Wenning 2001b: 20-21, following Jean Starcky 1966: 981-5; Zayadine 1997) "god of our lord (the king)", an astral god also identified with Zeus, Helios and Dionysos (cf. Wellhausen 1897: 48-51; Cumont 1905: 1865-8; Sourdel 1952: 59-68; Fahd 1968: 71-5; Teixidor 1977: 76-94; Drijvers 1986: 670-672; Zayadine 1989: 109-111; Gawlikowski 1990: 2662-5; Healey 2001: 85-107; Wenning 2003: 143-160; 2004: 34-49). This poses a problem. The artificial-cave, borrowed to the bosom of the mountain, most likely indicates a cult to a chthonic god (Borgeaud 1988). Generally speaking Dhū ash-Sharā is not known to have been such a deity. Nevertheless, Helmut Merklein (1995: 111, Note 16) followed by Joseph Patrich (2005: 106-108) have already

proposed the possibility of a chthonic god. Apparently, therefore Dhū ash-Sharā was not only a god of the mountains but also embodied the very mountain/rock itself — a chthonic deity. "Chez Stéphane de Byzance (*Ethniques* s.v.) Dousarès est le nom de roc" (Turcan 1989: 181). The only other option, in my view, to interpret the existence of an *operosum antrum* at al-Madras' is to postulate that Pan, the nymphs or the muses were visiting deities at Petra (cf. Friedland 1997: 94-96, 1999).

The above discussion serves to promote an argument that will be developed further in my forthcoming study of the 'mountain-top sanctuaries' at Petra. Namely: cult installations at Petra, as everywhere, are more complex than what meets the eye. They can tell us much more than is known today on the religion of the ancient Nabataeans.

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