

THE MONASTERY OF SAINT AARON

by

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Introduction

In the spring of 1990 during a helicopter-borne photographic reconnaissance of the Petra area, Kenneth Russell recognized the outline of a ruined structure on the top of Jabal an-Nabi Hārūn (the mountain of the Prophet Aaron) to the west of the ancient city of Petra. This structure is located at 1255 m asl on the small plateau just below and to the west of the mountain peak where the Muslim shrine, the traditional burial place of the Prophet Aaron is located (Palestine grid coordinates: 188.64 E x 969.667 N; UTM coordinates 731200 E x 3356470 N). The site was photographed from the helicopter (Fig.1), and later that summer, K. Russell, Carol Palmer and the authors inspected and mapped it.

Although the ruins had been noted before in passing, for example by Wiegand (1920: 141) and Savignac (1936: 261), they had not been formally described. After Russell's untimely death in 1992, the current plans and photographs were retrieved from his research notes; his ceramic collection and any associated notes, however, were not found.

The Architectural Remains

The remains reveal an architectural complex some 60 m N-S x 50 m E-W (Fig. 2). Distinct wall lines are barely visible in a field of rubble which appears to extend up to 2 m above the natural surface of the ground. This rubble, presumably from the collapsed upper courses of the walls, forms a gentle slope extending some 10 m in all directions. The walls of the complex are carefully constructed of ashlar of the local sandstone and most are approximately 0.75-1.00m in width. Only a single course of stone from any wall is visible because of the extent of

the rubble collapse.

The architectural complex is comprised of a series of rooms surrounding a cistern cut into the bedrock (Fig. 3). The cistern is filled with rock debris, but is accessible through an irregular opening some 6.00 m long and 1.00 m wide. The lateral extent and depth of this cistern can not be known prior to clearance. Near the cistern are walls with apparently *in situ* column drums nearby. The southern and western extents of the complex are delineated by walls forming a number of rooms; one room is clearly defined at the southwestern corner. Adjacent to this room a large number of loose large white limestone tesseræ can be seen.

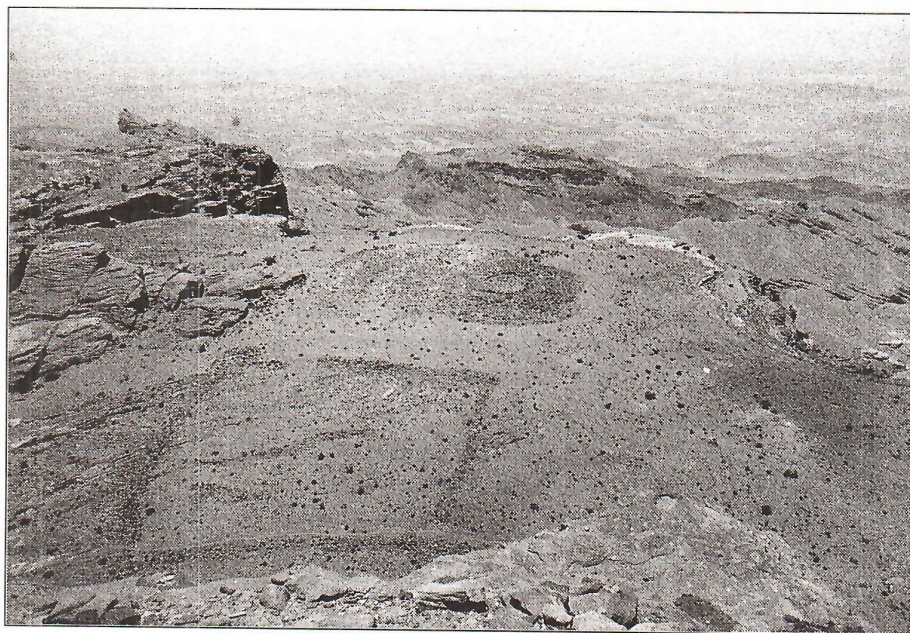
The northern part of the complex is formed by 14 small rooms built around a courtyard some 20.00 sq m. This courtyard area is relatively free of debris, and is presumed to have been cleared and used for tents in recent times. The rooms vary in size from 5.00 x 4.00 m to 5.00 x 2.00 m. Attached to and forming the southeastern corner of this courtyard complex, is one larger structure (21.00 x 16.00 m), which is subdivided into two rooms. The larger room to the south is some 16.00 sq m.

A column drum, apparently *in situ*, was mapped in its northern third. The smaller northern room is 16.00 x 7.00 m, and the inner face of its eastern wall forms an apse. It thus appears to be a small church. The longitudinal (E-W) axis of this room is oriented almost due east towards the highest point of the nearby mountain peak on which the Muslim shrine is built.

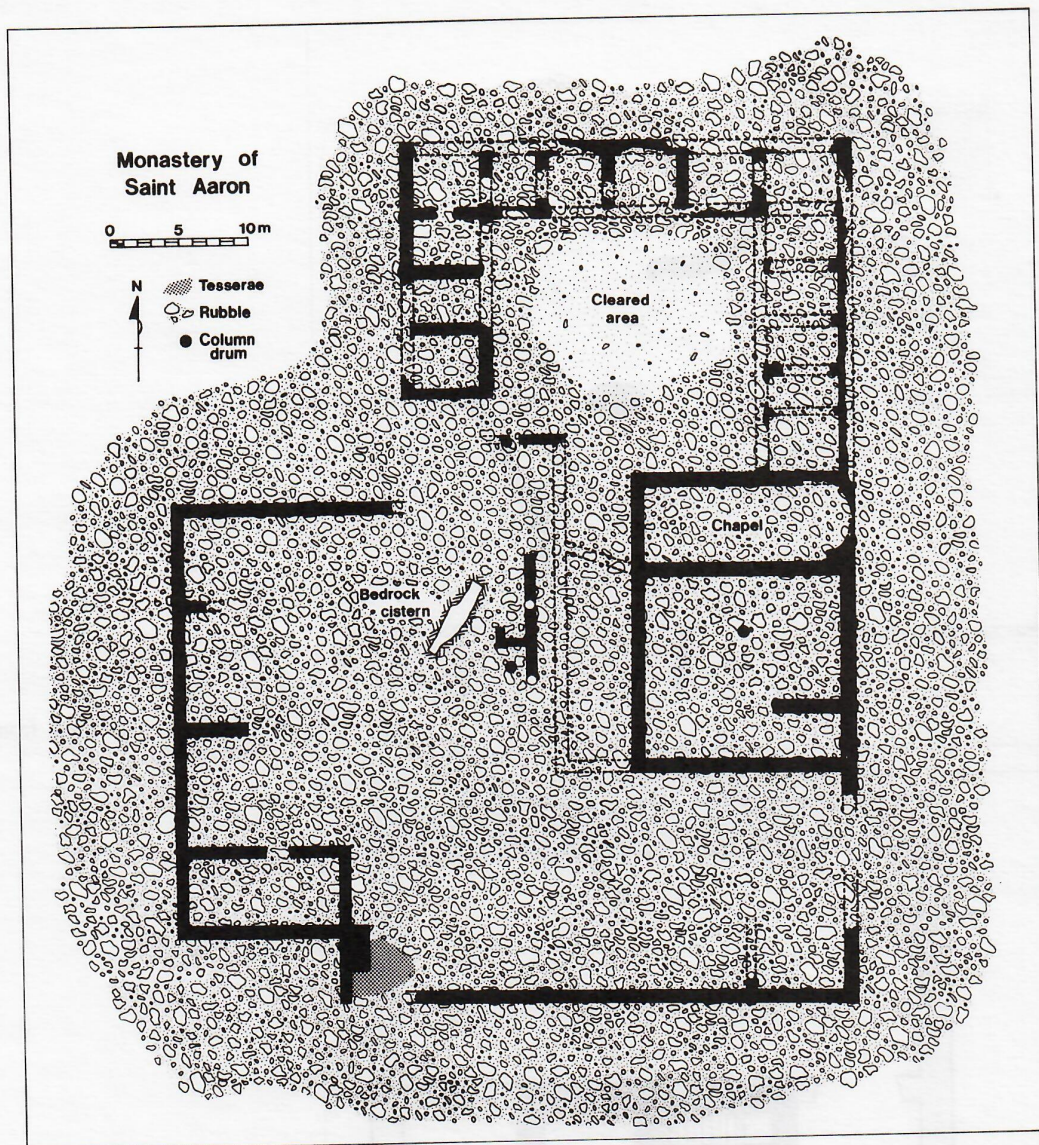
The site is marked by a striking absence of ceramics. Only a few fragments were found (Fig. 4) dating to the Byzantine and later periods. Additionally, a roof tile with



1. View (towards the south-west) of Jabal Hārūn. The Muslim shrine is at the summit in the center of the photograph. The remains of the monastery on the plateau below are visible in the center-right of the photograph. (Photo by Jane Taylor©).



2. View (towards the west) of remains of the monastery and associated structures below the summit. (Photo by Kenneth W. Russell).



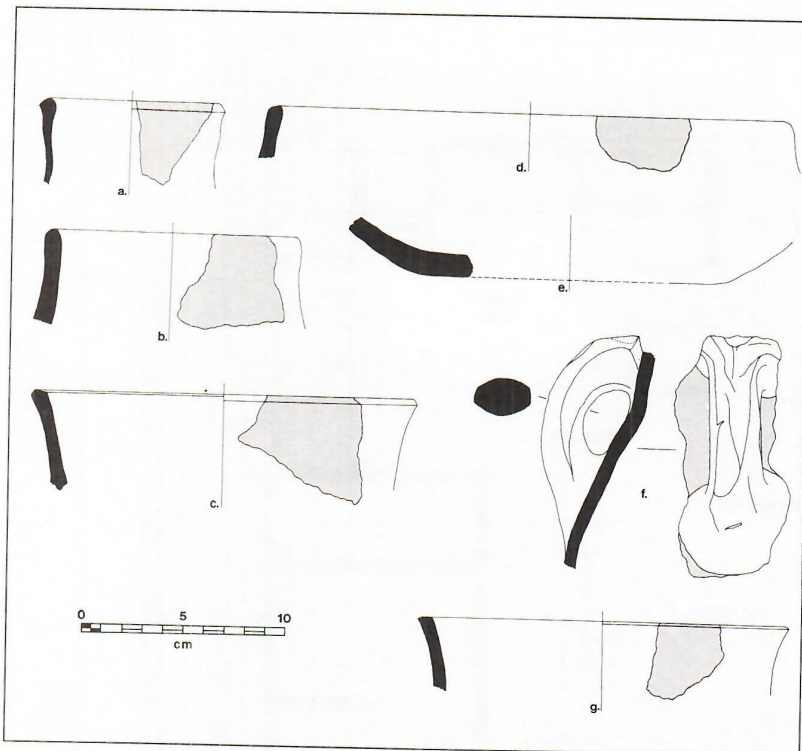
3. Plan of the remains of the monastery of Saint Aaron.

an inscribed cross was found. Savignac reports finding Nabataean and Byzantine pottery (1936: 261).

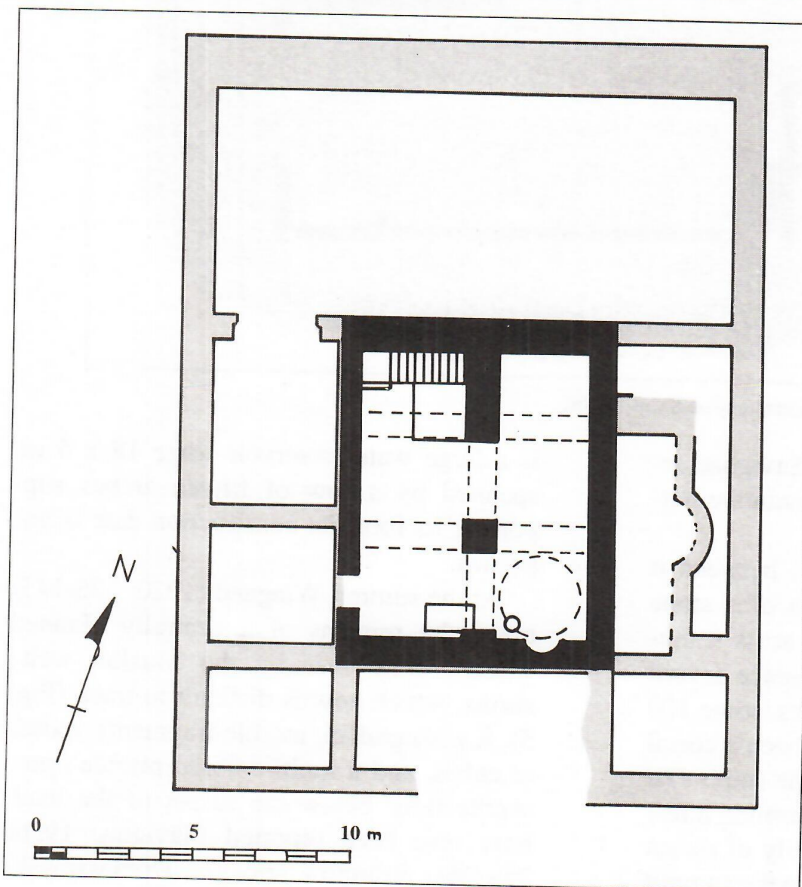
To the east of this complex, between it and the shrine, are the remains of a stone wall with a square installation at its southwest corner, enclosing an open space devoid of any walls or other installations, some 100 x 100 sq m. It appears to have been a corral for animals. Some distance to the south-east are standing stone-built walls forming a few rooms of a small house, probably of recent date. At the start of the path up to the summit

is a large water reservoir some 18 x 5 m, spanned by a row of fifteen arches supporting its roof. Its construction date is unknown.

At the summit Wiegand (1920: 136-145) noted the remains of a centrally planned church, built over by the Muslim weli shrine, which now is difficult to trace (Fig. 5). Jewish graffiti, marble fragments, mosaic cubes, and a multi-colored marble *opus sectile* floor below the carpet of the weli have also been reported (Savignac 1936: 259-261; Brünnow and von Domaszewski



4. Ceramics recovered from the monastery.



5. Plan of the well (in black) and remains of the underlying structure (in gray), following Wiegand (1920).

1904-1909:1: 419-424; Lindner 1970a: 314-328). On the roof of the weli are five pieces of marble colonnettes, which would have once been part of a chancel screen. A marble chancel screen post is reused in the Muslim cenotaph. It contains a few letters in Greek that can be read as "for the salvation of " (Sartre 1993:71, no.43). Wilson reported another Greek inscription on a pavement slab in the tomb face upwards and worn away by the feet of pilgrims (Wilson 1900: 73; Sartre 1993: 105-106, no. 69).

Among other evidence for Christians at Jabal Hārūn, short Greek inscriptions, crosses, and outlines of pilgrims' feet can be seen pecked into the rock along the path up the mountain.

Literary References

The identification of the structures as the Byzantine period Monastery of Saint Aaron is secure. Christians in the nearby city of Petra are well known from a variety of written sources (Schick, forthcoming) and there are a number of texts that directly mention not only Jabal Hārūn, but also a monastery and church there.

In the Byzantine period, Eusebius lists Mount Aaron, but without any explicit reference to Christianity (1904: 176 - Jerome: 177). Thomas the Syrian, the presbyter and archimandrite of the monastery of Aaron, presumably but not necessarily here, is attested for the 536 synod in Jerusalem (Schieffer 1982-1984: 4.3.2, Thomas no.2: 483). The church may be mentioned in the Petra scrolls discovered in excavations in the Byzantine church in late 1993. At least one scroll, currently being translated by a team from the Academy of Finland mentions the "Church of Saint High Priest Aaron" (Fiema and Frösén 1995: 532).

The church may well have continued throughout the Early Islamic period up through the Crusades. The *Vita* of Saint Stephen the Sabaite reports that the monks who walked around the Dead Sea during Lent in

the mid-eighth century stopped at Mār Hārūn (Leontios of Damascus 1991: 16.2: 96-97). Mār Hārūn could be Jabal Hārūn, although Jabal Hārūn is far enough south that it would have been a detour of several days for anyone walking around the Dead Sea. Al-Mas'ūdī, writing in 344-345/955-956, lists Jabal Hārūn as a holy mountain of the Christians in the possession of Melkite Christians (1894: 143-144).

The monastery was still in existence when the Crusaders first arrived. Fulcher of Chartes mentions it during Baldwin's expedition in 1100: "Furthermore we found at the top of the mountain the Monastery of St Aaron where Moses and Aaron were wont to speak with God. We rejoiced very much to behold a place so holy and to us unknown" (1913: book 2, chapter 5:381;1969:147; Runciman 1951-1954: 2:71-72). Gilbert the Abbot (1879: 255), the *Gesta Francorum* (1866: chapter 45: 523), and the *Historiae Hierosolimitanae* (1866: 556) both mention an oratory here, while Albert of Aquitaine also mentions the expedition but not specifically a monastery (1879: book 7, chapters 41-42: 535-536; 1923:2:44-45).

Magister Thetmarus mentions it during his visit to Petra in 1217: "At length I came to Mount Or, where Aaron died, on whose summit is built a church in which live two Greek Christian monks. The place is called Muscera" (xvi, 1-3; Laurent 1857: 38; Musil 1907-1908: 161, n.10.; Lindner 1970a: 102; 1970b: 314; Pringel 1993: 251-252). Muscera could either be a transliteration of the Arabic word *Mazār* (shrine) or a reference to Moserah (Deut 10:6). The monastery would have gone out of use soon thereafter, certainly no later than the construction of the Muslim weli shrine at the summit.

The Muslim Shrine

The construction of the Muslim weli is recorded by an Arabic inscription above the entrance. Its text has been reported variously. According to Palmer, it states that

“the building was restored by esh- Shim’ani, the son of Mohammed Calaon, sultan of Egypt by his father’s orders, in the year 739 of the Hijrah” [1338-1339 AD] (1871: 435), while according to Peake it “states that the shrine was built by Shimaani, son of Nasir Muhammed Kalauni in AH 728” [1327-1328 AD] (1958: 82, 135). Philby says that “an Arabic inscription over the doorway on the south side gives the date of the construction of the building as AH 900 (the last figure is, however, scarcely legible, and it may be anything from 900 to 909)=A.D. 1495 approximately” (1925: 9). The weli was built reusing architectural elements from the church. The cenotaph inside the shrine includes a second Arabic inscription, its last lines with the date are unclear. According to Clermont-Ganneau it records the construction and renewal of the tomb to the time of the sultan an-Nāṣir Muhammad ibn Qalāūn (1898) (see also new readings of these and other inscriptions in Petra by Suleiman Farajat, forthcoming).

Medieval Jewish pilgrims also record Jabal Hārūn, but mention nothing about any evidence for a Christian presence. Rabbi Jacob (1238-1244) records, “it is three days’ journey on the road thence [from Sodom and Gomorrah] to Mount Hor where Aaron is buried” in a list of tombs outside the Holy Land (Adler 1966: 127). An anonymous au-

thor in 1537 included it in a list of places where Jewish patriarchs are buried outside of the holy land, “Le mont Hor. Là est enseveli le grand prêtre Aaron, dans un caveau fermé; on a élevé au-dessus une belle voûte; les juifs vont à son tombeau pour s’y prosterner et y prier, et personne ne les en empêche. Les ismaélites mêmes traitent ce lieu avec respect.” (Carmoly 1847: 457 and n. 216 on p.488). Rabbi Yehezkel came in 1851 and in his travel diary he refers to earlier visits by Jewish pilgrims in 1624 and 1732 (Shalem 1981).

Summary

The ceramic evidence, the design of the architecture, the location on Jabal Hārūn, and associated remains, present the picture of a Byzantine period monastery with accompanying facilities for pilgrims at the foot of the summit, with another church at the top of the mountain. The situation is analogous to Mount Sinai, with the Monastery of Saint Catherine at its foot.

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