

# AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE SITE of SILA' / SELA' (ṬAFĪLA)

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## Introduction

The archaeological survey of Sila' / Sela' (Ṭafīla) was undertaken between 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> April 2015. The aim of the survey was to carry out a topographical study and surface survey of the site (also known Sila' or Selá in some publications)<sup>1</sup>. The site is located near modern-day Buşayra on the Edomite plateau, in the mountains of Ṭafīla, some four km off the King's Highway and about 50 km north of Petra (Fig. 1). The geographical coordinates of the centre of the site are 30°46'50"N, 35°34'30"E and the average elevation is 867 m. The highest point of the promontory is 877 m above sea level and the total surface area of the site is 42 hectares. Sela' is located on a rocky outcrop about 200 m above two surrounding *wadis*: Wādī al-Mashri' to the south, and Wādī Jamal to the north, and west of the outcrop. Both *wadis* flow into the Wādī Khunayzīrah, which in turn connects this system with the Wadi 'Arabah. Further evidence of occupation was found in the fields east of the Wādī al-Mashri', and in the *wadi* itself.

As-Sela' is a site of extraordinary scientific value and has enormous potential for broadening our understanding of the history of the Edomite plateau. Surface surveys have permitted the establishment of an approximate chronological framework for the site on the basis of the Iron Age, Nabataean and Roman pottery collected. Sela' may have been occupied from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC down to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, although at present we are unable to

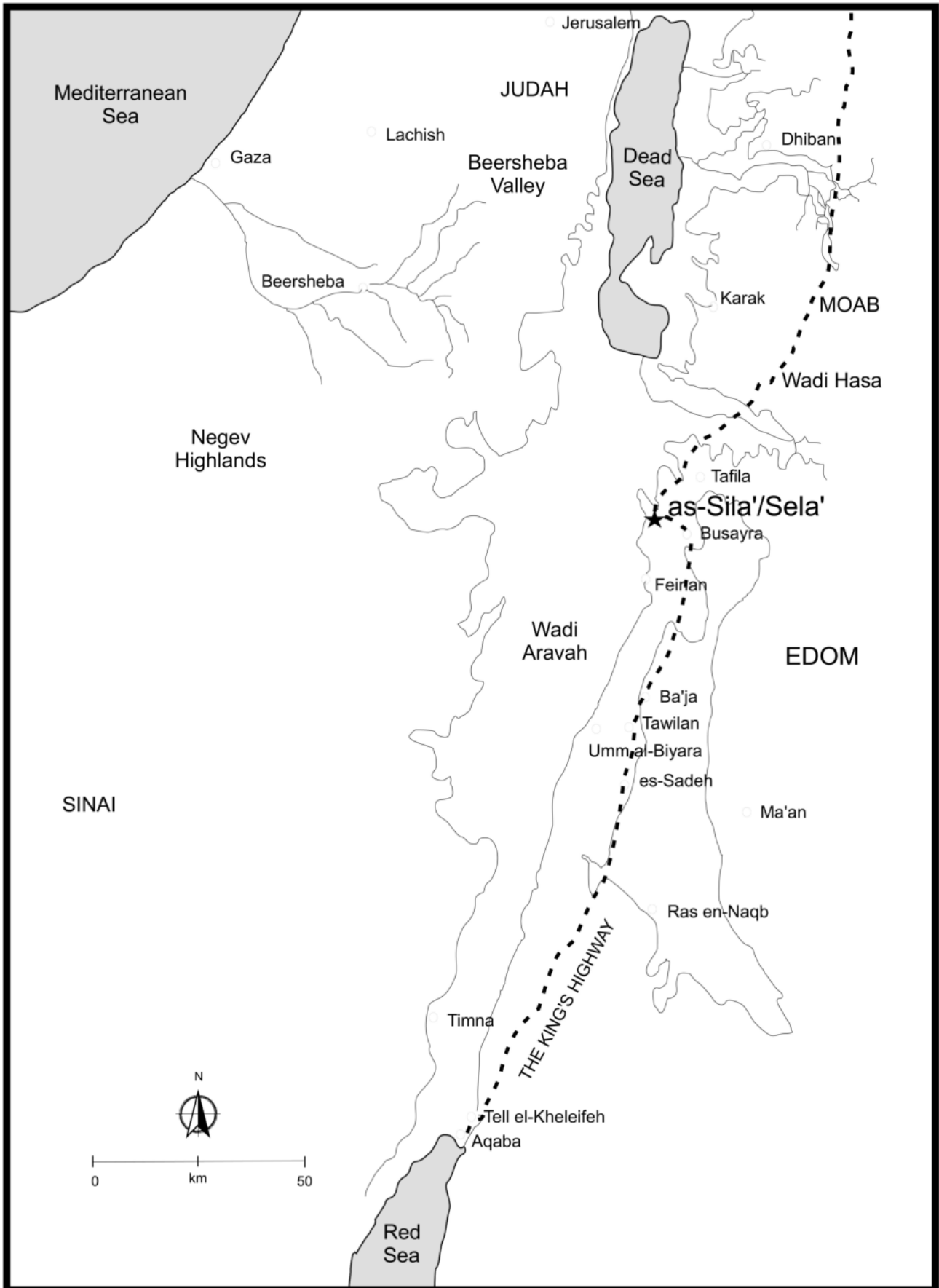
confirm that this occupation was continuous. A gap in settlement between the Iron Age II and the Nabataean periods has been observed at some neighbouring sites (MacDonald 2015: 40), but Sela' is yet to be excavated and its chronology is not well understood. The many structures built for water storage and management (e.g. wells, cisterns, channels, reservoirs of varying sizes etc.) make Sela' unique for the study of water management on the Edomite plateau during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. The site also has a carved inscription and relief of the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556 - 539 BC), the only one of its kind in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

During the survey several different kinds of features were identified, including streets, wells, gateways, stairways, rock-cut 'houses' and stone walls. The settlement has features that are characteristic of Iron Age II fortress sites, as well as features in common with Nabataean sites, such as Petra. Despite its isolation, or probably because of it, Sela' is quite well preserved compared with other sites in Jordan. Many structures have extant entrance areas, stairways, gateways, central areas and towers. These architectural features share commonalities with similar sites from the Iron Age II period on the plateau such as Ba'ja (Lindner 1987) and Umm al-Biyāra (Bienkowski 1992, 2011). In order to understand the relationship of features to each

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Academia Research Prize (R. Da Riva). The University of Barcelona has granted institutional support to carry out the research. Special thanks are due to Burton MacDonald, who read the article and offered valuable comments. The photos illustrating this article are from R. Da Riva unless indicated. In this article we will refer to the site as Sila'.



1. Map of Jordan (by R. Marsal, after Porter 2004: 375).

other, however, Sela' requires comprehensive and detailed archaeological excavation.

The site has been identified with Edomite Sela' which is frequently mentioned in the Bible (MacDonald 2000: 192), and many archaeological remains and textual sources bear witness to the significance of this site in different historical periods. The Nabonidus rock relief is the clearest indication of its importance during the Iron Age II. From the Nabonidus Chronicle we know that in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BC the king campaigned through this region, which he called Udummu, on his way from Babylonia to Arabia (Zayadine 1999; Lemaire 2003.). Indeed, the geographical setting and iconography of the monument suggest that it was carved to commemorate a military victory during Nabonidus' southern campaign. Its presence here also suggests that the area was under Babylonian administration at some point during Nabonidus' reign, although we know nothing of this rule.

### Archaeological and Historical Context

Sela, (Sila') was first mentioned by Alois Musil (1907) and Gustav Dalman (1908, 1912), but Colonel F. G. Peake, commander of the Arab Legion, was the actual discoverer of Sela'.

Peake notified Glueck, who made the first archaeological visit to the site in 1937. Glueck compared Sela' to Petra (unfavourably) and identified virtually all the surface material and structures he found as Nabataean. Other visitors included de Vaux and Parr, Starkey and Bartlett (Lindner, Hübner and Gunsam 2001). Crystal Bennett noted the absence of Nabataean features at the site and reported a preponderance of Iron Age pottery. Zayadine, Lindner, Hübner, Gunsam and others worked on the site from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, but they did not make intensive interventions (Lindner, Hübner and Gunsam 2001). Hart included the site in his 1984 - 85 survey of the area (Hart 1986). Surface surveys at Sela' undertaken between 1999 and 2001 by a team led by B. MacDonald (the *Ṭafila - Buṣayra Archaeological Survey*

[TBAS]: MacDonald 2004) referred to the site as Nr 134 and uncovered Iron II, Iron Age and Nabataean pottery (MacDonald and Sawtell 2002: 479). The late Hamed K. Qatamine of Mu'tah University undertook excavations at Selá in 2001, (MacDonald and Sawtell 2002: 477) but we have no information at all regarding this work. The site has not been surveyed or excavated since Qatamine's work there.

Even though the ancient settlement of Sela' has not been excavated, surface finds from the summit indicate that it was occupied during several historical periods (including the Early Bronze Age, Nabataean and Mamluk periods) but it saw its most extensive occupation and use during the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC (Zayadine 1999: 85-86). There are indications of Iron Age II occupation (7<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) both on the plateau and in the village of Selá in the form of pottery and architectural structures similar to those found at other Iron Age II sites such as Umm al-Biyāra, Buṣayra and Ḥisbān, and the lesser known sites of Ba'ja III and Umm al-Ala (Lindner 1992).

The plateau is reached by means of a rock-cut stairway called *khandaq* by Glueck, but apparently not by the locals, nor by the antiquities authorities in Ṭafila (Lindner, Hübner and Gunsam 2001: 254). The plateau was protected by a tower and was entered through a gate building or gateway. To the right off the entrance is a narrow gorge that Glueck named after the *siq* in Petra (Lindner, Hübner and Gunsam 2001: 254). There are some rock-cut houses with traces of painted stucco in green, purple, red and blue, and many structures associated with water management. In fact, Lindner identified more than 30 reservoirs or catchment basins (some of them very large), which he dated to the Iron Age period, as well as channels and cisterns. Similar structures were found in the surface surveys carried out at Ba'ja and Umm al-Ala, and some authors have suggested the existence of a group of traditional cistern makers active in the region (Lindner 1992: 144). Other features observed at Selá are more difficult to attribute to the Iron

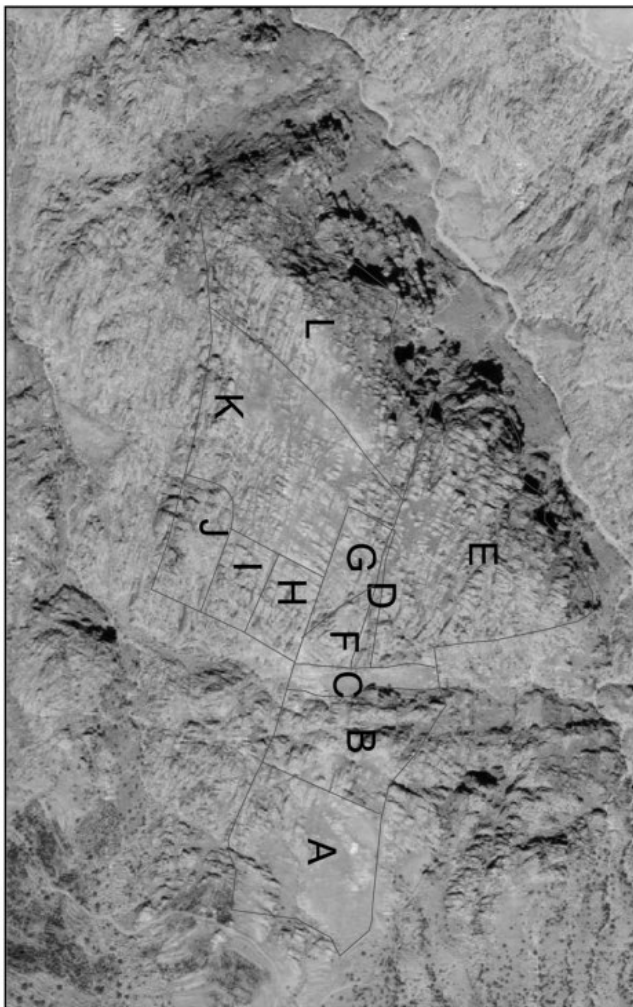
Age period, including some of the houses and the tower of the *khandaq*. Iron Age II as-Sela' shares some features with other contemporary sites in the region but it has a very personal and unique character which, as a result of its location near the King's Highway and the route to the Wādī 'Arabah, seems to have allowed it to function both as a temporary settlement and as a mountain stronghold / military outpost<sup>2</sup>.

### Surveyed Areas

The total area surveyed was 42.0089 hectares, distributed between the areas marked with the letters A - L on the sketch map (Fig. 2). The site is reached from the east, descending to the *wadi* from the modern-day village of Sila' along a tarmac road. There is an area with cultivated

fields east of the parking area (A). A surface survey has revealed the presence of Iron Age, Roman and mediaeval pottery, as well as lithic material, some iron slag and various metal objects. Within the *wadi* there are also rock-cut stairways and structures. West of A, so-called area B contains rock-cut structures ('houses' and reservoirs) and channels (Fig. 3). In our opinion, area B functioned as a kind of entrance immediately before the *wadi* area (C) and the stairway (D) leading to the outcrop. Surface finds on area B include Iron Age II and Roman pottery. The *wadi* area (C) is located to the east of the beginning of the great stairway (D). To the north of this area, the remains of a large and thick plastered floor have been found (Fig. 4). This area may have functioned as a kind of reservoir or basin, since a rock-cut channel leading from area B to the southern part of area C was also detected here. The rock-cut stairway (D) with approximately 160 steps begins in area C and ends at the entrance to the upper city (F). It is partially cut into the rock and partially built with stone ashlar (Fig. 5). In the lower part of the stairway, some modern steps have been added to allow access. There are the remains of old sections of the stairway and of a tower in the upper section of the steps, and there is also evidence of repairs done on the stairway in the 1990s (Lindner, Hübner and Gunsam 2001: 252).

The north area (E) is one of the largest identified at the site: it comprises a partially built section where we find rock-cut steps leading from the *wadi* to the upper part of the site, as well as some rock-cut structures such as houses and cisterns. Surface finds include pottery (particularly Roman) and lithic material. The entrance area (F) includes a monumental gateway, a tower, and some 'houses' with stone walls, which seem to date to Iron Age II. The gateway is rock-cut, with a reinforcement of stone ashlar to support the walls (Fig. 6). The great tower is hollow and seems to have also



2. Sketch map.

2. For the Iron Age II on the Edomite plateau, see

Bienkowski 2014 and MacDonald 2015.



3. Area B.



4. Floor in area C.

functioned as a water cistern (**Fig. 7**). We found traces of plaster and green, yellow, blue, purple and red paint on the walls of the nearby houses. Several cisterns were also detected, one of them with an elaborate sedimentation basin for separating mud and sand before the water was let into the main cistern (**Fig. 8**). A grave cut into the rock was found on the northern edge of the cliff. In area G we detected the rock-cut layout of a large structure, some houses, cisterns and also some tombs (a 'necropolis?'), which seem to date to the Nabataean or Roman period. Area

H contains two rock-cut houses, one of which at least seems to have functioned as a sanctuary: there is an altar and a sort of sacrificial pile or perhaps a *baetylus* (**Fig. 9**). Nowadays this structure is used by shepherds and the walls are blackened by smoke. In area I we found several rock-cut stairs, houses and cisterns, and a large open area, which we called the 'Main Street'. Here we found many Iron Age II and Roman potsherds, as well as lithics and some iron slag. Area J seems to be less densely built than the other sections on this side of the outcrop:



5. Stairs.

it includes a *wadi* with a rock-cut stairway, an artificial cave (?), some rock-cut houses and cisterns, and a tower at the south-east end of the site. The central area K is the largest part of the site. We found numerous cisterns here, rock-cut houses and also a long channel. Surface finds (pottery, stone tools and metal objects) resemble those observed in other areas of the site. In area L, to the west, we found a tower and some rock-cut structures, including houses and cisterns. We also detected a limestone outcrop, which was probably the quarry for the plaster used for the walls and floors of the cisterns and the houses. Near the limestone outcrop, we found iron slag<sup>3</sup> and some fragments of basalt objects.

### Architectural and Hydraulic Structures

The architectural structures observed at Sela are carved into the sandstone, built using stone boulders or ashlar, or constructed with a combination of these two systems (this is particularly evident in area F see **(Fig. 10)**). There are also holes for the wooden beams carved into the walls, and longitudinal trenches or clefts cut in the ground as shallow foundations for the walls. Architectural structures of uncertain use (but possibly houses) are normally rock-cut, with additional stone ashlar used to build the walls (**Fig. 11**). The walls are made of dry stone masonry but there is also evidence of a minimal use of limestone mortar or packing. Perishable materials such as wood and animal skins may also have been used. The size and shape of these structures vary, as they normally make use of the existing rock formation. The large boulders are hollowed out to create a cavity where, if necessary, extra elements such as stone walls, wooden beams may have been added. Examples can be seen in areas A and E, and elsewhere. In area F there are still traces of paint on the inner walls of the stone-cut houses, so at least some houses were decorated this way.

In area G we found the remains of a necropolis with a dozen cists made of flat limestone slabs (most of them already opened and emptied, perhaps in antiquity). A further grave (opened and lacking the capstone) was detected on the northern side of the entrance area (F), cut into the bare rock on the edge of the cliff (**Fig. 12**).

At least one of the two stone-cut structures found in area H seems to have functioned as a place of worship, with an altar of some sorts cut into the rock inside the structure and the remains of holes and niches in the wall, where some perishable structures would have been added.

An interesting feature of Sela' is the presence of cisterns, water reservoirs perforated or carved

3. The presence of slag at the top of the Sila' is significant; the site could have been used for

smelting because of the wind it receives (suggestion of B. MacDonald).



6. Structure at the entrance (entrance gate).



7. Tower.

into the sandstone, presumably filled with rainwater through surface channels incised in the rock (**Figs. 13 and 14**). We documented some forty of these cisterns, as well as some round pits, which seem to be unfinished cisterns that are carved to make use of a natural perforation of the sandstone. Some of the cisterns are cut into the sandstone at ground level, while others (like the tower from area F) are cut into the standing boulders. The shapes and sizes vary, as does the level of sophistication: some were technologically complex, with settling

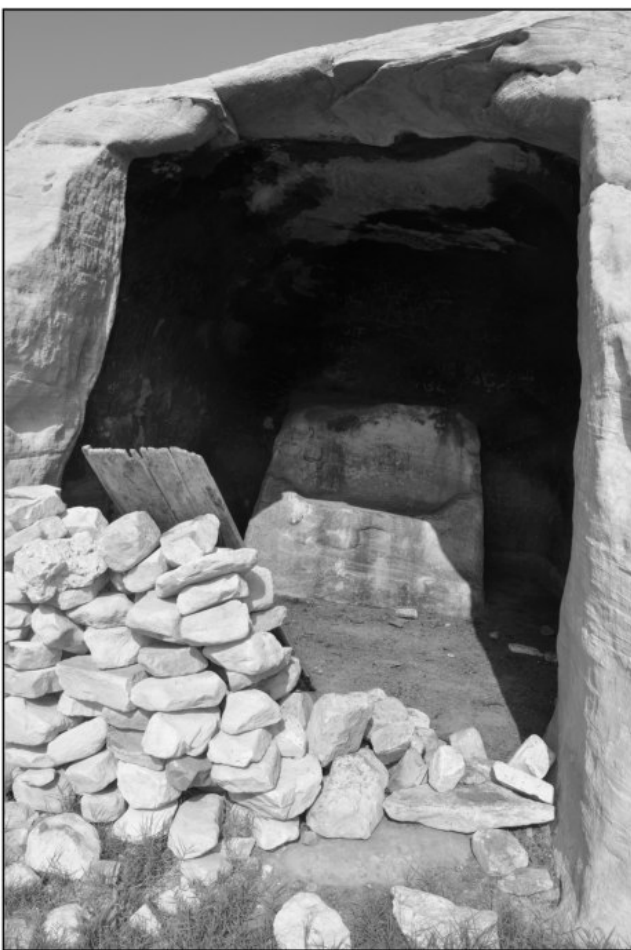
or sedimentation basins for stopping sediment and for separating mud and sand before the water was let into the main cisterns. Some cisterns are more or less oval in shape; others are rounded and some are cubic, with corners forming right angles. Some of the cisterns have plaster or waterproof cement on their sides and / or a capstone to seal them; this would have helped to improve the quality of the water, to extend the possible length of storage time and to reduce water loss through evaporation. Most of these cisterns are now filled with debris and



8. House and cistern.



10. Wall.



9. "Temple".



11. House.



12. Grave.

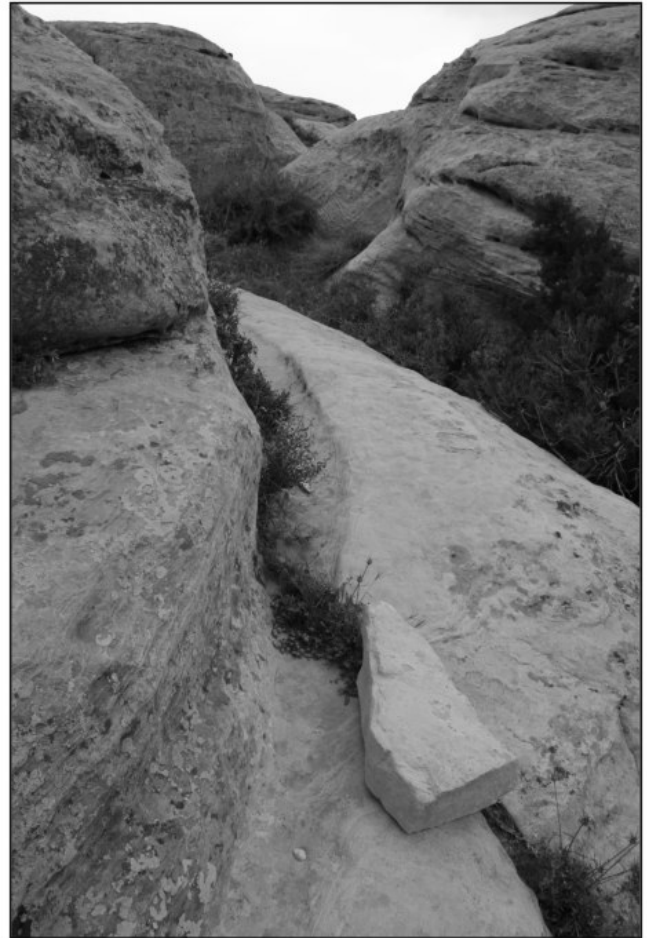
sediment. There is no way of dating or analysing any of these structures without undertaking an archaeological excavation. A series of rock-cut channels and pipelines were detected in several areas of the site (A, B, E, K, J and I). Some of the channels are up to 20 m in length,

and they seem to have been used to funnel the water into the cisterns (**Fig. 15**). The so-called *siq*, a narrow gorge situated to the west of the entrance with plastered sides, has a channel incised in the left side of its stairwell and the channel is decorated with blue paint on a thick





13-14. Cisterns.



15. Channel.

layer of plaster. All these elements suggest the existence of a relatively developed system for collecting and storing rainwater using water channels, pipes and underground cisterns.

#### **Ceramic Remains in the Sila' Area: an Initial Appraisal of Their Forms and Decorative Patterns.**

The survey revealed ceramic material all over the surface of the site, in some cases in very high quantities. A thorough analysis of these materials will only be possible after excavation. At this stage, we would like to offer some preliminary remarks on some of the ceramic groups identified in three different areas of the site, each with its own particular features which might be related to different uses and or phases of occupation. This initial description will contribute to the assessment of the potential of the site.

The first area is located on a terrace in the north-

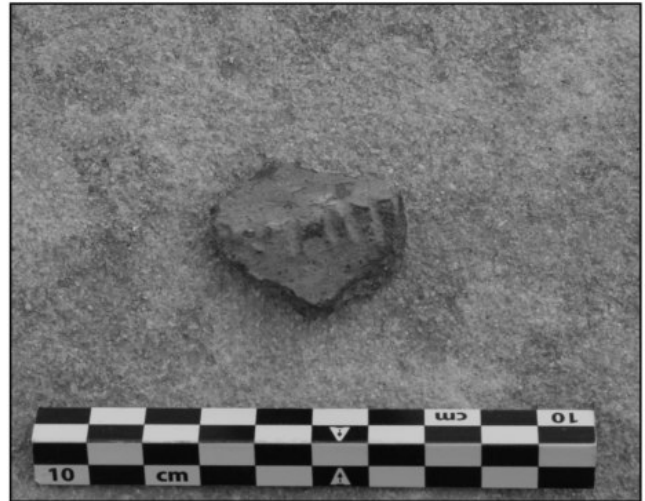
eastern part of the site and is reached through the *siq* from the top of the main stairway (area E). The ceramic group identified here is composed of more than a hundred sherds in association with quartzite lithic remains, as well as some fragments of worked basalt. Within the ceramic material, we have identified a group of sherds with thick walls and flat bases, robust handles and large rims. These features, together with our calculations of the diameters, indicate that the original vessels were large, rough storage jars. A second group comprises pottery with rims of smaller diameter, probably intended for domestic use. The fabrics of both groups were coarse with temper visible to the naked eye; the storage jars show a beige and / or light grey body and a light ochre slip. In contrast, the second group shows a grey body and pink or orange slip and, in some cases, reddish or dark brown geometrical decoration on the outside (**Fig. 16**).



16. Pottery.

The second area is located on the western side of the mountain (area L), among a group of rock-cut structures: stairs, cisterns and houses. The pottery found close to these remains of buildings is apparently related to them, although this assumption can only be confirmed through archaeological excavation. The ceramics in this group exhibit a coarse orange or sandwich (orange/ grey/ orange) body, with temper visible to the naked eye. They seem to be handmade and their main feature is external surface decoration of horizontal cordons with vertical incisions (Fig.17). Next to these materials we found fragments of worked pinkish granite.

The third group of ceramics was found in a secondary context at the bottom of the mountain, under the vertical rock face in which the inscription of King Nabonidus was carved. The ceramics were clearly redeposited and appear to have been formed by fragments falling down through one of the vertical canyons, with the erosion perhaps caused by landslide from the top of the outcrop into the bottom of the *wadi*. About fifty sherds were found in this context, all highly fragmented. In most cases they are body sherds, which makes it difficult to establish the complete form of the ceramics. A hypothetical calculation of the diameters suggests that these were small, thin-walled ceramics with reddish or dark brown geometrical decoration on the external surface. In general the pottery is coarse, with a grey body and white temper visible to the naked eye. On the outside the sherds have a



17. Pottery.



18. Pottery.

pink slip on which geometric motifs have been applied in black, red or dark brown paint. Motifs include straight lines, zigzags, chequering and cross-linking, both singly and in combination (Fig. 18). The decoration of this ceramic group suggests that these are examples of ‘Edomite’ pottery, which dates from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, particularly of the so-called Busayra painted ware (Hart 1995: 53).

Despite the abundant recordings of this pottery from sites from southern Jordan, there is still no clear indication regarding its origin. There is, however, some evidence to suggest it may reflect a cultural phenomenon that occurred in various settlements in Jordan and the Negev (Tebes 2011). The only petrographic analyses undertaken to date on Iron II painted pottery were carried out on ceramics recovered from Negev

desert sites and these studies indicate a local source (Gunneweg *et al.* 1991). Therefore, we must wait for the results of analyses on the Sela' pottery to obtain a clear idea of its provenance.

### Inscribed Objects, Engravings and the Inscription of Nabonidus

A number of inscriptions have been found in area K. Some are written in Arabic, but their chronology is uncertain, while others almost certainly contain *wusūm* or tribal marks, rather than letters (**Fig. 19**). Among other engraved material are some board games consisting of a series of small parallel perforations incised into exposed sandstone bedrock. These perforations, in series of 5 x 5, 6 x 4 and 6 x 5 were found at different points in areas E and K (**Fig. 20**).

The most impressive engraving is undoubtedly the relief of the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556-539 BC), which is absolutely unique in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (**Fig. 21**). Similar reliefs of this monarch have been found at Haʿit and at Tayma in Saudi Arabia (Joannès 2014). The Nabonidus relief, discovered in 1994 by Dr Hamad Qatamine of Mu'tah University and studied by several scholars (Dalley and Goguel 1997: 169, 174 fig. 8), is the only firm evidence for Babylonian presence in the region during the Iron Age II period. The relief is located

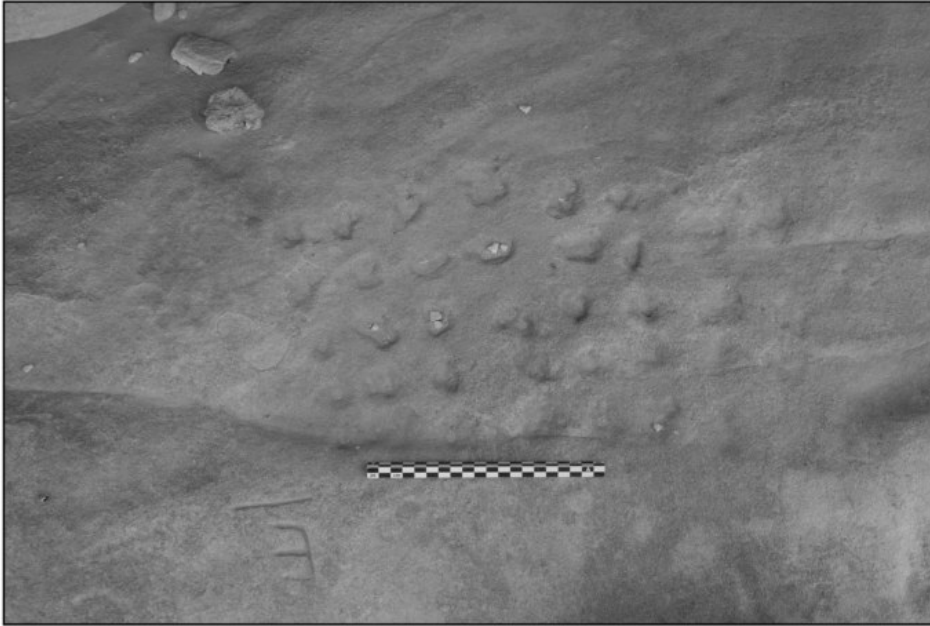
midway up the steepest part of the 150 m cliff, in a location where access is very difficult: ropes and scaffolding have to be used to reach it (Dalley and Goguel 1997: 170). The rock was engraved on a surface of six square metres: the king appears on the left-hand side, with the text being written on the right (Dalley and Goguel 1997: 174 fig. 8). Cut into a rectangular rock face, the relief shows the standing figure of a Mesopotamian king facing right, with the three divine symbols (the moon, a star and the sun) opposite him. The relief is not very well preserved, but the monarch's attire (his robe, long staff and headgear) is Neo-Babylonian, and it has been identified as a representation of King Nabonidus (Schaudig 2001: 544). There is sufficient documentary evidence of Nabonidus' activities on the Edomite plateau (Beaulieu 1989: 166; Glassner 2004: 234-245) during his Arabian campaigns to support this attribution (Beaulieu 1989: 180; Lemaire 2003: 287-288).

### Assessment of the Site: the General State of Preservation, Conservation and Restoration Work, Including Modifications and Recommendations

The site is in a relatively good state of preservation considering its size and continued exposure to environmental elements over the



19. Tribal marks.



20. Board game.



21. Relief of Nabonidus (photograph: S. Ríos).

centuries. Most of the visible structures (rooms, stairways, channels, cisterns *etc.*, and even the relief of Nabonidus, are carved into Ordovician Disi sandstone, a detrital sedimentary rock formed from the aggregation and cementation of grains of sand (quartz, feldspar, calcite *etc.*) and rock fragments. Despite its hardness, a combination of various factors has altered the sandstone, which now presents several pathologies:

1. The surfaces have eroded owing to the action of water and above all wind. The continuous impact of particulate matter has

resulted in sandification, pitting, mass loss *etc.*

2. Strong variations in hygrothermal conditions over short time periods and continued exposure to the sun has caused thermal stress, resulting in significant expansion and retraction in the sandstone, which then cracks and fractures. These variations also trigger the dissolution and precipitation of soluble salts leading to expansion and contraction, as well as to chemical changes that cause mechanical damage, such as alveolization, disintegration and flaking.

3. Biodeterioration is another important factor,

since animal excreta contribute organic matter and soluble salts which favour the development of plant species, lichens, bacteria and fungi. These species secrete organic acids that produce physical and chemical changes, dye the surfaces and create crusts, while the roots of plants and shrubs produce mechanical damage (i.e. fractures) as they expand and grow, in addition to generating acids.

In general, the degradation is due to the interaction of mechanical, chemical and anthropogenic factors - for instance, the use of the site by shepherds to shelter their livestock, or the presence of hikers, not to mention wear or damage caused at the time the structures were fully occupied. The use of perishable or reusable materials also accelerates the degradation of the living spaces carved into the rock and makes their interpretation more difficult (**Fig. 22**).

There are only a few walls that have not collapsed as a result of the original construction techniques, later dismantling of the foundations, disintegration of the mortar joints, effect of gravity, vandalism and other factors. In some instances, sections of wall have been removed by shepherds who re-used the stone blocks to build temporary enclosures.

The images decorating the walls of a house in the entrance area, and in the channel of the

*siq*, have eroded due to continued exposure to the wind and sun. Today, few pigmented areas remain. The mortars have also disintegrated, for the reasons mentioned above and due to the action of fungi and lichens. Several structures associated with the fortified cistern in the upper area were renovated, but we do not know when. Sections of the outer part of the wall were also consolidated with the insertion of ashlar, but this does not follow the original technique and thus was probably not contemporary. It did, however, prevent the wall from collapsing completely. In the same area, several ashlar have been bolstered with mortar to prevent the wall from falling (**Fig. 23**).

Despite the above analysis of the condition of the site, the structures are not in grave danger and do not require consolidation. What is necessary is the cooperation of archaeologists and conservators in the planning of future excavation seasons in order to extract key architectural elements and reinforce some of the structures. They should also work together on the assessment of the structures found with a view to their restoration and adaptation for exhibition (**Fig. 24**).

Of course, the intrinsic problems of the site require attention. The most important is the difficulty of access to the upper area, which



22. Detail of one of the houses carved into the rock, used as a shelter. Note the erosion of the sandstone, alveolization, the formation of lichen crusts, and the washing of earth and material along the slope. These constructions are difficult to interpret given the loss of the masonry walls and the absence of elements such as wood, leather, and so on (photograph: M. Corrada).



23. Overview of the wall showing the platform in which the fortified cistern was carved. Several periods of construction can be distinguished, during which different materials and techniques were used. See the modern consolidation in the centre of the image (photograph: M. Corrada).



24. Destroyed structures: steps carved into the rock leading to a set of destroyed "houses" (photograph: M. Corrada).

will cause problems for the supply of material. Similarly, the fact that many of the walls are next to steep vertical drops makes interventions of consolidation and restoration dangerous.

Given the significance of ancient Sela' it has enormous cultural and economic potential as a heritage site (in fact, it already attracts visitors) but needs a certain amount of presentation work in order to make its importance clear to tourists. The creation of a visitor route around the site would not be expensive and would add to its attractiveness.

Access to the site is straightforward (along a local road) and does not require the use of special vehicles. The Visitor Reception Centre, built in the present-day village of Sila' and which houses a Tourist Police office, should expand its activities and try to make the site accessible to all kinds of public - for instance, by creating panel displays showing objects from the site, printing maps with the route and so on. There is already a rest area, and services such as toilets, a shop and a café could easily be installed. From this starting point, visitors would be guided towards the site across the esplanade in the lower area (which could be redeveloped as a car park or as a rest area by installing benches and wooden tables). The route around the site would

be signposted and a number of observation points indicated to help visitors to identify and understand the site's key features, for example:

1. Access area: location of the site; the visitor route; the landscape.

2. Descent to the *wadi*: the relief of King Nabonidus, the principal tourist attraction, is difficult to identify without help; in this area there is a small platform where the tour guides can describe the site. From this point one can see the stairway to the top and complete the 200 m climb in about 30 minutes.

3. Top of the rock: entrance; fortified elements; water management structures (channels and cisterns); houses and huts; streets and squares; shrines; cemeteries and so on.

These aims will be modified and expanded over time as the archaeological and historical documentation recovered increases. A tour of the site would actually be enhanced by an excavation: visitors would have the opportunity to see the work underway, and this experience may give them valuable insights into the world of archaeology.

Today, numerous visitors come to the site even though no special tourism and heritage trails have been established. Enhancing the visitor experience will be key to the continued

preservation and conservation of this important site. One way to consolidate and increase tourist visits would be to incorporate the site within a network of hiking trails, as it is in an ideal location just a few kilometres from the towns of Buṣayra and Ṭafila, as well as being close to the King's Highway which traverses the country from north to south.

Strategic management of the site would boost the economy of the village and the surrounding locale, create employment for the local population, not just in research and conservation, but also in the important tasks of cleaning, maintenance and security. The creation of services for visitors (reception centre; shop and café; tour guides; accommodation and catering; crafts) would generate new jobs. Development would create infrastructure for the local population (e.g. rest areas, cafés and roads). It would also encourage members of the local community to identify with their collective past and raise awareness of the importance of preserving As Sila' and other heritage sites.

### **Conclusions**

Sila'/Sela' is a site in the Ṭafila area with an astonishingly rich archaeological heritage. In this regard, the site bears comparison with Bayda or Petra. Sila'/Sela' comprises many fascinating features, which can only be fully appreciated through further archaeological work at the site. The site's extent, the presence of many architectural structures, the surface finds (pottery, metal and lithics) and its general layout bear witness to its enormous archaeological potential. The many structures for water storage and management (cisterns, channels, reservoirs of different sizes etc.), as well as the dwellings and fortifications make Sela' a unique site for studying the economic use and social relevance of water management on the Edomite plateau during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. The site also has a carved inscription and relief of the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556 - 539 BC), which demonstrates its importance during the period of Mesopotamian expansion into the

area of Transjordan. Selá also presents a great diversity of architectural forms, with several areas or sections identified by their streets, wells, gateways, stairways, 'houses', channels and so on. The Iron Age and Nabataean / Roman periods are represented at the site, the approximate chronology of which has been estimated through preliminary study of the surface pottery. It seems that Selá was occupied in the Iron Age and Nabataean and Roman periods, i.e. from the 8<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC until the 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, although there is no conclusive evidence for continuous occupation.

This preliminary study conducted at Sela' in early April 2015 has drawn attention to the site's extraordinary scientific value as a source of evidence of past human activities in the Ṭafila area. There is little mention of Sela' in the scientific literature, but the site is likely to contain recoverable information that can only be obtained over the course of an extensive and detailed archaeological excavation. We think we have established the basis for future work at the site, which may help to answer important research questions regarding the social and economic processes at work in 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC Jordan. The topographic study and preliminary survey demonstrate the enormous potential of Silá for contributing to our understanding of the past on the Edomite plateau and for helping us to solve questions regarding settlement patterns, water management systems and economic activity. Despite its isolation, or probably because of it, Sila' can be considered a relatively well-preserved site. Its structures have a value as a group (entrance area, stairway, gate area, central area, towers etc.) and they also form an archaeological ensemble with other similar Iron Age sites on the plateau, such as Ba'ja and Umm al-Biyāra. In addition, the archaeological monuments of Sila' could be exploited for cultural and educational purposes. Thus, the combination of its history and landscape make Sela' a potential pole of attraction for sustainable tourism in Tafila and a key landmark for educational work.

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