

For Mrs. Diana Kirkbride-Haelbek who, as a pioneer in travelling and surveying with the Bedouins of the Petra area, among other discoveries, described Rās Slaysil for the first time in 1961

THE UNIQUE NABATAEAN HIGH PLACE OF RĀS SLAYSIL NORTHWEST OF PETRA AND ITS TOPOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

by

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Introduction

From Bayḍa, c. 5 km north of Petra, a valley with a wadi in its centre stretches for c. 3 km toward the west/southwest. It ends by pouring the water of winter rainfalls more than 400 m deep into Wādī as-Sīq (aṣ-Ṣīyyagh). A volcanic bluff struts out north of that place. The whole area has — at least since Musil — been called by the same name, which however has been and is differently spelt: Slejsel (Musil 1907), Sulaisil (Crawford 1930), Slehsil (Kirkbride 1961; 1966), Sleisel (Gebel and Starck 1985), Sleizel (Lindner 1976; 1991; Zayadine 1992), Sleysel (Lindner 1986), Sulêsel (Wenning 1987), and Suleisil (Gebel 1990).¹

The authors of this article propose to speak of “Wādī Slaysil” instead of “Wādī Sīq al-Ghurāb”, of the ancient and modern “Slaysil settlement” in the “Slaysil valley” and of the rock hill at its end as “Rās Slaysil” (Fig.1).

First References to “Slaysil”

The first writer to mention Slaysil was A. Musil (1907: 333) who saw “Wadi Slejsel” from a point to the west/northwest of the Dayr plateau. The arabist S. Crawford pondered “the Attitude of the Present Day Arab to the shrine of Mt. Hor”, referring of course to Jabal Hārūn. He described a site by the name of “Sulaisil” as a “subsidiary shrine” in relation to Jabal Hārūn. Thousands of sheep were, according to Crawford and his informants, annually driven to the

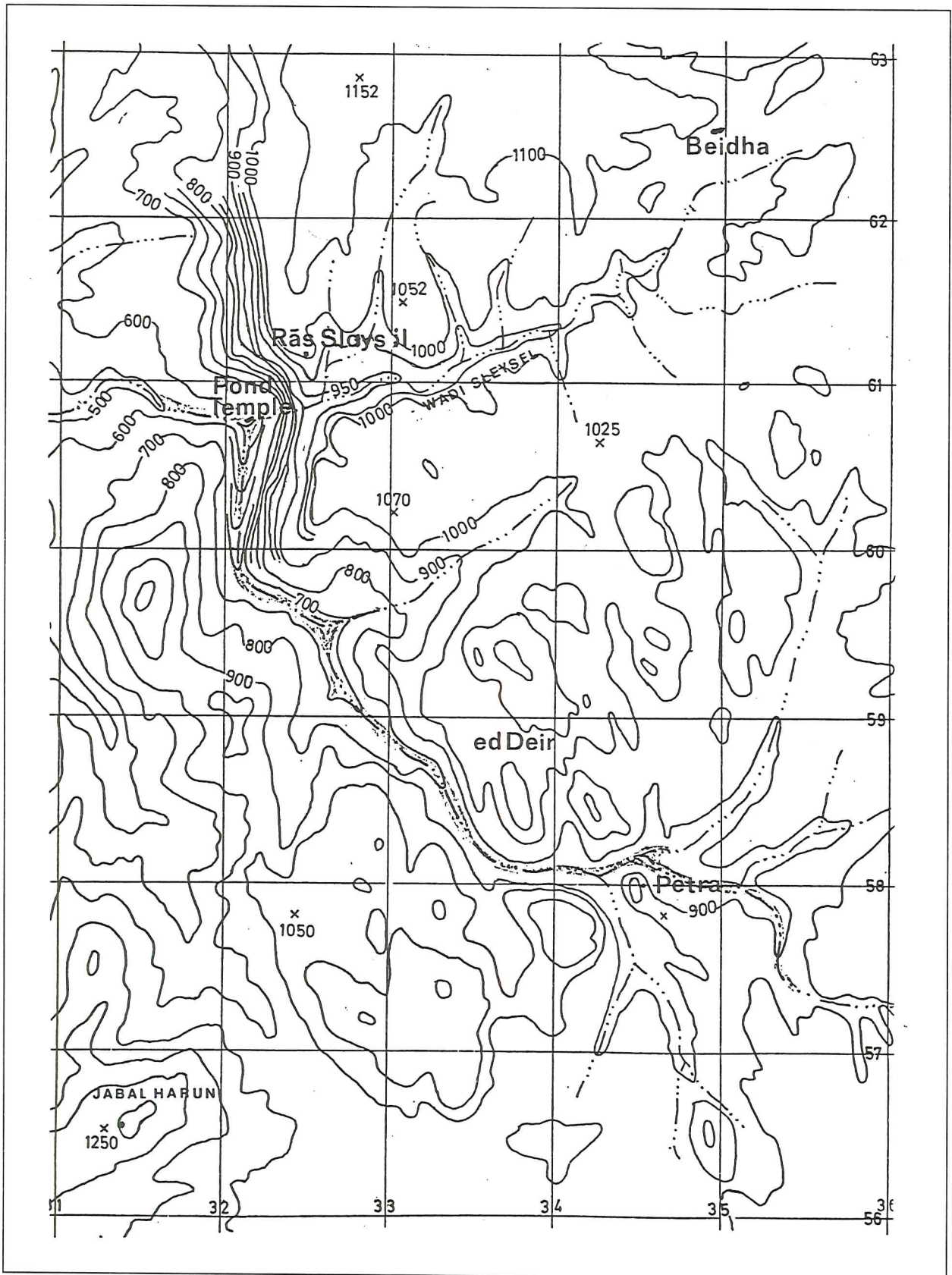
place “on a high shoulder of the range of mountains E(?) and more than an hour beyond the temple of the Deir” to have them look across a deep gorge and to gaze at the distant peak of Jabal Hārūn instead of being there in the flesh. Thus, Hārūn was to protect the animals from disease and render them fruitful. Eventually, one of the sheep was slaughtered and the blood “applied to the small rude building” on the “Sulaisil promontory”. The reader is reminded of Johann Ludwig Burckhard who had not to ascend all the way up to Jabal Hārūn in order to sacrifice his goat. A place where he could see the mountain was sufficient.

Crawford did not see “Sulaisil” with his own eyes; his report, however, proves that he had fairly reliable informants. After all, he visited other places around Petra, for example “Farasheh”, presumably Jabal Farasā further to the south, where he was shown another subsidiary shrine or “musallah” (1930: 292-97). A third (unrecorded) “musallah” was seen by one of the authors on the rim of the Jabal ash-Sharāh escarpment. It consists of a large plain boulder, on the surface of which people used to put smaller stones.

In the *Illustrated London News*, Diana Kirkbride (1961) gave a lively account on her activities around Petra between 1956 and 1961. Two-thirds of the way between Petra and Sayl ‘Aqlat, her Aceramic Neolithic excavation site, according to her description, a large wadi turns off to the west. Following this “Wadi Slehsil”, she came

1. The authors of this article suggested the spelling *Sleysel* “in order to have the word pronounced properly in English and German”. In keeping

with the transliteration system adopted in this volume, however, the name should be spelled *Slaysil*.



1. Sketch map of the Petra - Slaysil area (E. Gunsam).

upon wide ruined steps leading to the top of a high granite bluff. There, on "Ras Slehsil" she noted a well-laid pavement, many building blocks bearing the characteristic diagonal tooling, and one or two architectural fragments. To the west, beside the granite pinnacle, she observed another flight of steps leading down to a small platform and, beyond, to the sheer awe-inspiring drop to Wādī 'Arabah. Before reaching the "hitherto unrecorded Nabataean sanctuary" she noted a fair-sized Nabataean ruin-field nearby (1961: 448-451). Later she observed deposits of extremely hard and probably unmanageable basalt outcrops in "Wadi Slehsil" and small outcrops of copper carbonate at the "Wadi Slehsil precipice" (1966: 53).

Early Explorations of Slaysil by Teams of the Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Nürnberg (NHG)

One of the authors, together with Ibrahim Smadi, then Inspector of Petra, and Dakhilallah Qublan visited Slaysil in 1976. After 90 minutes of hiking from Bayḍa, the group discovered the remnants of a "caravan station" and, higher up, worked marble column drums, ashlar with diagonal tooling and Nabataean pottery (Lindner 1976: 93). Another team from NHG reached the promontory of Slaysil, Rās Slaysil according to Kirkbride, again in 1978. Nabataean pottery fragments including lamps, worked marble and tesserae were noted on the surface of a ruined building on the summit plateau. Ruins of a larger structure below the summit were regarded as remnants of a caravanserai in relation with a supposed caravan route to Wādī 'Arabah and from there to the Mediterranean (Lindner 1978: 93). The region of Slaysil was, since 1984, investigated several times by an Austrian group of NHG under the direction of E. Gunsam. The mountain-experienced team was well equipped for hiking and climbing in the precarious terrain. Tracks and path-

ways from Bayḍa and the Dayr plateau to Slaysil were explored. In the course of this work, the group investigated and climbed a road, ingeniously built of igneous material at the almost perpendicular rock wall from Rās Slaysil down to the bed of Wādī as-Siq or aṣ-Ṣiyyagh (the continuation of Wādī Mūsā). At 450 m down from Rās Slaysil they discovered the ruins of a Nabataean temple of the first centuries AD with surprisingly varied architectural fragments, including the remnants of a bath installation (Lindner and Gunsam 1993: 455-461).

Description of Rās Slaysil

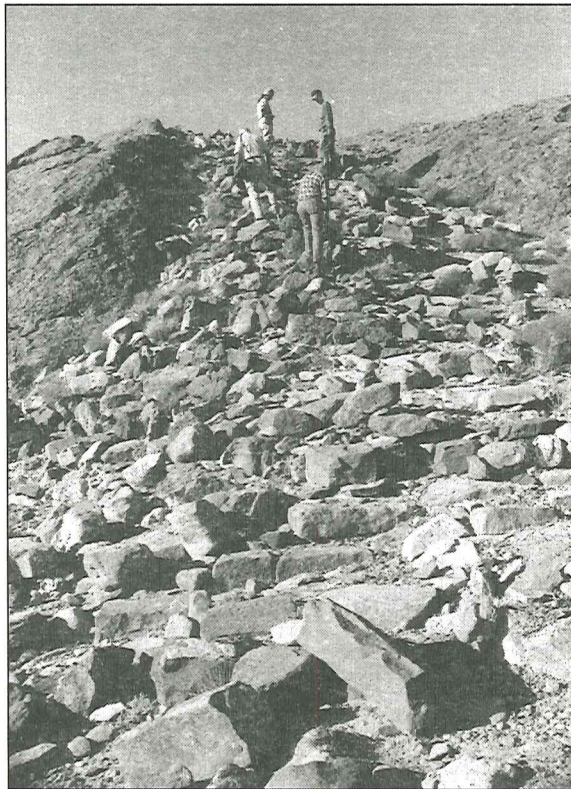
The promontory at the western end of the Slaysil valley and of Wādī Slaysil is located between the outlet of the wadi and the beginning of the above-mentioned road down to Wādī as-Siq (aṣ-Ṣiyyagh) and the Pond Temple ruins (Fig.2). A now badly damaged flight of steps, built upon the occurring quartz-porphyry, 3.50 m wide, leads 24 m up to a probably artificially levelled platform of 8 x 6 m at 1000 m asl (Fig.3). In 1989, it was entirely covered with what was assumed to be the foundation of a built structure of 8 x 5.5 m, apparently the same as mentioned (but not seen) by Crawford and later described by Kirkbride (1961) and Lindner (1976; 1978).

Rās Slaysil consists not of granite but of mixed igneous material, predominantly quartz porphyry and porphyrite (Gebel 1990), including compressed sandstone. At the northern side of the platform, visible for miles around, a seemingly unworked and certainly undecorated rock of 2 m height stands like a shield or half of a millstone above the sheer drop of 450 m down to the Pond Temple (Fig. 4). Already noted by Kirkbride, but apparently more damaged, are several steps and a levelled place cut in the rock of Rās Slaysil directly below the millstone (Fig. 5).

The "millstone" is called "*tāhūnat as-*



2. Rās Slaysil (left) with *tāhūna*, house ruins and wadi in the foreground.



3. Rock-cut and built staircase leading up to the High Place of Rās Slaysil.



4. Foundation of the built structure in front of the *tāhūna* of Rās Slaysil before its final destruction (1989).

Slaysil” by the local population. Contrary to Zayadine who translates Slaysil as “small wall”, the authors were told it means “rivulet”.² “Tāhūna” was translated to them as “millstone”. Anyway the *tāhūna*, not Jabal Hārūn, determined the axis of the building which, in fact, points rather to the west.

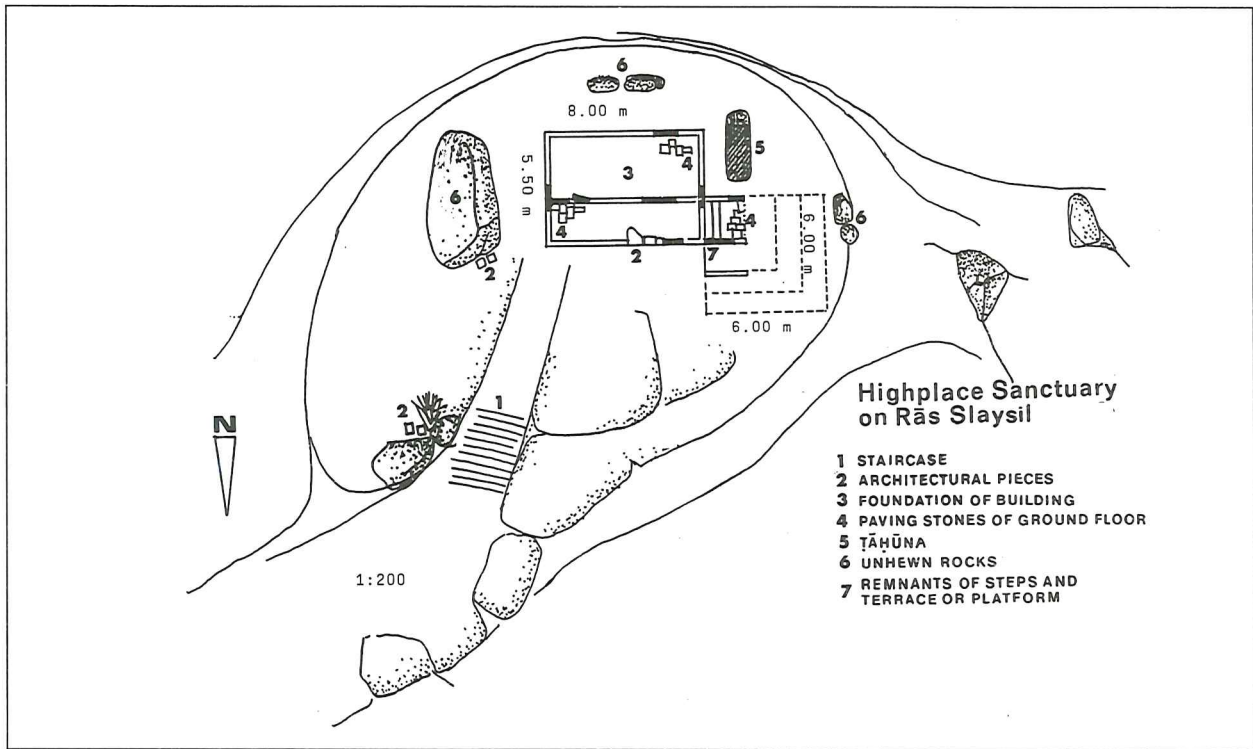
From the plateau with the *tāhūna*, Jabal Hārūn, the Dayr plateau, Naqab ar-Rubā‘i and Jabal Ṭaiyyiba can be seen. Where the rock wall drops almost perpendicularly, together with the ruined temple, Wādī as-Siq (aṣ-Ṣiyyagh) can be seen in a bird’s eye view. It curves at an angle of almost 45° before it runs toward Wādī ‘Arabah. Another outstanding rock below the top of Rās Slaysil is located more to the southwest. It is to be seen from far away, e.g. from the track

between Petra and the Pond Temple (Lindner and Zangenberg 1993: 141-142), where it is a landmark before the *tāhūna* comes into sight (Fig.6).

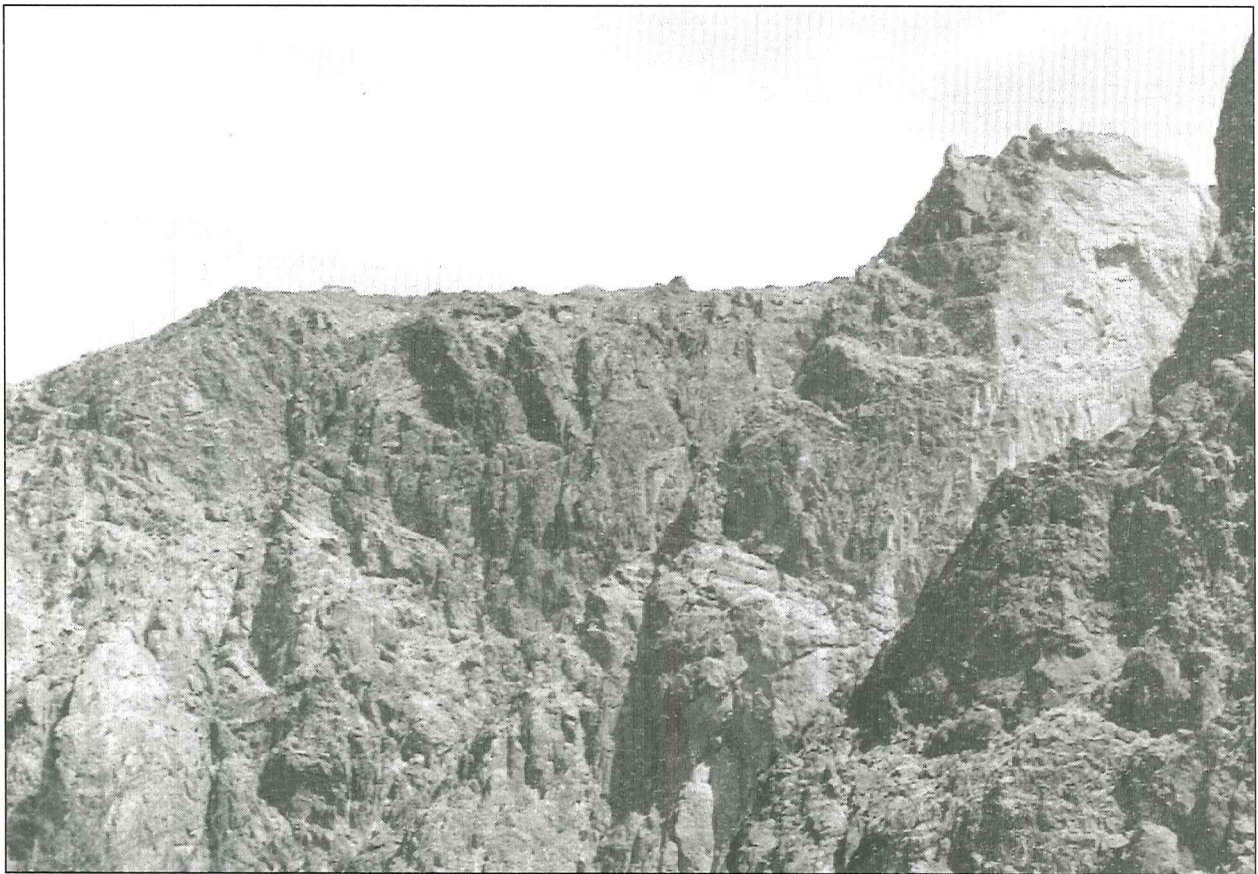
Unexpectedly, the remnants of the summit structure of Rās Slaysil were found completely destroyed in May 1990. A formerly noted pillar capital, a limestone ashlar, a fragment of worked and polished white marble (140 x 110 x 45 mm) and a slab with pecked “feet” had disappeared. In the virtually dug-over ground only pottery fragments were left (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 10). Fortunately, there are at least the photos taken by E. Gunsam in 1989 which can be presented. Rās Slaysil was re-visited in 1992. The destructions reported by the Austrian team were even more deplorable. Just one

2. Editor’s note: *slaysil* is colloquial for *sulaysil*, the diminutive form of *silsila* (terrace wall). *Sulaysil*

cannot be derived from *sayl* (water-course, ravine), the diminutive form for which is *suwayl*.



5. High Place Sanctuary of Rās Slaysil.



6. Rās Slaysil with the *tāhūna* on top and traces of the built road down to the Pond Temple, as seen from the path-way between Petra and the Pond Temple.

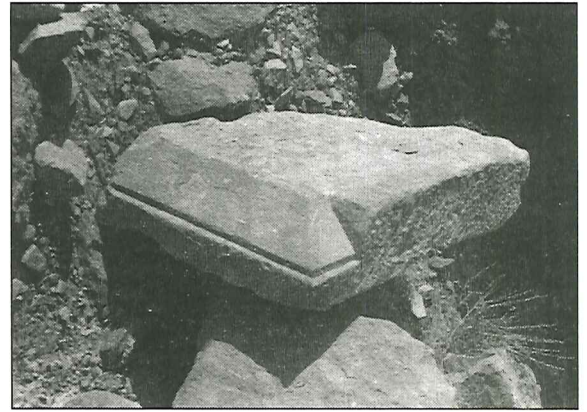


7. Foundation of the built structure in front of the *t̥āhūna* after its latest destruction (1992).

of the original foundation ashlar was still *in situ*. Sizable new holes had been dug. Examples of the thrown-out pottery were collected. They have to be dated to the first centuries AD probably reaching as far as to the Byzantine period (Figs. 11, 12, 13).

Conclusions Concerning the Ensemble of Rās Slaysil

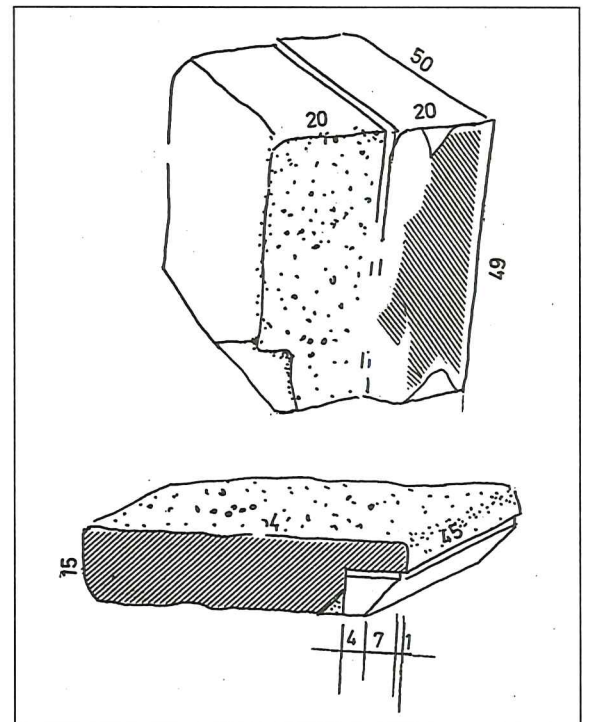
Size and location of the original structure on top of Rās Slaysil, together with the conspicuous *t̥āhūna*, the rock work below, perhaps for cultic feasting or for safe-keeping sacred objects, and the architectural and ceramic finds make it probable that a cultic shrine was added to the natural (“supernatural”) outcrop of the *t̥āhūna* during the Nabataean period. If the structure on top had been nothing but a watch station or a “tour de guet” (Zayadine 1992: 223), a pompous staircase of 3.5 m width had been unnecessary. The masses of sherds gauged by the robbers’ holes account for a place where people came in order to worship and sacrifice. An exact parallel around Petra is difficult to find. There is only a slight resemblance with the “shield” behind the snake of the Snake Monument at ath-Thugra. Dalman could not find a practical function for the “shield” which had been intentionally left standing when the monument with the snake on top was carved out



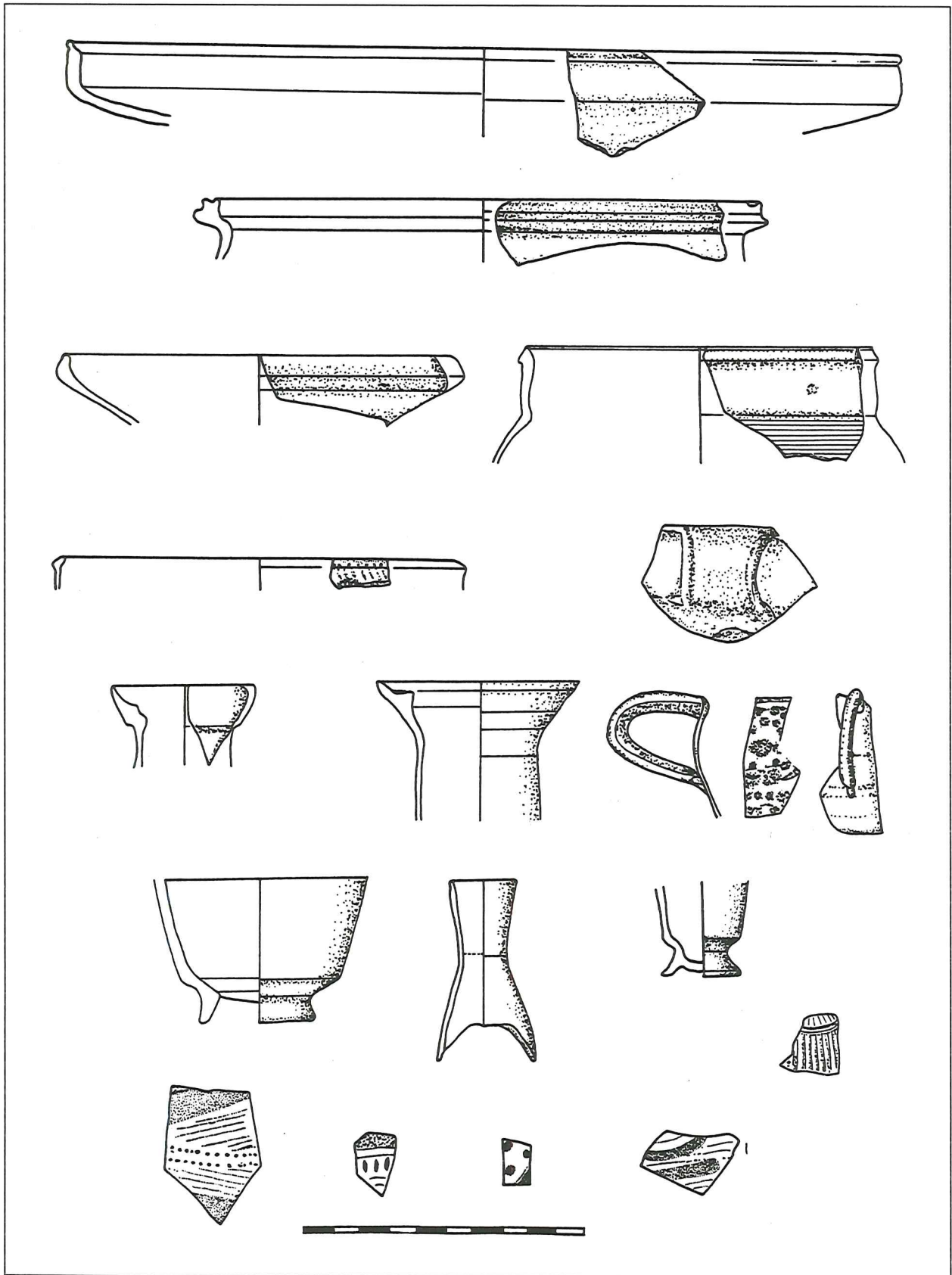
8. Architectural fragment (pillar capital) from Rās Salaysil.



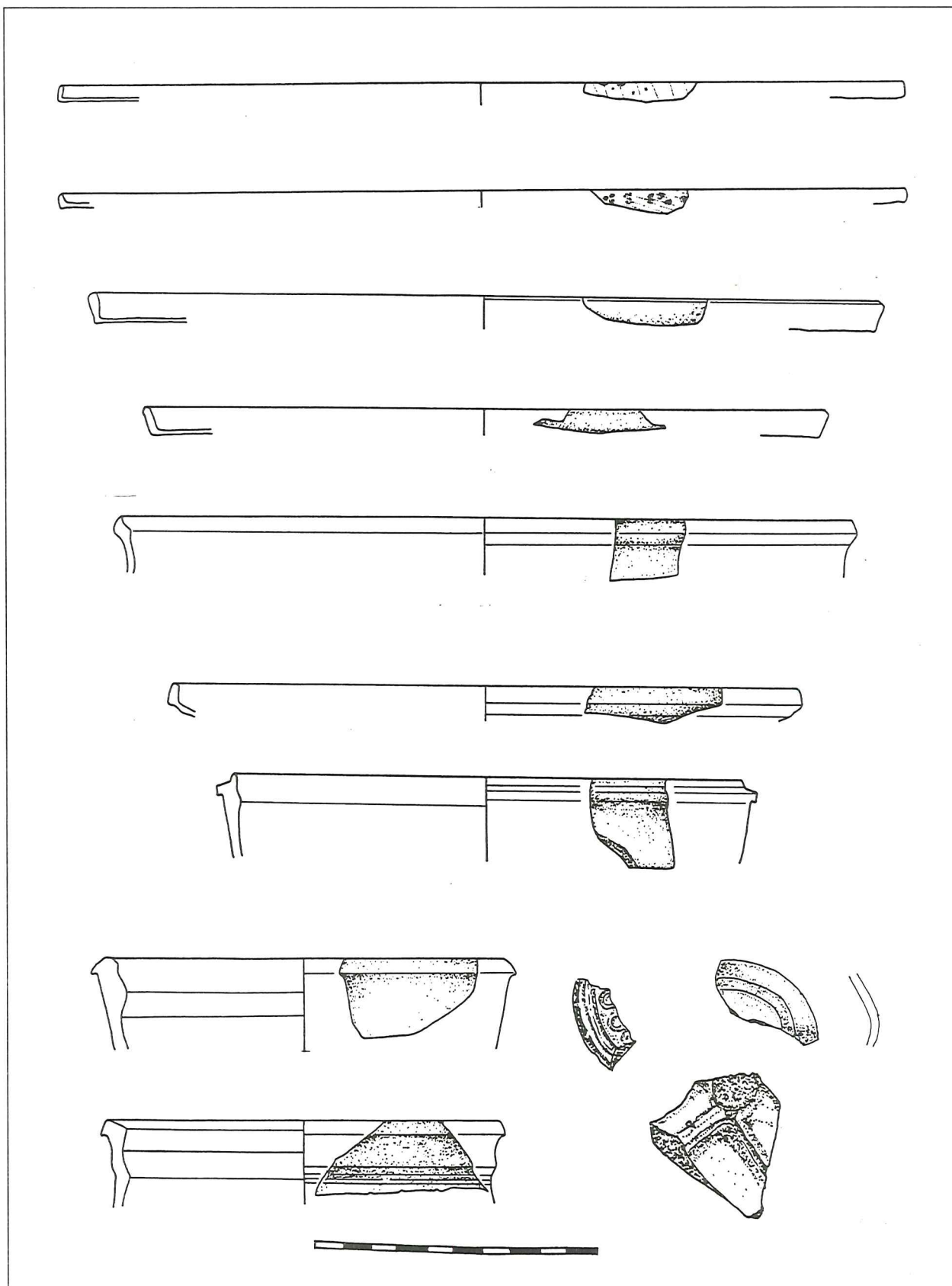
9. Architectural block from Rās Slaysil (1989).



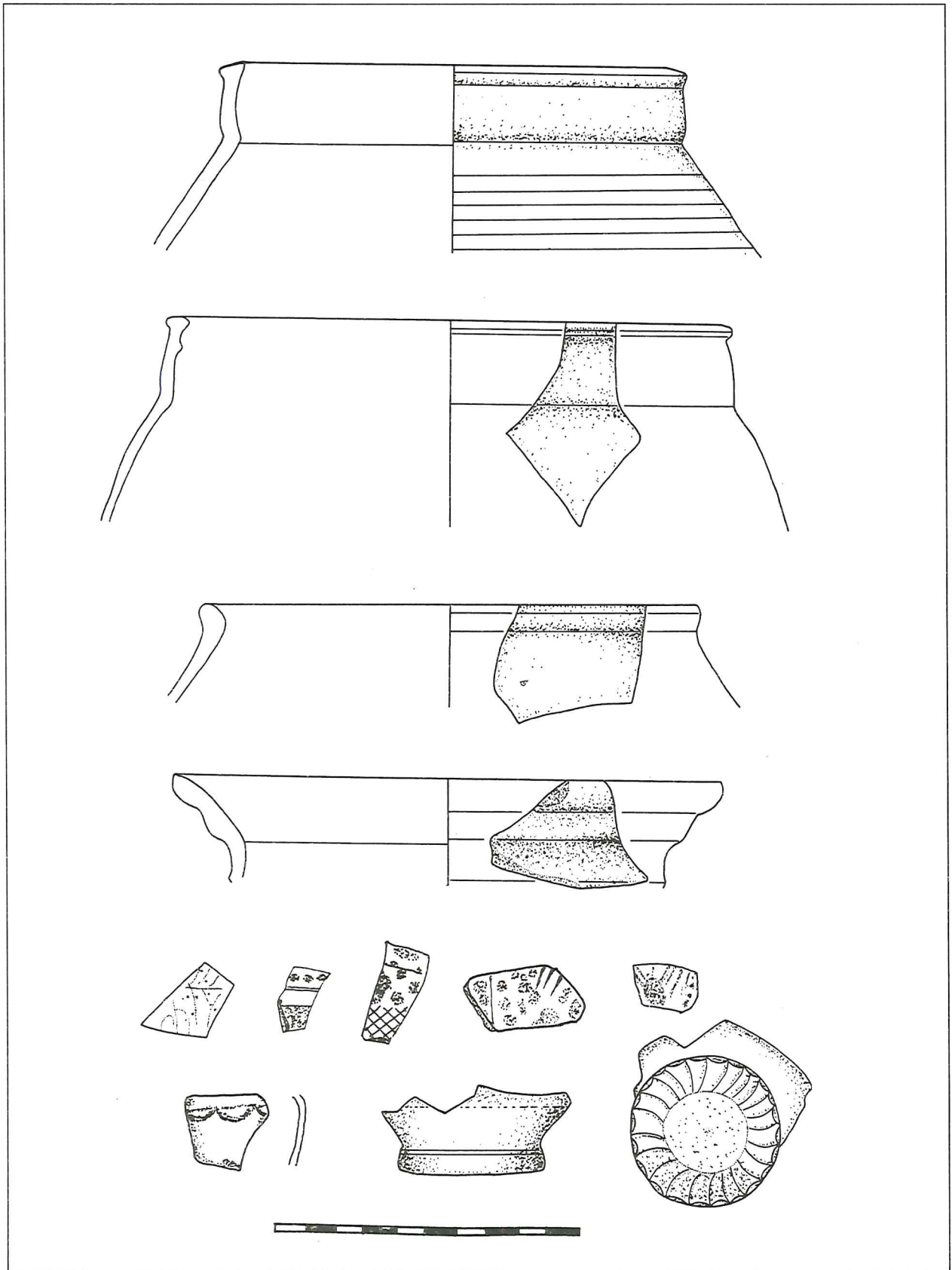
10. Two Architectural pieces from Rās Slaysil (1989) (see Figs. 8 and 9).



11. Pottery fragments from Räs Slaysil.



12. Pottery fragments from Rās Slaysil .



13. Pottery fragments from Räs Slaysil .

of the rock (Dalman 1908: 217-219, Abb. 142). If there was some cultic object on top of Rās Slaysil, the *tāhūna* might have been a protective shield for it, or it was the rock itself that was venerated.

In front of the *tāhūna* a built structure is to be assumed. Such an installation is reminiscent of another cultic ensemble in Wādī Abū ‘Ullayqa below Jabal Hārūn. There, foundations measuring 10 x 10 m with ash-lars, column drums and Nabataean pottery fragments were found in front of a formerly described Isis relief (Lindner 1989: 287).

Summarizing everything we know about Rās Slaysil up to now, there is ample reason to regard the ensemble on its top as a Nabataean High Place or sanctuary with a shrine or an atrium built in front of the *tāhūna* rock. Its uniqueness might have been the reason for the Nabataeans to revere the god(s) just at that place.

The Rās Slaysil High Place in its Topographical Context

The Rās Slaysil High Place has to be seen in a wider context of routes, settlements and other sanctuaries. In the first place, the assumption of a mere caravanse-rai at the foot of Rās Slaysil cannot be upheld any more. Already in 1989, E. Gunsam with her Austrian team from NHG had enumerated the ruins of about 20 built structures around Rās Slaysil. Zayadine identified a “hotellerie à cour central avec deux tours rectangulaires” (1992: 223). The original buildings, all of them erected on barren (sandstone or igneous) rock in the middle of cultivable fields exceed the size of a caravanse-rai and indicate a once flourishing rural settlement. There are many more house ruins, between Bayḍa and Rās Slaysil than formerly known. At the northern bank of the valley, large house ruins made of carefully cut ash-lars, sometimes diagonally trimmed, with stone basins and parts of circular enclosures dot the ground surrounded

by fields which were terraced in antiquity (Figs.14 and 15). As Dakhilallah Qublan remembered, it was D. Kirkbride who excavated one of the notable houses around 1960 (Fig.16). A cross is engraved on an ashlar where she might have rested during the dig. Remnants of buildings of special significance with many excellently trimmed ash-lars and with fine Nabataean pottery were noted to the south of the narrow outlet of Wādī Slaysil into the deep of the Pond Temple (Saḥīr al-Baqar) at Wādī as-Siq (as-Šiyyagh).

Besides the house ruins, massive walls around the wadi bends were seen in 1992. Zayadine described a system of irrigation by terraces and wadi barriers destined to use every drop of the water of winter rains (1992: 236). There might have been other sources of water in the valley. Where a wadi, allegedly Wādī Qārūn (corresponding to Jabal Qārūn) further to the north of it

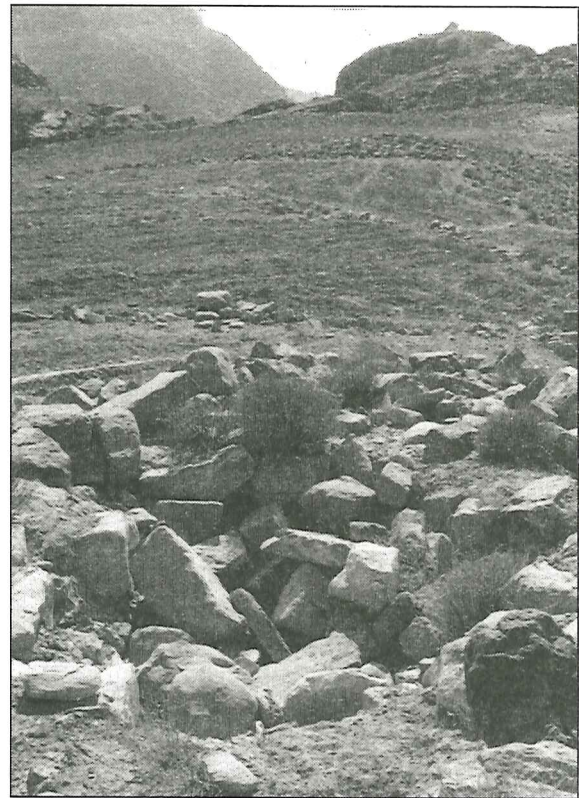


14. Stone basin in a house ruin of the Slaysil settlement.



15. Fragments of enclosure stones in a house ruin of the Slaysil settlement.

with a Nabataean shrine of top, enters the valley, water trickled out of the junction of sandstone and a granite outcrop. It spreads humidity even in October and allows tamarisc, oleander and other bushes to grow. Contrary to its seeming isolation, the Wādī Slaysil settlement was not without connections with its surroundings. Before the built road from Rās Slaysil down to the Pond Temple and further to Umm ar-Ratam in Wādī ‘Arabah was destroyed at some unknown time, the route between Bayḍa and Wādī Slaysil did not end at Rās Slaysil. Starting from Wādī ‘Arabah, the Austrian team of NHG in 1983 went past the “Roman Gardens”, Qaṣr Umm ar-Ratam and, following a Nabataean-Roman conduit which was filled from cisterns at the northern slopes, eventually reached Rās Slaysil c. 100 m to the north of the steep road. In 1989, the same team followed the conduit at the northern slope to Wādī as-Siq (aṣ-Ṣiyyagh).



16. Large Nabataean house ruin, excavated by D. Kirkbride around 1960.

There, at 1.7 km distance from Rās Slaysil, they discovered a ruined Nabataean settlement with masonry conduits and cisterns near a place called Ṭūr Imdai. Wādī as-Siq (aṣ-Ṣiyyagh) was obviously bridged by an aqueduct in antiquity.

The cultic installations were as dense and as well connected with each other as the dwellings of the region. With all distances measured as the crow flies, Jabal ad-Dayr with its sanctuaries and a temple is only 3km away, Petra 4km, Jabal Qārūn with a Nabataean shrine on top is 3km (Kirkbride 1961; Lindner 1986: 105), the Pond Temple half an hour’s climb down to Saḥīr al-Baqar and Jabal Hārūn is 4.5km distant from Rās Slaysil. All these sites yielded fine Nabataean ware from at least the first to the third/fourth centuries AD. Pilgrimage to the cultic places and from one place to the other should be considered. With regard to Rās Slaysil, its location at

the landing of the road down to the Pond Temple, that is from one sanctuary to another, and what seems still more important, from a High Place to a temple far down, accentuated by running water and a supposedly holy pond, made it as important as it already was due to its location at a route between Naqab Namala, Petra and Umm ar-Ratam in Wādi 'Arabah.

Except the cross, carved at Kirkbride's excavation site and perhaps the inscriptions from the Slaysil valley published by Zayadine (1992: 217-223), no later, Christian or Islamic, traces have been found by the authors. Where as Jabal Hārūn kept its role as a holy mountain all throughout (Edomite?), Nabataean, Christian and Islamic faith, Rās Slaysil like other shrines was forgotten. The Slaysil valley, however, is not forgotten. Bedouin farmers of today work in the same terraced fields as their Nabataean predecessors. And like those may have done, they give their names or allow their names being given to the terraced fields they cultivate (Zayadine 1992: 218).

By their reclaiming the valley for man, the Slaysil settlement has a chance to regain

its former importance. There is, however, one notable and deplorable disadvantage. The destruction of the Rās Slaysil High Place, as of other sites in the region, is most probably due to the same enterprising and industrious people who are so laudably emulating the Nabataean farmers of antiquity.

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