

# THE NABATAEO-ROMAN SITE OF WĀDĪ RAMM (*IRAM*): A NEW APPRAISAL

by

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## Introduction

A major Nabataean settlement was discovered in Wādī Ramm by G. Horsfield and excavated by himself together with R. Savignac in the early 1930s, followed by D. Kirkbride in May 1959.<sup>1</sup> The Department of Antiquities in Ma'ān began a large-scale clearing operation in 1962 concentrating on various complexes situated on the hills surrounding the temple of the settlement. More than 2800 m<sup>2</sup> of architectural remains were exposed. Unfortunately, this undertaking did not result in any publication. The large areas of remains which had been laid bare and ignored for decades suffered rapid deterioration and the earthquake of 1995 caused great damage to the temple itself.<sup>2</sup>

The French Institute of Archaeology for the Near East (IFAPO/Amman) came to an agreement with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan to clean the site and to record its main visible features. At the same time, B. Reeves and D. Dudley (University of Victoria-Canada) excavated, in the same framework, an area which turned out to be a major bath complex associated with a "villa".<sup>3</sup> IFAPO's first season was carried

out in the summer of 1996, which was followed in 1997 by the opening of some probes below the level reached in the 1962 excavations in order to obtain new chronological sequences of the various buildings.<sup>4</sup> Five limited soundings have been put down around the temple and what was called the western complex. The complexes, some chronological points and elements for comparison will be discussed briefly in the following text.

## The Temple

One of the first aims of the 1996 season was to record in detail the remains of the temple exposed in 1962 in order to provide a complete update of the last plan published by Kirkbride (Fig.1).<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the 1997 soundings which provided new material for a better understanding of the different phases of the building.

## *The Primitive Sanctuary of Lat*

A new Thamudic inscription reused in the foundation of the central chapel (*naos*) of the Nabataean temple refers to the construction of a sanctuary (BYT) of Lat, done by a member of a tribe well-attested on other

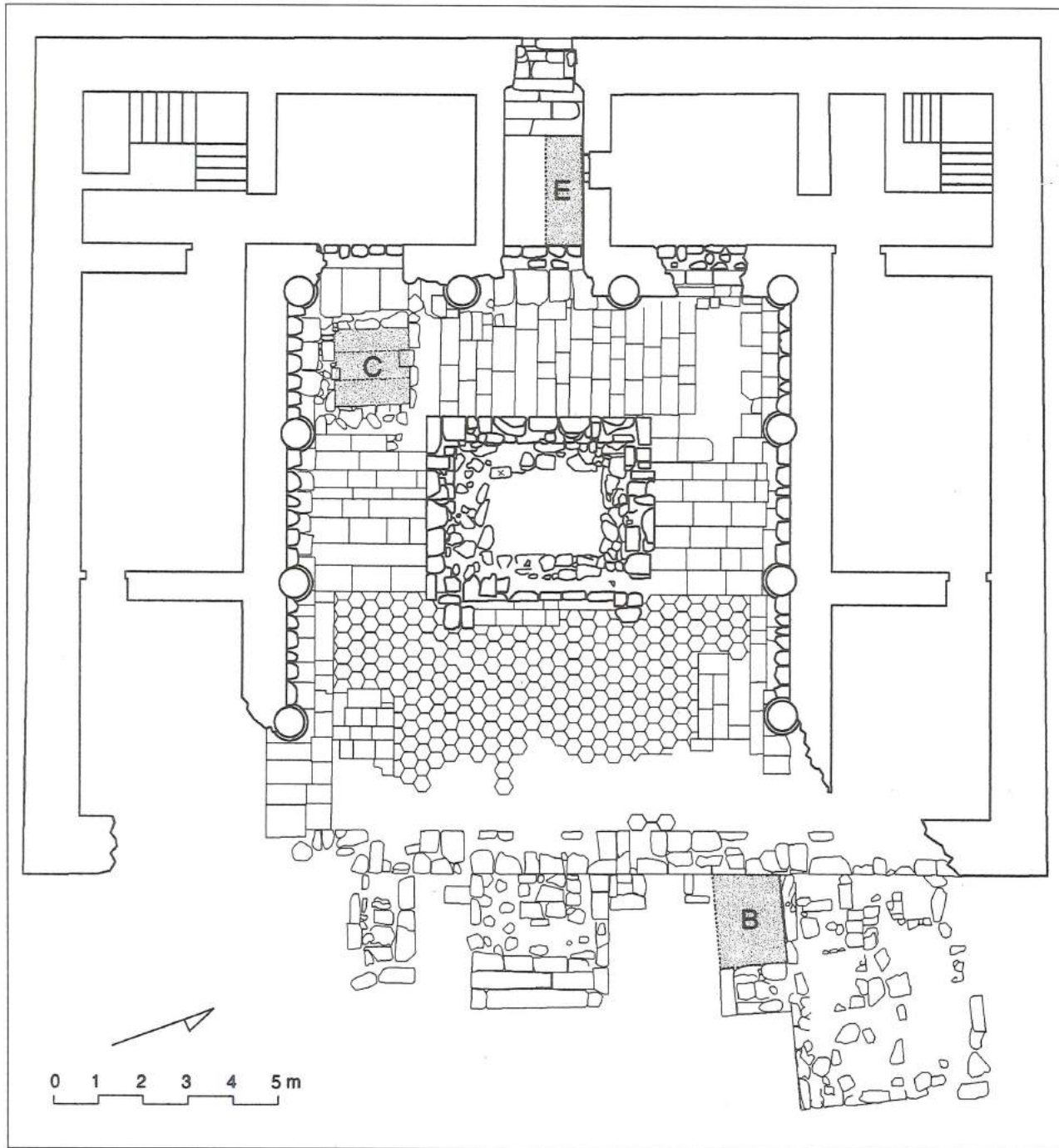
1. The first reports are, Savignac 1932: 581-597; 1933: 403-422; 1934: 573-591, Horsfield and Savignac 1935: 245-278, Kirkbride 1960: 65-92. The Nabataean inscription of 'Ayn ash-Shellalah were reinterpreted by Strugnell, 1959. The site was then presented in detail by Starcky 1966: 978-980. The literary sources are discussed in Graf 1983: 655-656. For the Greek and Latin inscriptions of the site, see Sartre 1993: 173-182.

2. The restoration of the temple and of the western complex has been undertaken in 1996 under the supervision of Sawsan Fakhiry (Department of Antiquities of Aqaba).

3. Dudley and Reeves 1997:81-106.

4. The members of the 1996 team were E.Natchiz, B.Ravez (topographers) and M.Malkawi (archaeologist) and the author (director). L. Mhamdiyeh served as Department of Antiquities representative and architectural draughtsman. In 1997, the Department's cooperation was under F. Zayadine. During those two seasons, the Department of Antiquities paid the workmen who helped in the cleaning and excavation process. Yvonne Gerber (Basel University) did the preliminary reading of the pottery. The Final Report of the two campaigns is in preparation and will be published in *Syria* (forthcoming).

5. Kirkbride 1960: pl.III.



1. Top plan of the Nabataean Temple of Wādi Ramm (*Iram*), (1996).

inscriptions of the area.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the block with the dedicatory inscription was reused for the foundation of the first temple phase, indicates that this sanctuary preceded that building. D. Kirkbride, in a probe on half of the central chapel, found several

artefacts interpreted as domestic.<sup>7</sup> She also suggested that the substructure of its pavement (in which the inscription was later found), according to its height, could have been part of an earlier wall. If this is so, that small section of wall could be part of this

6. For the inscription, see Farès-Drappeau and Zayadine in this volume.

7. Kirkbride 1960: 85.

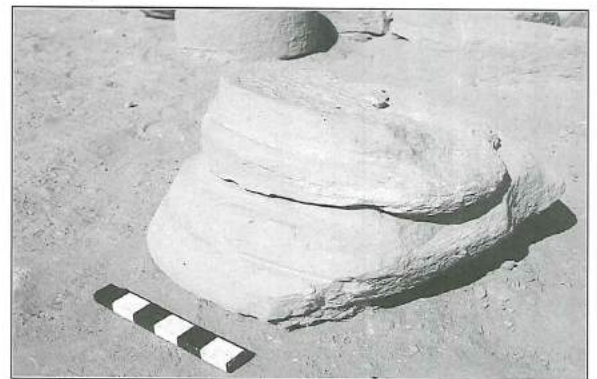


primitive sanctuary.<sup>8</sup>

*The Temple under Nabataean and Roman periods*

Around the late first century BC to early first century AD, a rectangular podium (12.1 x 13.9 x 1 m) had been erected, probably above the afore mentioned first sanctuary. It was reached by a narrow centred stairway (3 m wide) with seven steps (Fig.2). This podium supported a central chapel of 3.2 m x 2.7 m and was surrounded by 14 columns on its four sides. This peripteral temple had 4 columns on its front and back and 5 columns on both sides. The column drums, standing on Attic bases, were carefully dressed, with a reserved undressed circle of 1cm high on both their extremities (top and bottom). If the height of the drums vary, the transitions from one drum to the other were intentionally underlined. This treatment must be considered as an intentional decoration. If this assumption is correct, the columns were originally free-standing and were bound by walls in a later phase. They were supporting Nabataean

capitals of which two echinuses and one upper half with horns were found (Figs. 3 and 4).<sup>9</sup>



3. Echinus of a Nabataean capital, front column (1996).



4. Upper half of a Nabataean capital, front column (1998).



2. The podium and its front stairs, from the east (1996).

8. Kirkbride 1960: pl.III, Section E-F. It is important to note that the walls of the *naos* have unusual large foundations. But those are also part of the substructure sustaining the pavement inside the *naos*. Unfortunately, between D.Kirkbride's description and our visit, the archaeological levels connected with the central chapel were destroyed. During our cleaning, sterile sand was reached directly under the foundations of the central chapel.

A probe under the hexagonal pavement of the main podium could hopefully solve this question.  
9. The upper half of a capital was found by the Department of Antiquities during the removal of one of the fallen columns of the façade still *in situ* in the summer 1997. The capitals belong to Judith McKenzie's Type 1 Nabataean capitals, McKenzie 1990: 190.



The *naos* was opened on its eastern side, facing the entrance of the monument. Its pavement was set 0.6 m above the pavement of the podium itself. Unlike other Nabataean temples where the main podium is reached by two small stairs of narrow steps,<sup>10</sup> this chapel was not preceded by steps but its access was limited by a grill. Its eastern face was underlined by two pilasters on both sides of the opening as documented on old photographs (Fig 5). Unfortunately, only one course of the *naos*'s façade re-

mains today (Fig.6). The *naos* was crowned by a cornice of which elements were found during the first excavations.<sup>11</sup> There was shown the representation of the divinity Allat.<sup>12</sup>

In a later subphase, a thin dwarf wall was built between the columns. We might suggest that this wall did not reach the capitals. It was apparently too thin (less than 0.25 m) to support any entablature but could have supported a light cornice subtly different from the one of the *naos*.<sup>13</sup> The columns



5. *Naos*, from the east, (1934, by courtesy of Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jerusalem - East Jerusalem).



6. *Naos*, from the east (1996).

10. The temple of Khirbat adh-Dharih, the Qasr al-Bint, the temple of the "Winged Lions" and the sanctuary of ad-Dayr have this feature in common.

11. Horsfield and Savignac 1935: pl.XIII.

12. The attribution to Allat by G. Horsfield and R.Savignac was based on the inscriptions of 'Ayn ash- Shallalah and a graffito found in the temple itself. This is, if necessary, now con-

firmed by the newly found Thamudic inscription dedicated to Lāt. The lower part of a sandstone statue was also found in the 30s and interpreted as a Tyche. Its date is not known but it could refer to later phases of the building. For a possible recent comparison, see Figueras 1992; for Allat, Starcky 1981.

13. Horsfield and Savignac 1935: pl.XIII.



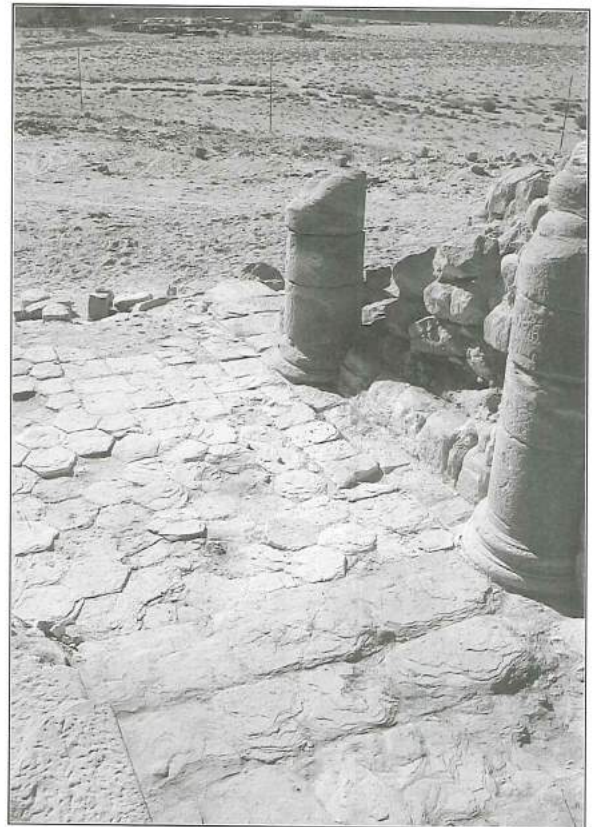
were then plastered and the inner face of the walls decorated with painted stucco. Several blocks found in the ruins were covered with lozenges imitating rectangular courses with lozenged incised decoration on their flat side. According to their thickness, they are in all probability to be associated with the afore said dwarf-wall. Thus, at this time, the external temple precinct was apparently decorated with an incised stucco while the inner faces of the walls were decorated with ornamented paintings.

In front of the *naos*, the flooring of the podium was composed of hexagonal sandstone pavers while the rest was paved with ordinary flagstones (Fig.7). On both northern and southern limits, the hexagonal pavement is interrupted by flagstones. They are associated with cultic furniture found *in situ* in the 1930's. Moreover, the pavement shows several traces of restoration.<sup>14</sup> On the south-western side of the podium, there was a 1.80 m deep square cistern covered by flagstones and supported by a single arch. Parts of its hydraulic mortar is still visible.<sup>15</sup>

In a later intermediate phase, the temple was enclosed by a major wall except on its frontal façade. This is Kirkbride's wall "C" which appeared also to have been built against the rear wall of the podium. Kirkbride assumes that this wall was built to give stability to the podium. It could also have been for a reorganisation of the roofing. The construction of that wall can be

dated roughly to the first century AD<sup>16</sup> which gives us an indication for the preceding phase of construction, that is, around the turn of the first century BC and AD. It is therefore tempting to relate the original construction phase to the reign of Aretas IV (9/8 BC - 40 AD).<sup>17</sup>

The latest building phase of the temple was determined by another probe<sup>18</sup> opened against the back wall of the temple; its



7. Hexagonal pavement after cleaning of the podium, from the west (1996).

14. During sweeping a part of the damaged hexagonal pavement, we were lucky enough to find a coin of the first half of Rabbel II's reign. Nevertheless, this cannot be used as sound chronological evidence.
15. Probe C consisted of cleaning the cistern, unfortunately emptied during the 1962 excavations.
16. Probe E (2.4m / 1.4m) was made in the western hall of the temple, between the rear wall of the podium and the stairs leading to the western complex.
17. Many scholars were tempted to base the chronology of the temple on a graffito found on painted stucco fragments and first published in 1935 (Horsfield and Savignac 1935: 264-268).

- The dedication to "the Great Goddess of Iram" dates to the year 41. Aretas IV is the only Nabataean king who reigned more than 41 years. However, based on the fact that nothing refers to the titulature of a Nabataean king, R. Savignac concluded that the inscription refers to the era of Bostra. J. Starcky who read the inscription again also concluded that the graffito dates to 147 AD (Starcky 1966: col 979-980). He added that his reading was certain. Therefore this dedication does not give any conclusive evidence of an original building phase to be dated to Aretas IV.
18. Probe A (4.5m x 1.5m) was opened between the western door of the temple and the Western Complex.



foundation trench contained material of the end of the first century AD and early second century AD. This should date the latest extension of the building unless the back wall and the lateral walls are not contemporary. At this time, several rooms were added to the former temple along three of its sides, except on its façade. The temple was trapezoidal in outline (22.8 m wide on the front, 23.1 m wide on the back and 19.2 m on its sides). A communication between the temple and the western complex was established through a hall and several steps leading to a door in the back wall of the monument. Two stairways were built on its backcorners reaching an upper floor or the roof of which nothing remains. No pavement was found as far as the external rooms or in the western hall.

There is no evidence left of the later occupation or destruction levels of the building. Nevertheless, the 1962 excavation revealed another major structure which adds to our knowledge of Nabataean religious cults: a rectangular platform of 5.3m x 3.5m is abutting the north-eastern part of the temple's façade (Fig. 8). This structure was



8. Rectangular platform in front of the temple, from the south-west (1996).

reached by three central narrow steps. A probe<sup>19</sup> put down to its foundations indicates that the platform was added after the second building phase and belongs to the later phases. This is probably to be associated with well-known numismatic representations of an altar from Bostra, Adra'a, Mādabā and Charach Moba, dated to the late second and third centuries AD. Those coins show small platforms supporting "betyles" reached by a few narrow central steps (possibly a ladder). On several examples, courses are clearly drawn on the anterior face of the platform. Sometimes, priests seem to stand on it to perform rituals.<sup>20</sup> As far as we know, the abutting platform of Wādī Ramm's temple seems to be the only surviving construction of this type.

Despite the lack of archaeological evidence, and apart from the Nabataean grafito mentioned above, a Latin dedication of an altar indicates, however, that the temple was still in use in the first half of the third century.<sup>21</sup> As yet the abandonment for its date remains unknown.

Thus far, the stratigraphical evidence gives us the following tentatively dated sequence of events:

- I. A sanctuary (BYT) is built and dedicated to Lat.
- Ia. A main temple (peripteral tetrastylus) is erected before or around the late first century BC to early first century AD.
- Ib. A dwarf wall is erected between the columns.
- Ic. A major wall is built around the podium in the early first century AD.
- IIa. The temple is reorganized in the late first century AD, early second century

statues on the podium?).

21. Sartre 1993:179-180; the lower part of the altar with its inscription moved earlier to Amman and the upper one found during the 1996 clearance of the podium have been joined together and are now shown in Amman's Archaeological National Museum.

19. Probe B (2.2m x 1.5m) was opened in front of the temple, between the temple and the steps of the cult platform.

20. Spijckerman 1973: Adraa, pl. 10, nos. 1,2,3,4,12; pl.11, nos.17,18; Bostra, pl.15, nos 38,42 (showing its courses),43,44 (in perspective); pl. 17, 67,72; Charach Moba, pl.22, nos.5; Meshorer 1985, Bosra, p.88, no. 239 (with two priests or



AD (Rabbel II?).

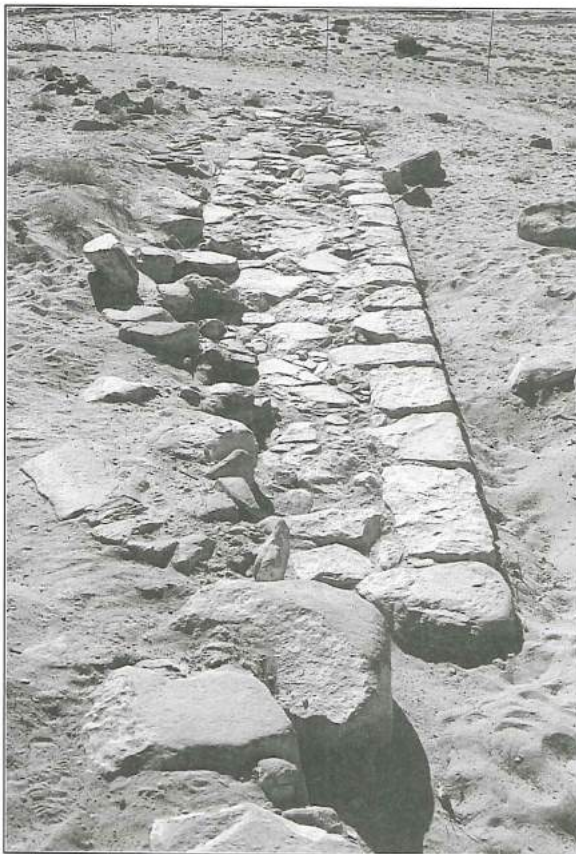
IIIb. The cultural platform is added.

So far, the limits of a supposed temenos have not been found. An orthogonal structure 1.8m wide and 17 m long in front of the temple could be the northern limit of a monumental access to the sanctuary (Fig. 9). It is not established yet if this is the base of a stylobate or part of a wall.

The field work did not focus on the temple only. Other buildings sketched in the 1930 or exposed in 1962 were recorded, especially behind the temple (western complex) and in the depression south of the temple hill (southern "village").

### The Western Complex

In 1962 an important complex of 20



9. The orthogonal structure, east of the temple, looking west.

22. Rooms CO1 and CO2 form a first unit. Rooms CO4, CO5 and CO 6 constitute a second unit.

23. For Probe A, see above, Probe D (2.20m x

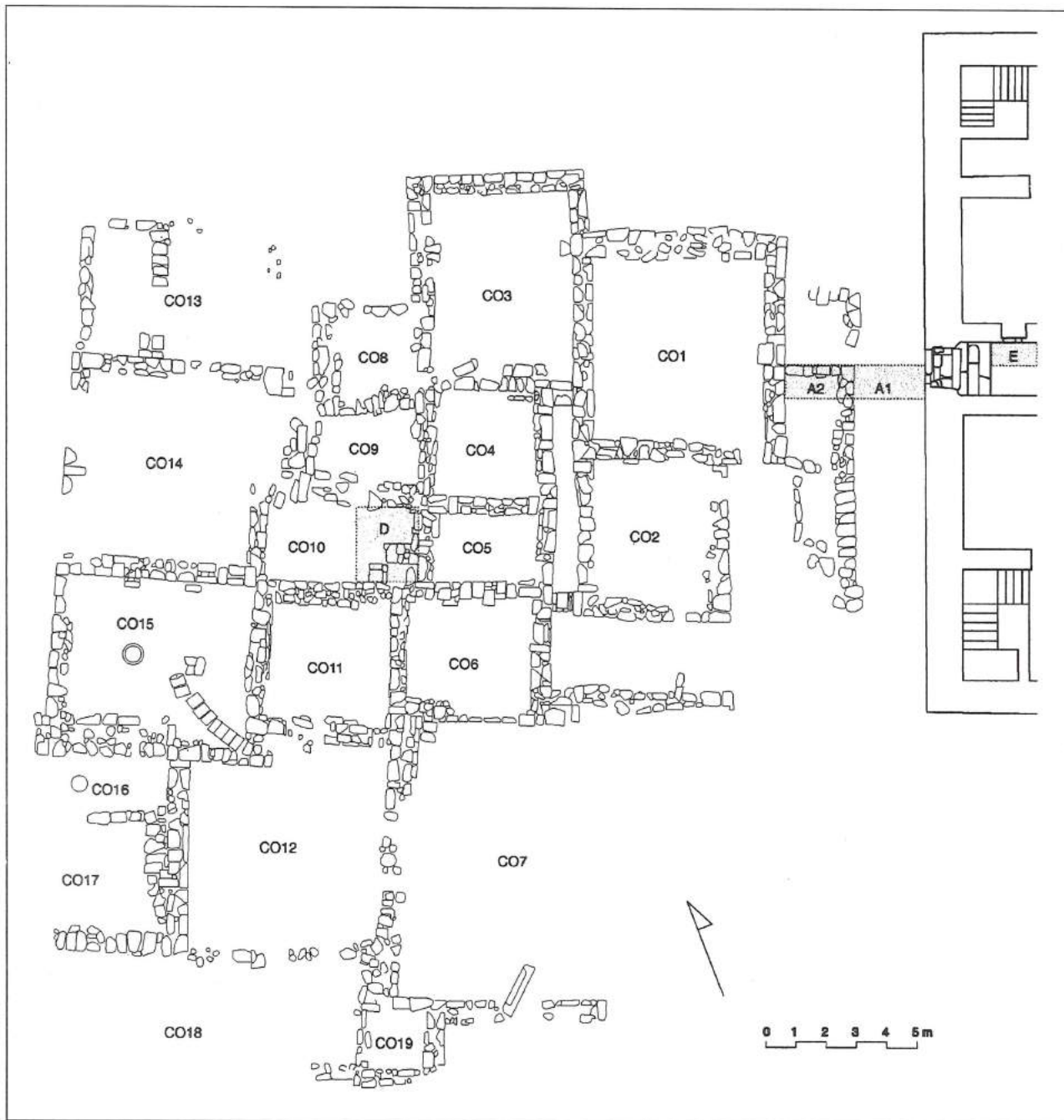
rooms was cleared behind the temple (Fig.10). At least three main rectangular units of two or three major rooms can be traced through later additions.<sup>22</sup> They follow the general orientation of the temple. Our soundings have provided some preliminary chronological sequence. The two probes<sup>23</sup> have indicated that

- the visible western complex is contemporary with the latest building phase of the temple, that is, the late first to early second century AD. The newly excavated levels, untouched in 1962, are dated to the third century. The latest surface sherds found in the complex during the 1996 cleaning operation are dated to the mid-fifth century. The occupational levels revealed domestic activities.
- Both trenches evidenced earlier structures below the surface remains of the complex which are tentatively dated to the late first century BC and early first century AD. That means the earlier complex coexisted already with the first phase of the Nabataean temple. Without further investigation, the function of this complex and its relation to the temple itself remains unclear.

### The Southern "Village"

This 3500 m<sup>2</sup> area sketched in the thirties was recorded (Fig.11). It is limited on its southern edge by a wall of nearly 100 m. Two other similar long walls limit the northern side of the main wall on which the temple has been built. Their dates and function remain unknown - they are perhaps to be associated with the canalization system feeding the site from several springs on the east slope of the Jabal Ramm. The southern settlement does not refer to a grid but rather seems to have grown in an unplanned manner. The remains just emerge above the topsoil. Two thresholds indicate the level of

2.00m) was the extension of the probe opened in 1996 in the Western Complex (room CO10).



10. 1997 probes of the western complex.

the remaining structures. The complex has also several large enclosures. The surface collection of sherds appears to be of Nabataeo-Roman dates.

### Towards Rural Egyptian Models from Ptolemaic and Roman Periods

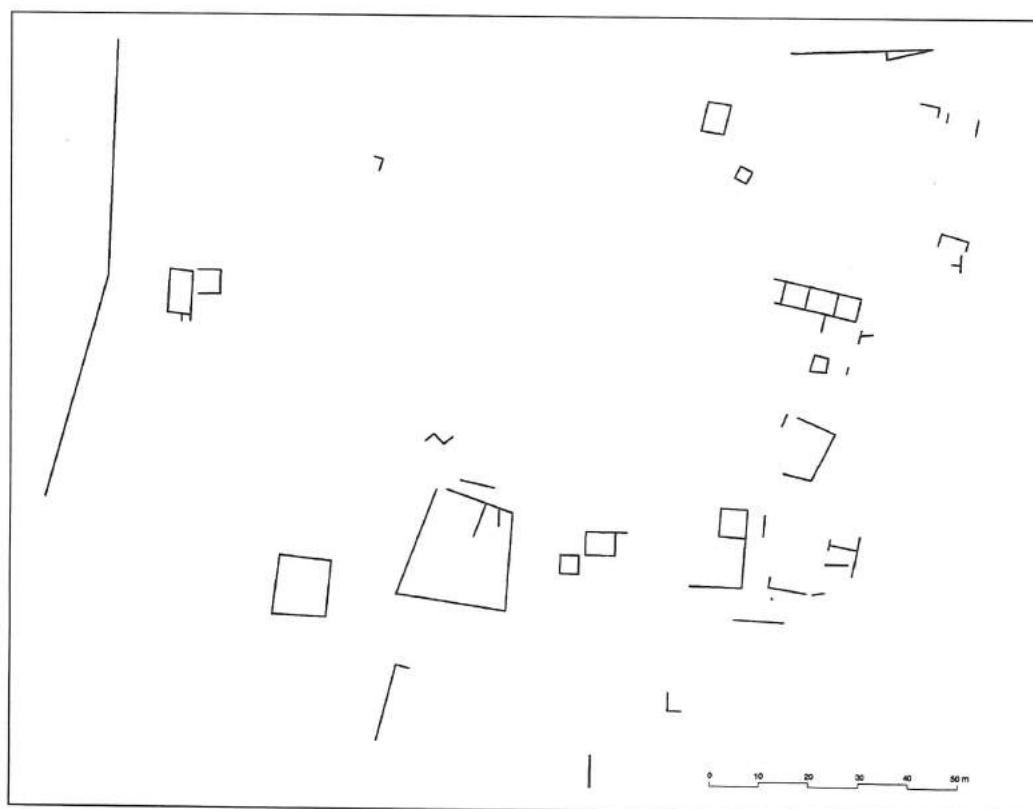
It seems possible to assert that several

Nabataean temples refer to Egyptian models. Those influences are noticeable in plans, elevations, structural elements (niches, cryptae under the podium, etc.) and decorative features (sculpture, stucco, etc.).<sup>24</sup> Here is not the place to expose all the reasons for this assumption but several examples can be introduced to place the proposed compari-

24. Tholbecq 1997: 1086-1088; this comparative study of the Nabataean temple is the subject of the

author's PhD dissertation (Université Catholique de Louvain - Louvain-La-Neuve / Belgium).





11. 1997 plan of the Southern "Village".

sons for Wādī Ramm's temple in this general context. Several Nabataean temples show a rectangular plan, opening through a rectangular front room (cf. Dhibān, first temple of Oboda, Khirbat. adh-Dhariḥ, Temple of the Winged Lions of Petra). This plan finds its origin in Egypt in temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman period. For instance, the second stage of the temple of Khirbat adh-Dhariḥ clearly refers to rural Egyptian sanctuaries of which the Temple of al-Qal'a (Coptos) is a good example.<sup>25</sup> This affiliation explains several characteristic features of adh-Dhariḥ's temple organization. The elevation of the main façade of the building finds also an excellent parallel in the funeral Temples of Tuna el-Gebel (Hermopolis Magna).<sup>26</sup> Speaking of structural elements, the presence of niches at the back wall of several Nabataean temples (in Petra: in the Temple of the Winged Lions or the decoration of the back wall of the Qaṣr al-Bint

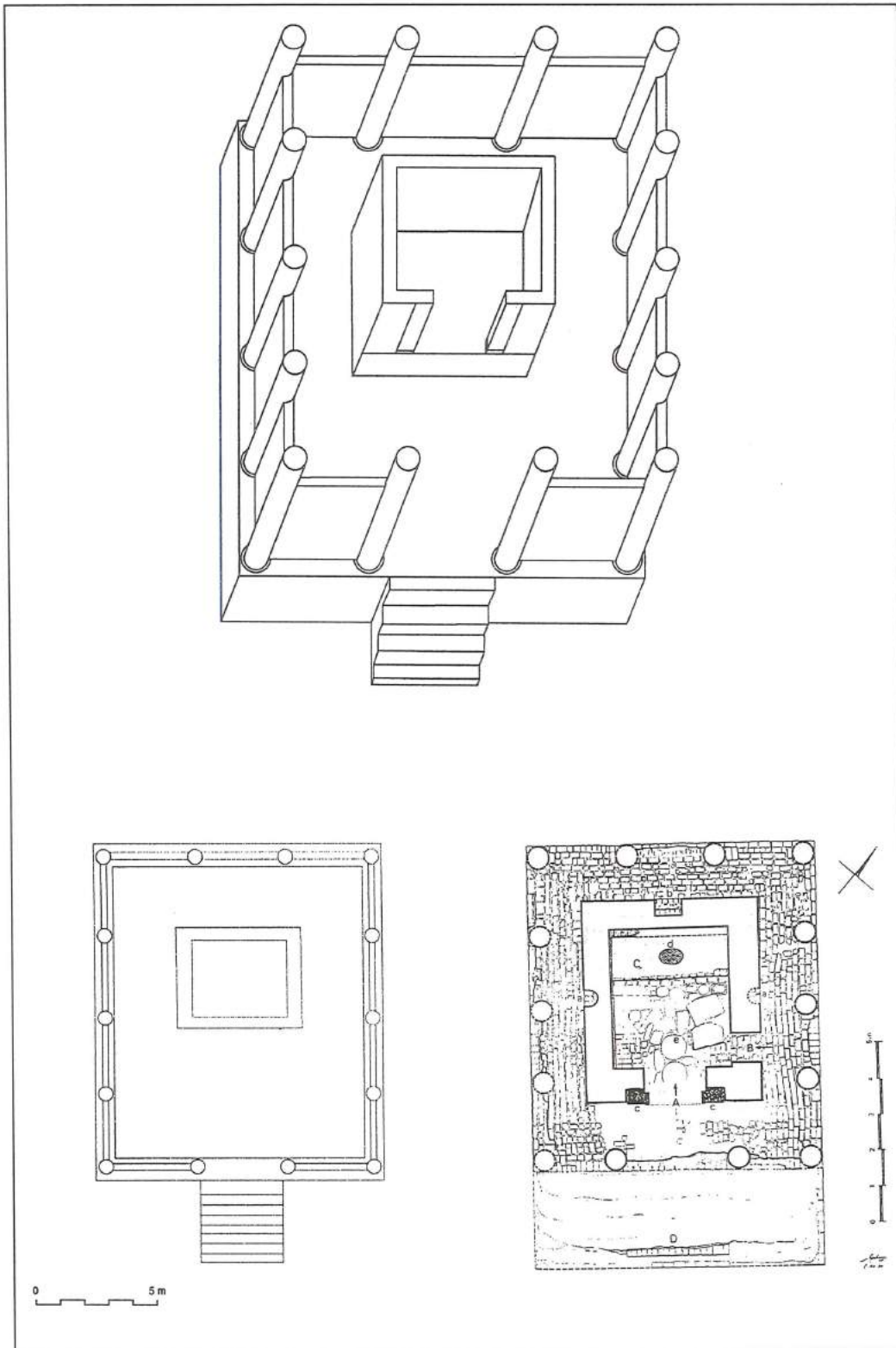
which underlines a rectangular niche) could also find its origin in Egypt.

While it does not enter in a Classical Nabataean typology like the examples of Khirbat adh-Dhariḥ or the temple of the Winged Lions, the Temple of Wādī Ramm seems to find parallels in Egypt, too. The first phase of the temple finds a good parallel, though later, in the Serapeion of Luxor dedicated in Hadrian's reign<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 12). This temple consists of a rectangular podium (12 m long x 8 m wide). It supports 14 columns (4 on the short and 5 on the long sides) and its front is reached by steps. The general proportions of both monuments are identical, although the building of the Wādī Ramm example is noticeably bigger. The only substantial difference is the extension of the *naos*, which is smaller in the Wādī Ramm temple. This configuration allowed extra space in front of the *naos*, creating a pronaos-like space, characteristic of various

25. Pantalacci and Traunecker 1990: 7; general organisation in plan, hall around the main podium, lateral rooms

26. Perdrizet 1941: pl. XXIV - Pensabene 1993: 266.  
27. Golvin *et al.* 1981.





12. Tentative schematisation of the Temple under Aretas IV (?). The Serapeion of Luk-sor, from Golvin *et al.*, 1981: 119, fig.2.

Nabataean temples. Moreover, if the interpretation is correct, the erection of a dwarf wall in a sub-phase could refer to Egyptian examples too.

Nevertheless, the latter idea is supported

by the fact that the later extension of the Nabataean temple of Wādī Ramm (phase IIIa) has also a parallel in Egypt. The temple of Dayr Chelouit, in Western Thebaid, its decoration dating from the time of Au-







gate (now destroyed) inside the temenos, between the temple and the main entrance of the temenos could help us to understand the function of the orthogonal structure mentioned above.

The plan of Egyptian temples correspond to precise rituals clarified through texts or representations covering the walls. If the affiliation between Egyptian models and Nabataean temples is established, it is then essential to understand why the Nabataeans referred to those particular models and how those types were adapted to answer to Nabataean rituals of which, without any literary reference, we know very little.

### Conclusion

Wādi Ramm (*Iram*) is the first site mentioned by Cl. Ptolemaeus in his list of cities in *Arabia Felix* (*Aramava-Geogr.*, 6.7.27)). At first sight, Wādi Ramm seems situated outside the main caravan routes even if it was probably linked to Qurraya (*Ostama*) and Tabuk (*Thapava*) or other Nabataean sites of the Madian if not to major harbours like Aila and Leuke Kome. In addition, several Minean inscriptions testify to ties with Southern Arabia. The springs were exceptional enough to attract the nomadic tribes and to incite them to build a sanctuary to Lat. Two built cisterns - today badly damaged by the removal of their construction material - were fed by canalizations coming down from 'Ayn ash-Shallalah and other close springs. A second canalization system came from 'Ayn Abū Rumayleh down through the temple hillside to the eastern complex and its baths. We do not know if those springs were abundant enough to feed an important agricultural settlement in spite of dams and structures having been found during surveys around Wādi Ramm itself.<sup>29</sup>

The role of the Wādi Ramm settlement as part of a regional sanctuary is clear. The

primitive building dedicated to Lat was the meeting place for several nomadic tribes. It was followed by the building of a major temple going back to Classical models. Nabataean dedications to Allat by various workmen (macon, sculptor, architect?) in 'Ayn ash-Shallalah must refer to a major undertaking, presumably the building (phase IIa) or the transformation of the temple itself (phase IIIa). This evolution could evidence the growing importance of the Nabataeans at the turn of the era. Similarly, the Roman power marking its presence among the nomads, is attested by the Latin dedication of a governor mentioned above. This policy was also evidenced through the bilingual dedication of the temple of Ruwaffa in the second century<sup>30</sup> or the work carried out on the Western temple of Oboda (Negeb) in the late Roman period.<sup>31</sup>

The function of the western complex during the Nabataean occupation is not yet understood. It is also too early to determine the precise functions of the eastern complex in the settlement at this time but the presence of a "villa" (connected with courtyards) associated with baths close to a sanctuary has also been discovered at Khirbat adh-Dhariḥ. The question of the organisation of such sanctuaries (staff associated with the temple, authority in charge of the religious meetings and commercial fairs, economical autonomy or dependence) remains open.

The next campaign will provide hopefully more evidence for the chronology and the economical background of this settlement connected to a main regional sanctuary. Several questions need to be answered: is the temple associated with a temenos and its related features (altar or banqueting halls); which are the functions of the successive western complexes and the southern "Village" and is there evidence of agricultural

29. Graf 1983: 654-657.

30. Sartre 1982: 25.

31. Negev 1997: 53-54.



or pastoral activities or of distant commercial contacts? Last but not least, the date of abandonment of the site still needs to be determined. Those are the main questions on which our attention will focus in the next season.

After two short but very fruitful campaigns, we have now updated plans of the structures exposed in 1962. First stratigraphical indications and the parallel study by IFAPO of Semitic inscriptions of the area (see F.-Drappeau and Zayadine 1997) and in this volume allow us to rethink the settlement of Wādī Ramm in a broader his-

torical context. On this base, one can now pose new questions about the origin and the life of this site on the roads between Hegra and Petra. In addition, after cleaning, the Wādī Ramm settlement is going to be a historical and archaeological site of major interest for tourists and scholars alike.

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