

AN IRON AGE BASALT STATUE FROM THE AMMAN THEATRE AREA

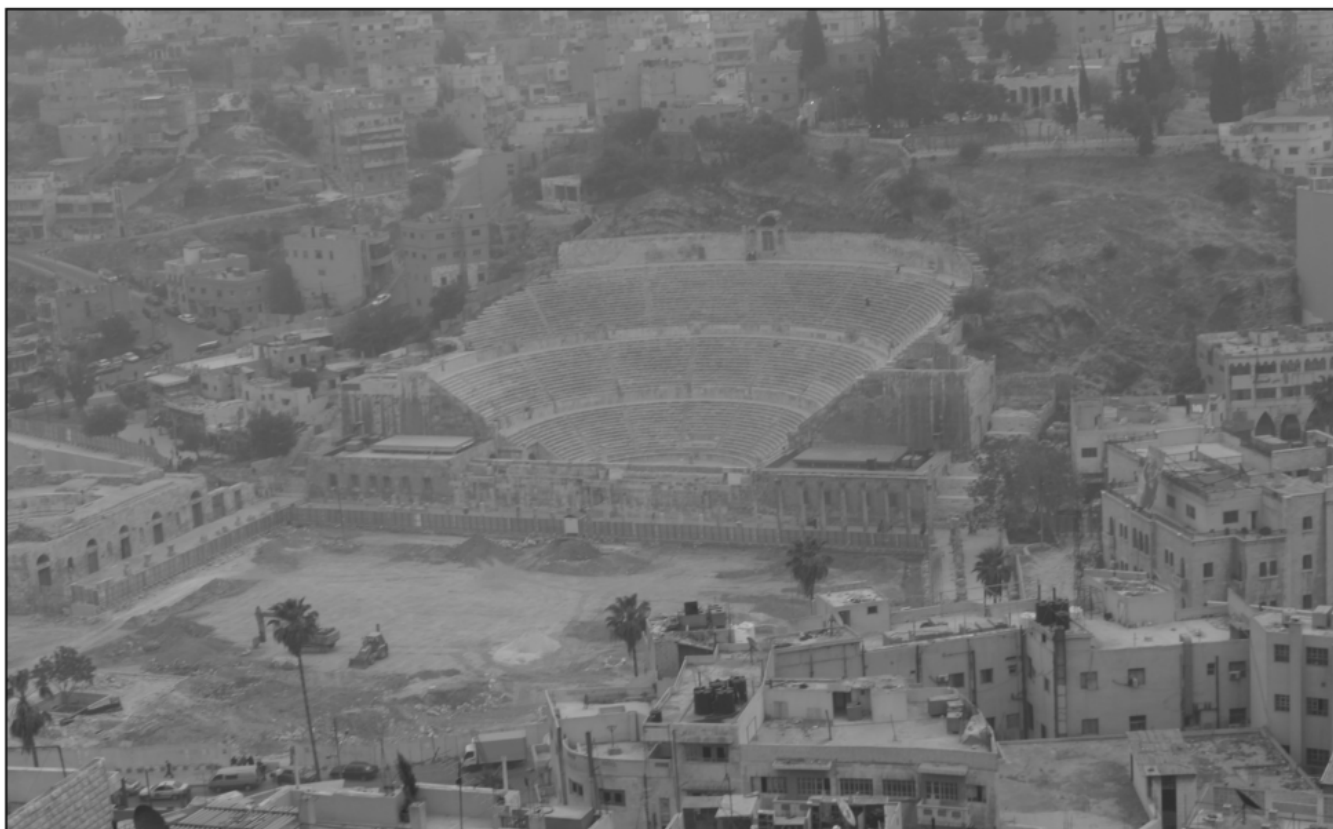
Joel S. Burnett and Romel Gharib

In April 2010, a rescue excavation by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DoAJ) uncovered an anthropomorphic basalt statue measuring over two meters in height in the ‘forum’ area in front of the Roman theatre in Amman (**Figs. 1 and 5**)¹. What follows is an account of the discovery and excavation, a description of the statue, and preliminary remarks regarding comparisons with smaller statuary

from Amman and with monumental sculpture from the broader ancient Near East. As this discussion will show, the Amman theatre statue depicts an Ammonite king from Iron Age II.

Discovery and Salvage Excavation

The statue was discovered on 11 April 2010, in the early stages of construction in the Greater Amman Municipality’s recent development



1. Amman forum plaza construction, 11 April 2010, looking south from the Citadel (Jebel al-Qal'a). Photo Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

1. The statue’s discovery was initially announced in The Jordan Times 20 April 2010 (Luck 2010) and shared with the wider scholarly community on 9 June 2010 by

Adeib Abu-Shmais at the 11th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan (ICHAJ) in Paris.

of Hashemite Square and the ‘forum’ area plaza in front of the Roman theatre (**Fig. 2**)². In the course of grading and earth-moving operations, a mechanical excavator came into contact with a large stone object that lay buried just an estimated 0.35 m beneath the leveled ground surface³. Construction was immediately called to a halt and an emergency archaeological excavation was conducted for the statue, the area immediately surrounding it and other selected loci within the graded construction area across the plaza (**Fig. 3**)⁴.

Upon excavation, the large, column-shaped stone object proved to be an anthropomorphic statue depicting a standing male figure. Thanks to the attentiveness both of the DoAJ inspector and the machine operator, the statue had

incurred only glancing contact with the earth-moving equipment and remained intact without any broken pieces and with only a few lines of relatively superficial scraping across the lower part of the face (across the mouth area and on the right side of the beard) and on the right side of the torso and right arm of the statue (**Fig. 5**)⁵. No other pieces of the statue nor any material cultural remains were found in the area immediately surrounding the statue.

The only other ancient artifacts uncovered among the other loci of the salvage excavation on the forum plaza were the remains of interlocking terracotta pipes (*ca* 0.25 m diameter) from a Roman drainage system for removing rainwater. These pieces were discovered at roughly the same level as the statue (i.e. *ca* 0.35 m. beneath the



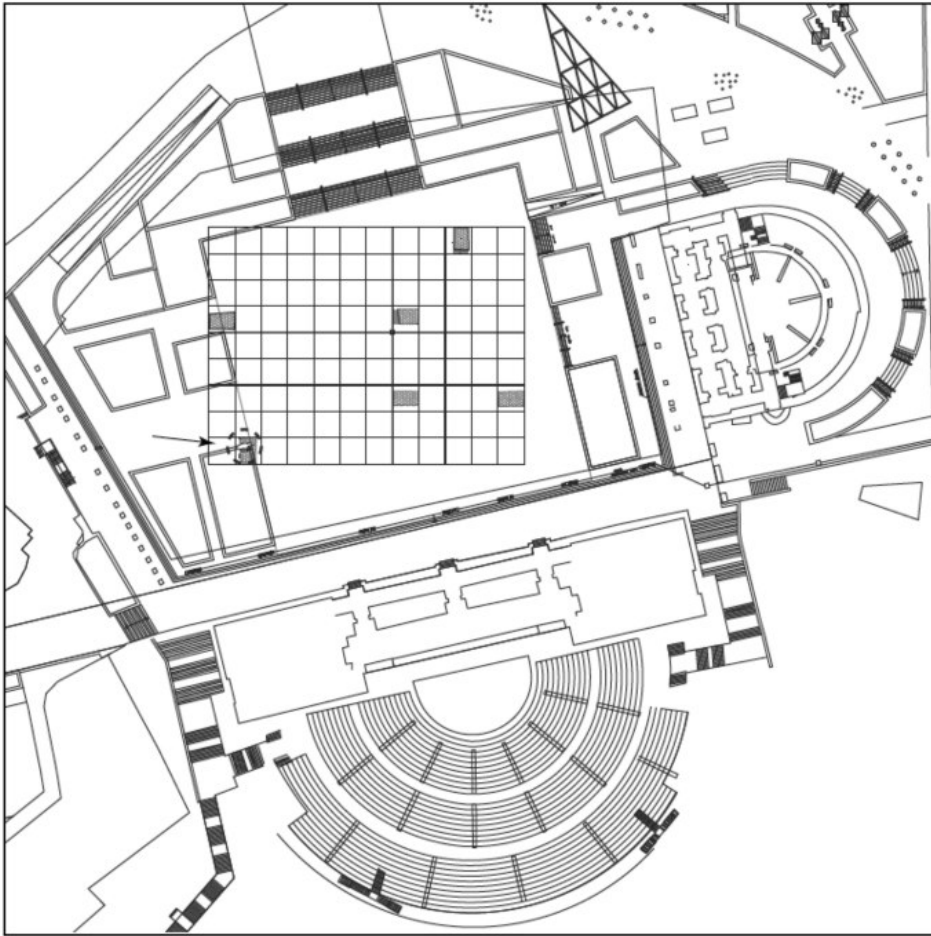
2. The newly developed plaza, looking south (28 March 2014), photo by Regine Hunziker-Rodewald). The arrow indicates the statue find spot; see also figs. 3 and 4).

2. The completed plaza and Hashemite Square complex was officially inaugurated for public use during the weekend of 28 March 2014 (Freij 2014). Since the term ‘forum’ has become the conventional label for the ancient plaza in front of the Amman Roman theatre (see, e.g., Hadidi 1974, 1978), we will henceforth use this familiar term without quotation marks and without implications for its specific function or architectural features during the Roman period.

3. This part of the construction work involved digging down below the graded soil level to form a footing, or foundation trench, along the northern side of an arbor installation that is now part of the new plaza design (Figs. 2 and 3).

4. Romel Gharib is the Department of Antiquities inspector who was on site for the construction project and who directed the emergency excavation (Fig. 4).

5. The break on the upper right arm occurred sometime in antiquity (see below).



3. "Other darkened areas of the grid indicate test loci investigated during the salvage excavation".

graded soil surface). As demonstrated in Hadidi's excavations of the north-western, southern and eastern areas of the plaza, this drainage system lay just beneath the Roman pavement level of the forum plaza and was associated with Roman pottery of the second century AD⁶.

The statue was unearthed lying horizontal and face up, essentially level with the graded surface beneath which it was excavated and in keeping with the basic ground plane indicated by the Roman colonnades and surrounding Roman pavement level uncovered in the previous forum

excavations by Hadidi during the mid-1960s (Hadidi 1974: 76-85, figs 3-6). The statue lay directionally parallel to the orienting side of the forum plaza running along the front of the Roman theatre (**Fig. 3**)⁷. As Hadidi's excavations showed, lower layers of fill contained mixtures of Roman, Hellenistic and Iron Age pottery (Hadidi 1974: 77-89 and figs. 4-6), indicating that the Roman-period construction of the forum involved digging out the entire area and filling it back in⁸. All of these factors together indicate that the statue was deposited within

6. Hadidi excavated the same type of terracotta pipe from this Roman drainage system just below the Roman pavement level, at the foot of the steps descending from the colonnade on the forum's west side. See Hadidi 1974: 83, 84, fig. 6, pl. 26:B, 1978: 213.

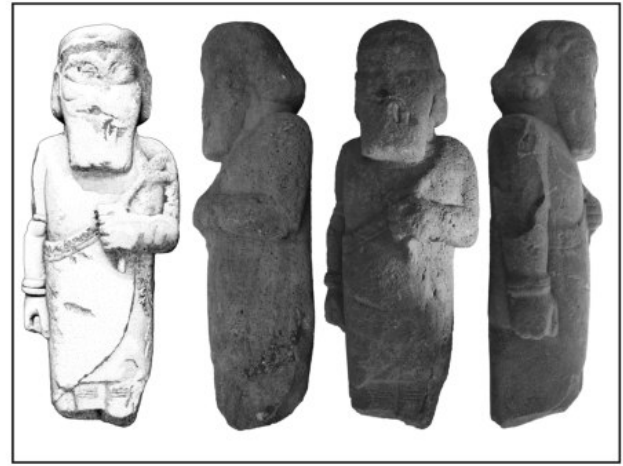
7. Because the features of the modern plaza development are likewise oriented to the surrounding Roman colonnade, the statue was uncovered in digging along a

straight line on one side of the arbor installation aligned to run parallel to the front side of the Roman theatre (see Fig. 4).

8. Hadidi 1974: 80, 82, 83. In the area excavated closest to the theatre, along the forum's south side, the bottommost depositional layers contained pottery that Hadidi characterizes as "purely Iron Age I sherds" (p. 82).



4. Looking west, the statue next to its find location. The statue was removed from the north foundation trench (running east-west) for the modern arbor perimeter. The remaining perpendicular guideline painted on the ground marks the arbor's east side (running north-south). See also fig. 3.



5. Amman Theatre Statue (Drawing by B. J. Parker. Photos by the author.)

the fill completing the Roman forum during the second, or perhaps early third, century AD. (that is, *ca* 200 AD).⁹

Description of the Statue

The statue depicts a standing male anthropomorphic figure, with part of the right upper arm and the lower legs having broken away sometime before the surviving portion of the statue came to be buried at its find spot during Roman times (see above). It is made of basalt and measures 2.1 m at its maximum length, 0.85 m at its widest point and 0.56 m at its maximum depth, with an estimated weight of *ca* 2 tons (4000 lbs / 1,814 kg)¹⁰. The surface of the statue shows considerable weathering, including the effects of water erosion over the entire left side of the body and head. Furthermore, many of the features of the statue appear to have been sculpted at a relatively superficial depth but nonetheless reveal considerable attention to detail.

The figure stands facing forward, with the

right arm held straight down at the side and the right hand clenched in a fist. The left arm is bent at the elbow, with the left hand held to the chest in a fist grasping the stem of a large lotus flower, or Egyptian water lily, which lies across the left chest and shoulder. Also crossing the figure's chest is the edge of a shawl hemmed with a petal-patterned border, draped over the left shoulder and partially covered by the flower stem. Between the lower edge of the flower and the left forearm, traces of sculpted lines (though now badly eroded) represent garment features on the upper left torso that continue below the left arm in more elaborate detail, including front and side flaps of the shawl, another petalled border and vertically hanging tassels. Wristbands composed of two ribs appear on both arms. The lines of a short-sleeve tunic worn underneath the shawl appear just above the elbows of both arms. Emerging from underneath the bottom-front of the shawl, two ends of a belt tied underneath the shawl hang down

9. According to Hadidi, who carried out systematic excavations of the forum area from 1964 to 1967, the theatre was completed *ca* 175 AD and the forum plaza was completed during the following decades, as indicated by the second-century Roman pottery that prevailed in the upper fill levels he excavated in the southern and western portions of the forum. See Hadidi's reconstruction of the occupational history of the theatre and forum (Hadidi 1974: 85-88) and, specifically, his

excavation of a coin of Elagabalus (218 - 222 AD) within a fill level belonging to the Roman construction of the forum (p. 75, fig. 3 and p. 82), *ca* 20 m south of where the statue was later uncovered at a comparable level in 2010.

10. Dr Don Parker, emeritus professor of geology at Baylor University and a specialist in igneous petrology, calculated the estimated weight based on the measurements.

vertically, displaying horizontal, ridged lines.

The figure looks straight ahead. The nose and surrounding portion of the face, now almost completely flat, were apparently defaced intentionally in ancient times¹¹. The outlines of large eye spaces, probably once including inlays, are still visible, as is the upper outline of the beard, which extends downward at the bottom into a broad rectangular shape. The traces of a headband or diadem extend across the forehead and curve around just behind the ears on both sides. An irregularly rounded indentation near the center of the forehead appears to be the result of mutilation to the center part of the diadem or to the forehead more generally. Full, flowing hair hangs down from the sides and back of the head, gathering below and behind the ears into a bun of large sculpted curls. The top of the head is relatively flat with a drilled hole *ca* 3.25 cm in diameter and *ca* 4.35 cm deep, slightly rear of center¹².

The back of the statue is rendered in only the most basic outlines.¹³ The outer shape of the hair continues around to the back of the head, though without any sculpted detail. The body curves around the shoulders and sides, and the back is flat all the way to the legs with no apparent effort to render naturalistic body features or clothing elements, save for the top border line of the shawl continuing under the right arm and just around the figure's right flank.

Preliminary Comparative Analysis

The scale and material of the Amman theatre statue bring it into comparison with a tradition

of monumental sculpture in basalt well known from Zenjirli and other sites of north Syrian, or 'Neo-Hittite', culture during the ninth to early seventh centuries BC.¹⁴ A broader Levantine tradition of monumental sculpture in basalt or similar stone is attested with a less certain date range south of Amman on the Karak plateau in several examples: (1) showing strong affinities to the 'Neo-Hittite' tradition, an orthostat carved in the form of a lion, (2) bearing motifs that align more strongly with Egyptian or Egyptianizing style, the Balu'a stele relief, (3) the Shihan (Rujm al-'Abd) relief, (4) the inscribed Karak fragment (the inscription dating to the ninth century BC) and (5) the mid-section of a kilted anthropomorphic statue at the Karak museum¹⁵.

The north Syrian and 'Neo-Hittite' tradition prominently features anthropomorphic three-dimensional stone statuary, on a scale similar to that of the Amman basalt statue, in the depiction of gods and human kings (Orthmann 1971: 476, pl. 4b, 484, pl. 7d, 522, pl. 41d-e, 545, pl. 62c-d). The broader Syrian tradition of stone statuary depicting rulers or deities in the form of life-size standing figures includes the early example of Puzur-Ishtar (dated to Ur III period Mari, *ca* 2,100 BC, in diorite [Pritchard 1969: 150, 299 no. 433]) and the well-known basalt statue from Tell Fekherye in north-east Syria dating to the ninth century BC (Abou Assaf, Bordreuil and Millard 1982; Dion 1985). The basic stance and arm position of the Amman statue, one that is widespread in the Near East and eastern Mediterranean during the first millennium BC (Falsone 1989), is also found

11. The surface striation running across the mouth area and then turning down on the left and middle chin area was caused by contact with the earth-moving machine at the time of the statue's discovery (see above).

12. Two additional, smaller holes on the top left edge at the back of the head appear more pitted and irregular in shape and may thus have resulted from the extensive water erosion evident on this side of the statue (see above).

13. The object's size and weight are obstacles to producing unobstructed photographs of the back of the statue at this time.

14. See Orthmann 1971 and the various articles and illustrations collected in the issue of *Near Eastern*

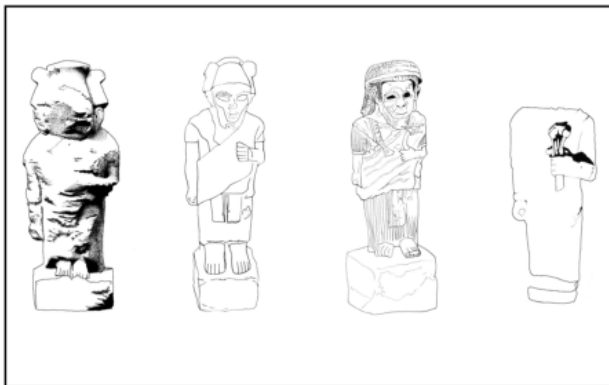
Archaeology edited by Harrison (2009).

15. For the Balu'a stele relief, see Ward and Martin 1964 and Routledge and Routledge 2009. For the Shihan relief, including a thorough review of scholarship, see Hunziker-Rodewald and Deutsch 2014: 51-67 and pls 6-10. For the inscribed Karak fragment, see Reed and Winnett 1963: 1-9, especially 3-5 and fig. 1, and Parker and Arico 2015: 105-20. Parker and Arico suggest the stone of the Karak fragment may not be basalt, as identified by Reed and Winnett, but rather granodiorite (2015: 105). The rest of these pieces, with further bibliography, are noted in Routledge 2004: 178-80, 182.

in Assyrian stone statues of Ashurnasirpal II (883 - 859 BC) and Shalmaneser III (858 - 824 BC), and in a limestone statue of a king found at Assur measuring 2.55 m in height without the missing head and dating prior to the ninth century BC (Strommenger 1970: 11-13, 13-15, 16-17, pls 1, 6a).

This attitude also characterizes a series of smaller stone statues from Iron Age Amman and its vicinity, comprising several statuettes of male figures measuring less than one meter in height, mostly in limestone (see Fig. 6)¹⁶.

The Amman theatre statue also resembles the Amman series of male statuettes in basic details of dress and adornment, especially with respect to the beard, the shawl hem crossing the chest from the left shoulder, and the hanging belt ends and tassels adorning the garment (Figs. 5 and 6). Particularly noteworthy are the parallels with the statuette inscribed with the name Yarḥ'azar (Fig. 6c), which wears a headband with the head otherwise uncovered (compare the atef-crown worn by the two statuettes in (Fig. 6a – b) and several statue heads from Amman [Abou Assaf 1980; 'Amr 1990: 158-67 and



6. A, B, C, D. Amman Statuettes. Drawings by B.J. Parker.

16. For the four statues in Fig. 6, see Abou Assaf 1980: 7-102, here pls 1, 3, 6 and 7 (torso 11). The statuette in Fig. 6b is made of a hard, grey stone (Abou Assaf 1980: 22 and pl. 3; Bienkowski ed. 1991: 41, fig. 39). Two additional examples in limestone, with the same pose being evident despite considerable damage, are a statuette discovered on the Amman citadel in 1985 (Zayadine, Humbert and Najjar 1989: 357-63, especially 359, and pl. 51) and an unpublished limestone statuette on display at the Jordan Archaeological Museum at the Amman citadel. Another

pls 7-8; Daviau and Dion 1994]) and which holds the lotus flower in the left hand against the chest. The lotus flower, which originates in Egyptian art as a symbol of life and renewal, passes into Levantine iconography to stand as a distinctly royal emblem during Iron Age times (van Loon 1986: 245-52, pls 59-61). This same statuette bears a label inscription that mentions “Yarḥ'azar, [son of Za]kar, son of Shanib” (yrḥ'zr / [br z]kr br šnb [Aufrecht 1989: no 43]), indicating the portrayal of a royal personage¹⁷.

Conclusions

The Amman theatre statue finds its place within a broader Levantine tradition of monumental basalt sculpture well represented during the ninth to seventh centuries BC. It finds its closest parallels of stance and motifs in the series of stone statuary consisting of smaller, mostly limestone statues and statue heads from Iron Age II discovered in and around Amman. The example closest to the Amman theatre statue in this respect, the Yarḥ'azar statuette, likewise bears the royal motif of the lotus and additionally includes an inscription indicating the royal status of its subject. These factors reinforce and specify what the monumental size of the basalt statue suggests, more generally, based on Syrian and Assyrian parallels, namely, that it depicts an Ammonite king.

The statue's monumental and royal character are consistent with its find location just below the Amman citadel (Jabal al-Qal'a), on which Iron Age monumental architecture and the greatest concentration of Ammonite stone sculpture have been recovered¹⁸. The citadel hill thus suggests one possibility for the Amman

study of Ammonite statuary is the unpublished Masters thesis by Abdel Sami' Abou Dayyah 1978.

17. The apparent double patronymic suggests a royal lineage; the grandfather, Shanib, may be the Ammonite king mentioned by Tiglath-Pileser III around 734 BC (Pritchard ed. 1969: 282).

18. For both monumental architecture and stone sculpture recovered from the citadel hill, see Dornemann 1989: 89-94, 154-63, 198-99, 283-87; Zayadine, Humbert and Najjar 1989; Humbert and Zayadine 1992.

theatre statue's original location, from which it fell, or was pushed, to roll downhill and land in the perpetual stream (*the sayl*) at the foot of the hill. There it would have lain for some centuries prior to its removal in Roman times, a scenario consistent with the considerable water erosion covering the left side of the statue.

Alternatively, the statue might have originally stood closer to the location of its burial and modern discovery. Hadidi's excavations in the Roman forum uncovered considerable Iron Age pottery remains, including a level he recognized as comprising "purely Iron I" ceramics excavated on the south side of the forum, directly in front of the colonnade running in front of the Roman theatre (Hadidi 1974: 82). Although no architectural remains have emerged from the various probes of the Roman fill completing the forum's construction, a monumental stone fragment possibly once attached to an architectural structure was excavated in this same general area, namely, the Amman theatre inscription fragment, also in basalt¹⁹. Thus, one cannot dismiss the possibility that this area lying below the Amman citadel and inhabited during the Iron Age was an extension of that focal point of royal monumental display²⁰. A more precise determination of the statue's original location would require additional evidence.

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Joel S. Burnett
Baylor University
Department of Religion
One Bear Place # 97284
Waco, TX 76798-7284
USA
Joel_Burnett@baylor.edu

Romel Gharib
Department of Antiquities of Jordan
besan_g@yahoo.com

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19. The inscription is dated palaeographically to the sixth century BC. See Aufrecht 1989: 151-53 no. 58. In the *editio princeps*, Dajani describes the location of the object's discovery as occurring "at a depth of 2.60 m. in the west side of" the Roman theatre. See Dajani 1967-1968: 65. X-ray fluorescence testing of both the Amman theatre fragment and the Amman theatre statue conducted by Dr Don Parker and the authors in June 2012 indicate that the stone for the two artifacts likely originated from different quarries.

20. The recovery area of Ammonite royal and monumental cultural expressions extends well beyond the citadel hill, as illustrated by the bronze bottle inscription from Tall Siran (8 km north-west of Amman citadel [Zayadine and Thompson 1973]) and limestone statues discovered at Khirbat Hajjar (ca 7 km south-west of Amman citadel [Ibrahim 1971; Abou Assaf 1980: 21-22, 86, 87]) and at Abu Aland (ca 7 km south of Amman [Ibrahim 1971: 95; Abou Assaf 1980: 29-30, 31]).

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