

# AN IRON AGE (EDOMITE) OCCUPATION OF JABAL AL-KHUBTHA (PETRA) AND OTHER DISCOVERIES ON THE “MOUNTAIN OF TREACHERY AND DECEIT”

by

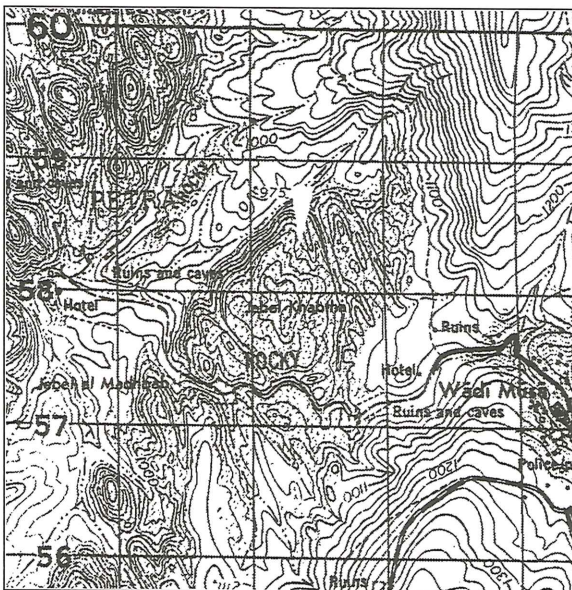
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## Introduction

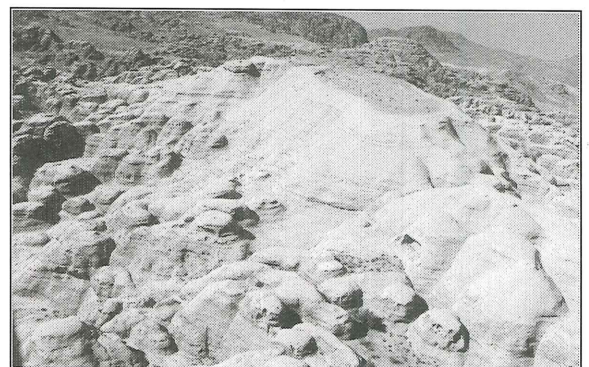
The basin of Petra is walled in on its eastern side by the impressive wind-sculptured sandstone massif of Jabal al-Khubtha (Figs.1 and 2). The sheer west-facing rock walls were, provided with steps and staircases by the Nabataeans but are still uninviting. Climbing up from the east is worse. Nevertheless, already around the turn of the century Jabal al-Khubtha was visited first by Musil in 1896 (1907: 124), then by Rev. A. Forder in 1904 (cf. Dalman 1908: 330), followed by Hoskins in 1905 (1906: 385-91) by Molloy and Colunga in 1905 (1906: 582-87), by Robinson in 1907 (1930: 147) and by Dalman in 1904 -10 (1908 and 1912). These intrepid pioneers, spending half a day at most on the mountain, noted accesses, sanctuaries, idol niches, inscriptions, cave chambers, cisterns, watch-towers and a High Place. In the early

twenties, Philby and Mumm, touring with and for Kennedy, climbed up to Jabal al-Khubtha. Accompanied by Arabs they reached Wādi al-Mudhlim from the summit plateau. Pottery was of no significance at their time. As Kennedy stated, “...on the ground of Petra practically nothing is to be found but Roman remains - fragments of pottery and occasional coins of no very great interest...” (1925: VI). There were several other visitors in the next decades, among them Horsfield in 1929 (1938: 13-14, Pl. 41: 2) who, except for a house, a watch-tower and a large reservoir, found the mountain top “sparsely if at all occupied”.

Later survey teams of the Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Nürnberg (NHG), mostly directed by M. Lindner, visited and explored utterly confusing Jabal al-Khubtha several times since 1967. They verified Dalman’s and others’ descriptions of the “mountain of treachery and deceit” as G. L. Robinson translated *khubtha* (1930:147), whereas Dalman preferred “Abfall” or “Schlacke” (1908: 9). Zayadine explains *khubtha* as an adjective, feminine of *akk-bath* (relative of *khabith*), meaning evil, ma-



1. Map with the location of Jabal al-Khubtha (1:50 000).



2. Jabal al-Khubtha seen from the air. Note large cave chamber (lower right).



licious, corrupt. According to him, the bedouins call the mountain khubtha because it has no precise role in Petra, no good access and no attraction (pers.comm.).

The Nabataeans, developed the mountain with elaborate staircases cisterns and sanctuaries. In addition to earlier described features, in 1984 and 1986 an al-'Uzzā relief with square eyes, an intimate sanctuary with seven steps leading to an idol niche, a bench and a water basin, and a previously not mentioned large cistern whose front wall was destroyed, were discovered (Lindner 1986a:130-137; 1986b).

Also in 1984, apart from Nabataean-Roman sherds, fragments of another kind of pottery were spotted. Admittedly due to lack of attention and knowledge, the finds were not recognized at that time and left on site (Fig. 3).

**A Minor Edomite Hamlet ?**

In 1994 a team of NHG directed by M. Lindner followed a widening mudflat near a niche with a predella (Fig. 4) up to two cave chambers (Nr. 786, 788 D) in white Ordovician sandstone which had been described by Dalman 90 years ago (1908: 343). On the way, pottery fragments, because increasingly evident the further one went. They were recognized and dated as Iron Age (Edomite) ware.

The NHG teams had, already, discovered four Edomite mountain strongholds: Ba'ja III (Lindner and Farajat 1987),

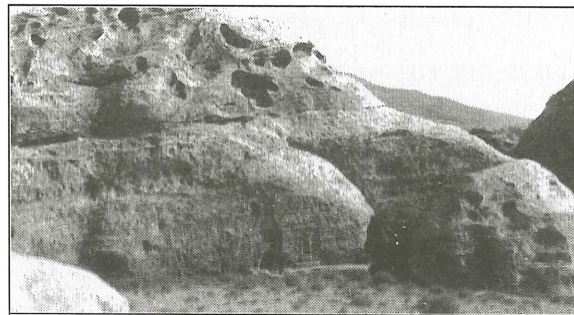


3. Ceramic finds on Jabal al-Khubtha 1984.

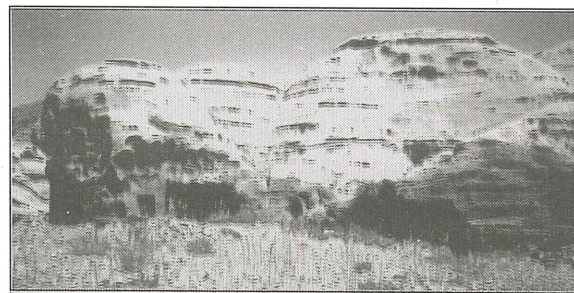
Umm al-'Ala (as-Saddah) (Lindner *et al.* 1988), Jabal al-Qšeir (Lindner, *et al.* 1996a) and an Edomite fortress, Khirbat al-Mu'allaq) (Lindner *et al.* 1996b). It was suggested by Zeitler there might be some Iron I pottery among the finds in which case it should be examined.

The same is true for indications of an Early Bronze Age occupation. Such an early use of Jabal al-Khubtha should be looked at together with four other newly identified Early Bronze sites in the Greater Petra region (Jabal Fidre, Jabal Shudayfah, Umm Babayn, Umm Saysabān) which are being prepared for publication.

On Jabal al-Khubtha, the bulk (and origin) of the pottery fragments together with tumbled building stones was located in front of a flat rock spur and the cave chambers at 1075-80 m, covering an area not more than 30 x 30 m of the gently sloping site (Fig. 5). Most of the sherds and stones had been washed down the mudflats toward west-south. Given the ceramic finds, Khirbat al-Khubtha was provisionally seen as the remains of an Edomite hamlet used as a retreat and a watch station. The place was for-



4. Jabal al-Khubtha: Niche with predella and basin. End of mudflats and Iron II finds.



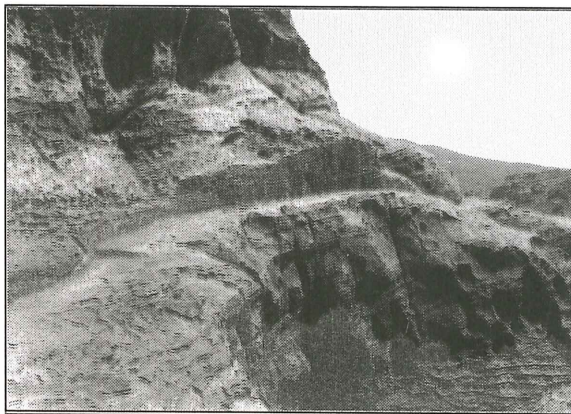
5. Edomite khirbat in front of Nabataean cave chambers.



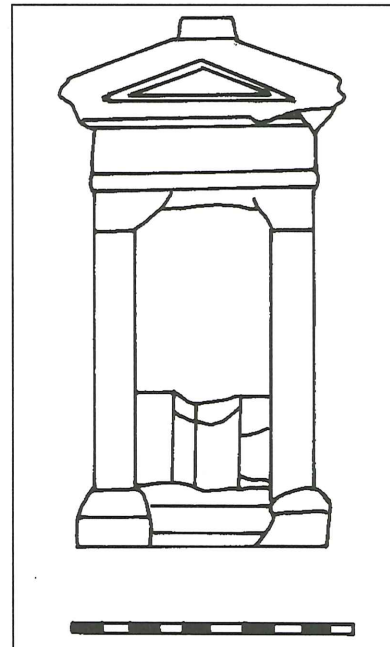
tified by nature. Without the later steps and staircases, it was extremely difficult to reach and easy to defend by few people.

The cave chambers, showing signs of later Nabataean work, might have been natural caves used as the back of Edomite houses as seen on the slopes of Umm al-'Ala and Jabal al-Qṣeir. Around the *khirbat*, no traces of Edomite occupation were seen in 1994. Only a small cave with a rounded entrance might have antedated the Nabataean stone work. A large cave cistern of 10 x 5 m and a height of c. 4 m, a hundred metres to the north-east from the cave, is not easy to date. A similar one at Sayl al-Baṭḥa (in prep.) cannot be dated earlier than in the Nabataean-Roman period. Four more cisterns in a natural catchment farther down the mountainside do not look typically "Nabataean".

Khirbat al-Khubtha offered an unrestricted view to the sloping plateau of Umm al-Biyāra on the opposite side of the Petra basin where C.M. Bennett excavated an Edomite village (1966). A rock-cut footpath (Fig. 6), running from an Hellenizing idol niche with two pairs of betyls (Fig. 7) (Lindner 1986: 133-34) toward south-west as a ledge above the as-Siq, shows no diagonal Nabataean pick-axe strokes (Lindner 1986: 135). It was tentatively regarded as an Edomite or early Nabataean path between the hamlet, and through the Eagle



6. Rock-cut footpath from the end of Edomite occupation originally leading to the Eagle Niche Valley.



7. Hellenizing niche with two pairs of betyls.

Niche Valley (Dalman 1908: 115-17; Lindner 1997, in print) to the area of Bāb as-Siq and to Wādī Mūsā (Fig. 8). By 1995, with the permission of the Department of Antiquities, represented by Suleiman Farajat, a two-day survey with an overnight stay was planned and executed. M. Lindner and Dakhllallah Qublan were set down by helicopter on the summit plateau, while the other members of the NHG team with two luggage-carrying donkeys climbed up from the Florentinus Tomb.

### An Extended Edomite Occupation

The descent from the summit plateau toward the previously identified hamlet in front of the cave chambers and the survey of 12 identified courtyards (Musil's "Gärten") between the conical sandstone "cupolas" (Fig. 9) revealed more Iron II (I?) sherds (see below, Figs. 20-22) and an extended Edomite presence on two levels or tiers between 1060 and 1080 m. The lower tier (I-IX) runs from the cave chambers to the Hellenizing niche and to the rock-cut footpath. The other tier, somewhat higher at the mountainside (X-XII) reaches the flight of steps leading up to the summit at 1070 m. The two tiers are connected by a short





8. View from the rock-cut footpath into the as-Siq.

gorge where oval querns and hammer stones were noticed (Fig. 10). Most Edomite sherds were found in courtyard VII as well as numerous badly hewn and/or eroded stones—a lot more than can be explained as eroded from the surrounding rocks.

As in other places, stone material was quarried from the foot of “cupolas” leaving worked benches which are difficult to explain otherwise. There are also more stones of a blue colour revealed in layers at different elevations including the summit plateau than might have broken loose naturally. One cannot date the quarrying of the stones nor their use for attaching small dwellings to the “cupolas” and to a few rock shelters (see Fig.9:IX). All courtyards display traces of water running down from the mountainside and the cupola-like hillocks, artificially conducted sometimes by worn channels or gutters. Given the natural and partly artificial water-supply, agriculture



9. GPS- measured points and location of the “courtyards” with Edomite pottery finds.





10. Querns and rubbing stones between lower and upper tier.

and horticulture in the courtyards were possible as far as the poor soil allowed. With a few cross walls, water and soil could be held back. A threshing floor on a wide terrace of the upper tier (Fig.9:X) proves that at some time crops were planted and processed on Jabal al-Khubtha.

The extent of Edomite occupation, identified by pottery finds, ends with a 40 x 40 m courtyard (Fig.9:XII) surrounded by rock walls and, according to the plantlife of September 1995, usable as a garden plot. A rock-cut cistern and the rock-cut foundation of a dwelling with abutments for two arches at that place were already described in 1986 (Lindner 1986: 131-2). They are of Nabataean-Roman-Byzantine origin and belong together with a few (idol) niches in an almost perfect "cupola" to the summit complex of Jabal al-Khubtha.

The summit, a plain, slightly oval pla-

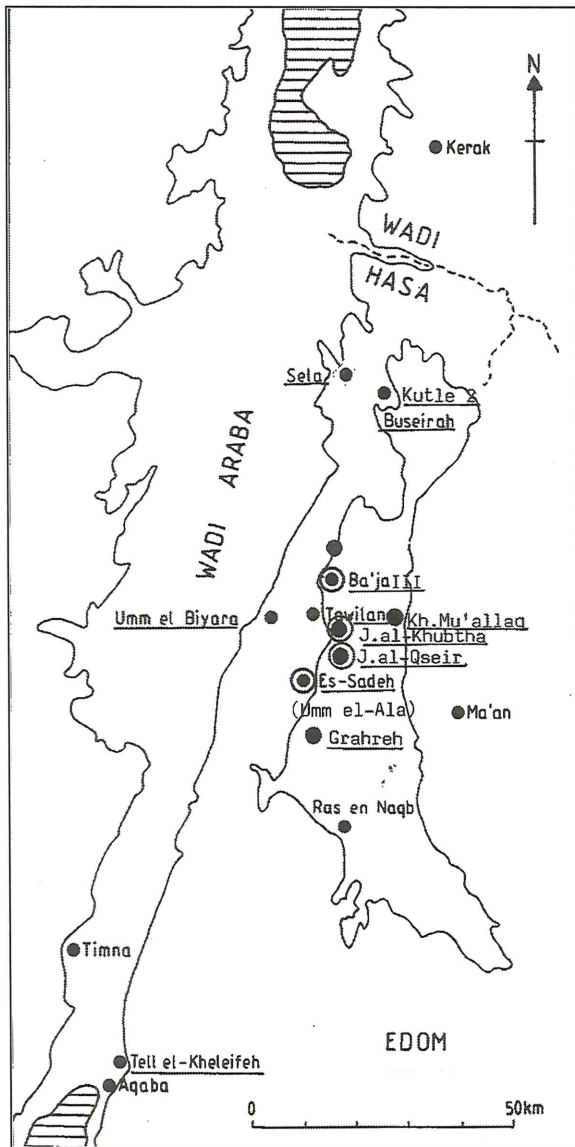
teau at 1132 m, can be reached by several washed-out steps. The surface is covered with low bushes, covering the otherwise whitish Ordovician sandstone. There are foundations of *two* towers on the top, thus confirming Musil's and not Dalman's description. An unsuspected number of mostly Late Nabataean to Byzantine sherds, can be attributed to people who stayed (sacrificed?) here and in the uppermost courtyard (Fig.9:XII). The lack of Edomite pottery fragments implies that the Edomites were less interested in the possibilities of the summit than the Nabataeans, at least under Roman-Byzantine rule.

At any rate, the Edomite occupation of Jabal al-Khubtha, previously only suspected, has been confirmed. On the map, the settlement joins the other mountain strongholds discovered by teams of NHG in the last ten years and increases the number of Edomite sites in southern Jordan (Fig. 11).

#### Cultic Mountain and Profane Quarry

The survey of 1995 led to a surprising discovery which might change our concept of Nabataean-Roman Jabal al-Khubtha. Up to the present, the mountain has been regarded solely as a holy place with several sanctuaries. Dalman found, the "rock cut off, shaping that way a terrace" (1912: 36) to the right of the cave chambers, but in fact, the whole area of Ordovician sandstone to both sides of the cave chambers was one extended quarry with the quarry workers' strokes in a herringbone pattern visible up to 3 m. There are also the precut oval holes where wooden beams were inserted to lift a whole "Slab" from the fissionable sandstone. Dakhallah Qublan, a trained stone mason from Petra, is to be credited for showing the quarrying methods and their traces on Jabal al-Khubtha. The petroglyph of a pickaxe incised at the head of the large cistern below the High Place is reminiscent of the workers' tools (Fig. 12).





11. Sketch map of the known Edomite settlements in southern Jordan. Discoveries of NHG are encircled.

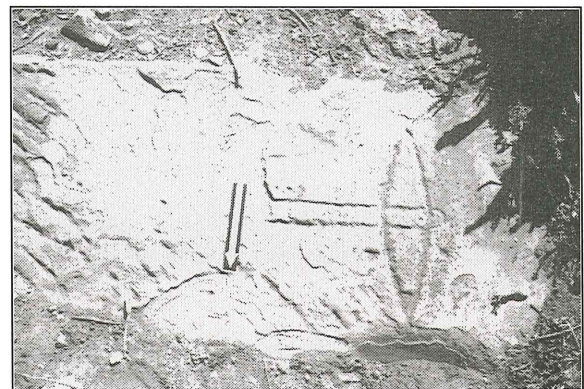
The same pickaxe may be seen on the discus of a lamp: from al-Katūta (Horsfield 1941: 123, PI. 11: 49), in that case in the hands of a winged Eros wearing leg-shackles. (Fig. 13).

Some of the stones quarried to both sides of the cave chambers may have been used to construct dwellings around the High Place. The bulk of the stone material was probably used for building activities at Petra proper where an immense volume of building material was needed (Pflüger 1995: 289).

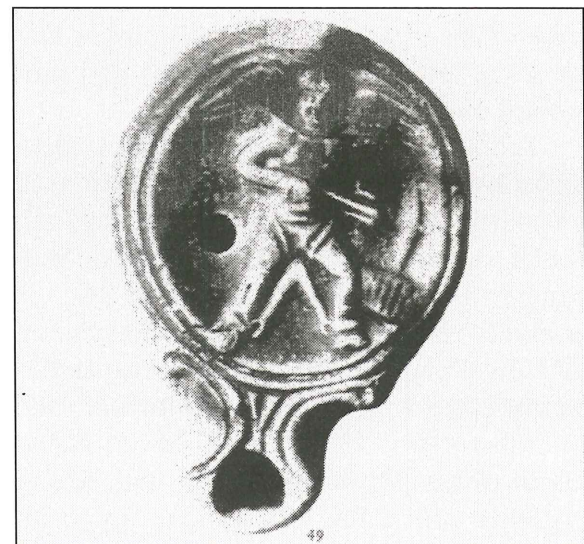
If that is true, how were the ashlar transported to the foot of the mountain? The descents to the al-Khazna, the Urn Tomb or the Florentinus Tomb were too narrow. On first sight, the 3m wide “processional” stairway from the High Place area down to the big portal near the Florentinus Tomb indicates cultic significance (Figs. 14-16). But the question has to be asked: was the staircase built to transport quarried stones down to Petra? Or did the Nabataeans use the staircase for cultic as well as practical purposes?

**Al-Khubtha - “off limits”, when and to whom?**

Mentioned already by Hoskins (1906:



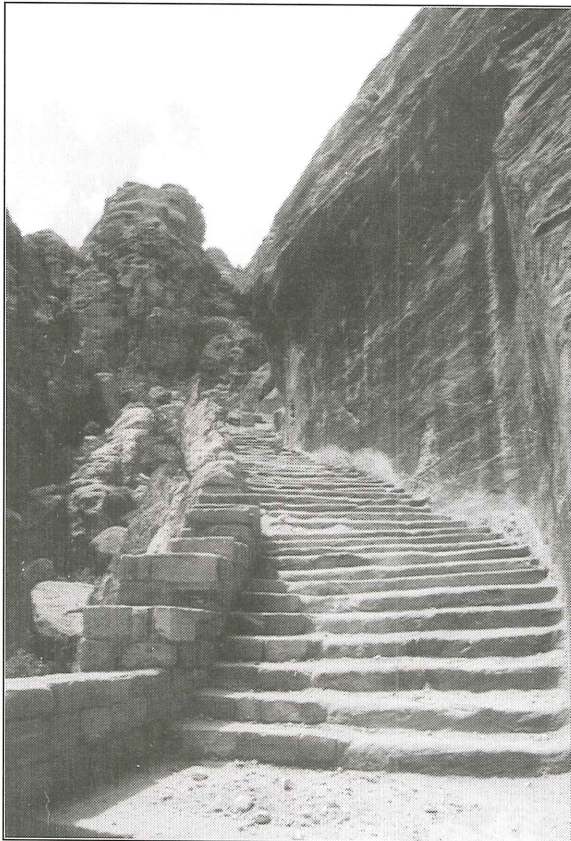
12. Incised pickaxe near the large cistern of Jabal al-Khubtha.



13. Winged Eros wearing leg-shackles and a pickaxe in his hands, on the discus of a lamp, excavated by Horsfield at Petra.



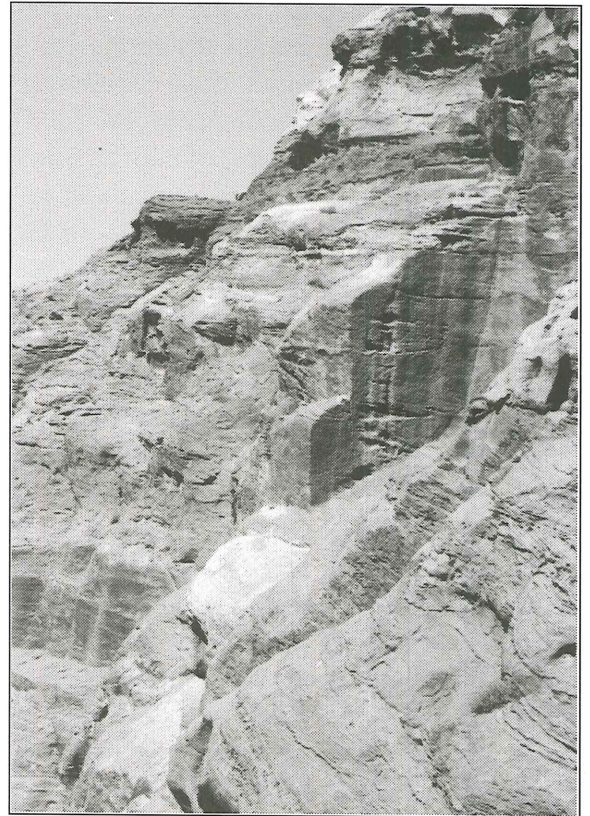
385, Fig. 1) and by Dalman (1908: 331), as far as the big portal to the north of the al-Khubtha massif is concerned in 1995 it was recognized with all its implications that the entire site could be sealed off. The portal, a gigantic but hardly a triumphal entrance could at least be locked and opened. On the contrary, the wide staircase was cut off in a way that only a by-pass or the narrow way between Urn Tomb and High Place could be used. The rock-cut pathway or ledge running from the mountain side to the Eagle Niche Valley at its foot was effectively interrupted by cutting off c. 10 m of the rock wall. The previous control through a watch station in the Eagle Niche Valley was not enough. The descent to Wādi al-Mudhlim, laudably taken by Philby and Mumm (Kennedy 1930: 72) and repeated by Dakhlallah Qublan and J. Hübl 65 years later ends with a gully, breaking into a perpendicular rock wall. It can only be overcome either with ropes or by building a



14. Restored stairway on Jabal al-Khubtha.



15. Big rock-cut thoroughfare and portal at the lower end of the stairway.



16. Interrupted passage between the rock-cut footpath and the Eagle Niche Valley.



steep ramp of heavy stones before one ascends. The area was once a quarry and the rock wall may not just be a product of nature exclusively. In addition, just here a small settlement exists which astonishingly sports a ramp of laid stones and was according to its surface pottery inhabited by Nabataeans and later by Medieval Arabs.

The quarrying in the Eagle Niche area extended all around the rock wall of Jabal al-Khubtha up to the interrupted pathway. It was on purpose done so that the mountain can hardly be approached from this side. Why was al-Khubtha put "off limits"? Dalman explained the portal as a defense installation; enemies should be prevented from entering the city of Petra from above (1908: 34, 331). Kennedy (or rather his colleagues Philby and Mumm) did not recognize the portal as a closable door at all, and attributed its size to the "great importance of the places of worship to which it led" (1930: 71). Such an explanation might come close to the truth. After all, Jabal al-Khubtha was the mountain where the Nabataean kings were buried since Obodas II, and where the sanctuary of Aretas IV's family stood (Knauf). There are, of course, other possibilities, as for instance a place of retreat. Due to the uncertain chronology of the described activities, it is difficult to decide when and for what purpose Jabal al-Khubtha was closed off. Even the Crusaders (1099-1291) might have taken a hand in defending the Petra basin. In fact, one Latin cross (Fig. 17) (also to be attributed to a hermit) was found incised on the rock wall opposite al-Wu'ayra, incidentally not far from an interesting rock picture (Fig. 18). The (apotropaic?) engraving shows a camel, an unmistakably male figure and a scorpion. The portal near the Florentinus Tomb, however, was by no means Crusader work if compared with their construction methods at al-Wu'ayra and al-Ḥabis at Petra. The same is true concerning Dalman's "Sperrfort" (1908:34; 1912:12-14) of Zibb 'Aṭṭūf

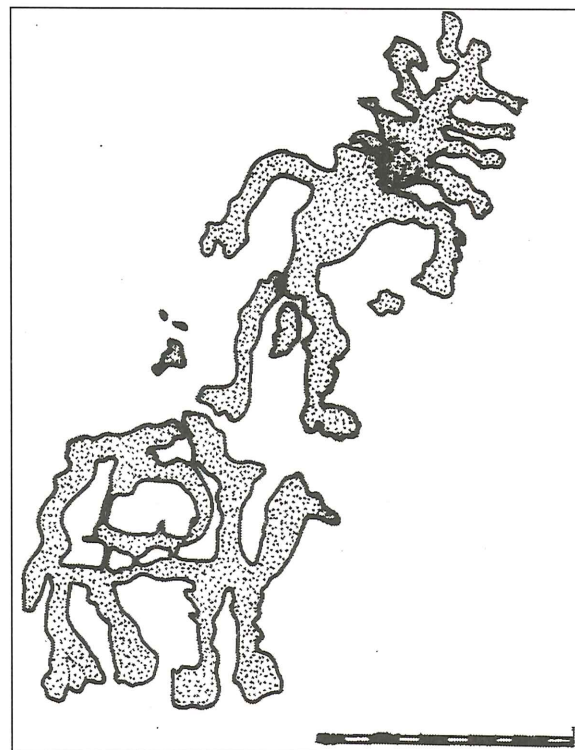
which is to be regarded rather as the Nabataean propylaea of the Great High Place than as Crusader masonry. The matter of al-Khubtha "off limits" should be cleared, indeed, by an overall archaeological and historical evaluation of defense necessities at Petra at different times.

### The End of the 1995 Survey

On their descent from the summit plateau of Jabal al-Khubtha, J. Hübl and Dakhallah Qublan of the NHG survey team in-



17. Incised cross at the northern cliff of Jabal al-Khubtha.



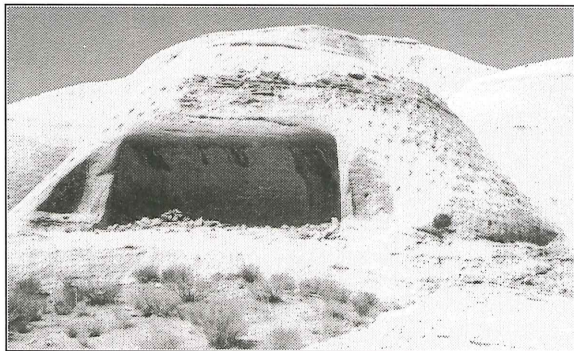
18. Petroglyph at the northern cliff of Jabal al-Khubtha.



spected the open cave chamber in the east-facing cliff (Dalman 1908: 344) which had seemed too steep to cross before. The empty hall displays niche-like rockwork at both sides of the opening (Fig. 19). The purpose of more than a hundred small holes regularly cut on the cliff wall at the sides and above the cave is uncertain. The location of the cave chamber with a view over and dominating the whole land to the east points to a look-out. The NHG team left Jabal al-Khubtha by the wide staircase. Where the steps were broken off, one had to climb down a steep chimney near the Palace Tomb (1908: 331). Through a newly opened rock hole the NHG team reached the lower section of the staircase and entered the basin of Petra below the great portal.<sup>1</sup>

#### Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, Dr Ghazi Bisheh, and his representative at Petra, Mr Suleiman Farajat, for permitting and supporting the surveys of Jabal al-Khubtha. My thanks and great appreciation



19. Large cave chamber with unexplained holes all over the front at the east-facing mountainside of Jabal al-Khubtha.

go to Dakhllallah Qublan from Petra who as a true friend and mentor guided us through the courtyards between the white Ordoevician cupolas and by helicopter to the summit plateau; to Ms E. Schreyer and Ms I. Künne for their help during the surveys. Ms E. Gunsam, Ms A. Schmid, R. Gmelin, I. Just and others had accompanied one of the authors several times to and on the "mountain of treachery and deceit". M. Lindner will not forget a small boy (at that time) who, 25 years ago, led him down from the steepest rock wall where he had lost his way. Dr Jürgen Zangenberg read the typescript and A.E. Lindner did the computer work.

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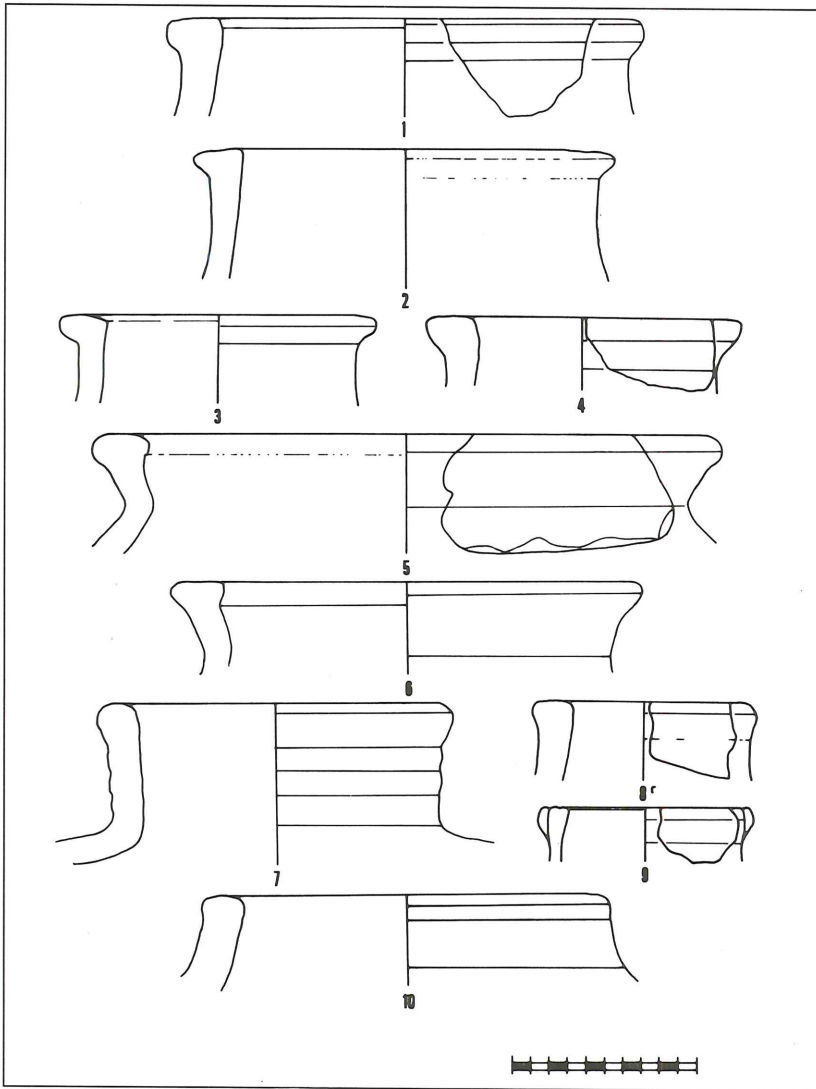
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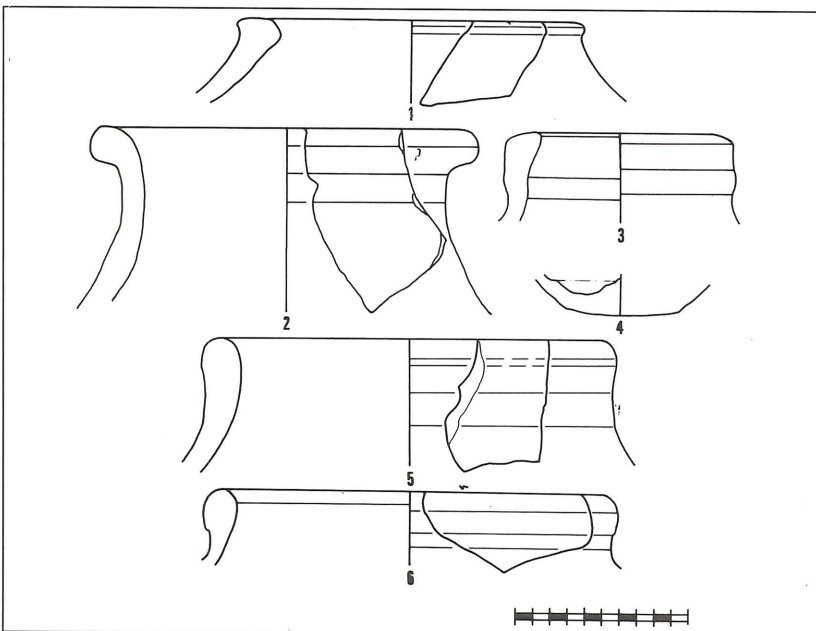
1. The staircase with its width of 3 m, running boldly down the rock wall of Jabal al-Khubtha, impressed one of the authors so much that through channels he suggested to the then Minister of Tourism and Antiquities to have the steps repaired and made accessible for tourists. A few days later, the work was started with 40 men under the supervision of Suleiman Farajat and Dakhllallah Qu-

blan. The next day, J. Hübl and E.A. Knauf climbed up to Jabal al-Khubtha again and with GPS fixed the exact position and elevation of the Edomite occupation. Thus, in 1995, they concluded a series of visits and surveys of the "mountain of treachery and deceit" after (for one of the authors) 25 years of patiently exploring a true *fascinosum* of Petra.



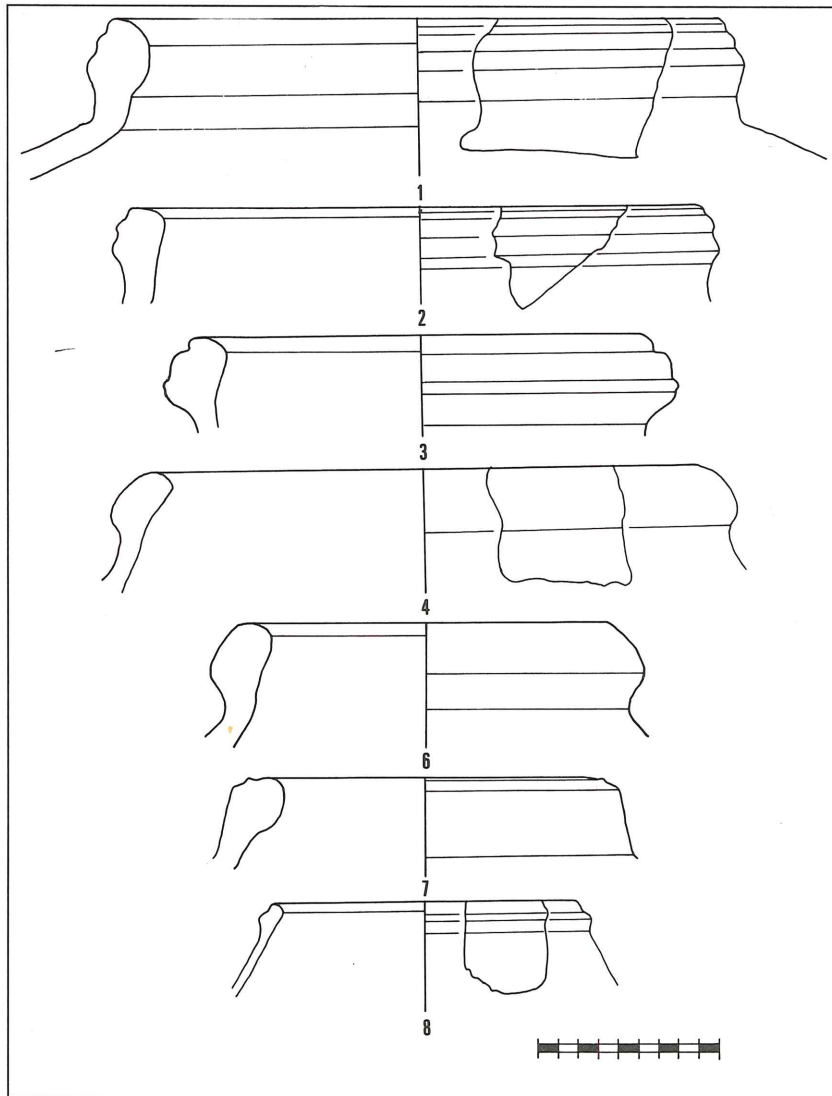


20. Jabal al-Khubtha, Early Iron Age pottery with T- and L-shaped rims.



21. Jabal al-Khubtha, Early Iron Age pottery with rounded rims.





22. Jabal al-Khubtha, Iron II pottery.

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