

## Remarks on the Urbanistic Development of Petra's Center in the Nabataean and Roman Periods

Petra, the capital of the Nabataeans, and of the Roman *Arabia* and Byzantine *Palaestina Tertia*, one of the most important trade centers of the Near East has always attracted a considerable attention among scholars. For example, studies on the architecture and art of Petra are much advanced. However, the overall assessment of the urban development of Petra and its civic status is still in its infancy. The relevant historical information is, unfortunately, meager. The major reference to Petra is a brief note by Strabo who, writing at the end of the first century BC, mentioned that Petra, the metropolis of the Nabataeans was exceedingly well-governed, and frequented by the Romans and foreigners (XVI.4.21,26).

The Nabataean kingdom was annexed by Rome in AD 106, but the status of Petra as the most prominent urban center in Roman *Arabia*, if not its *de facto* capital is strongly suggested here. Honors and signs of imperial grace were frequently bestowed upon that city, antedating those given to Bostra. Petra was recognized by the honorific of "metropolis of Arabia" as early as AD 114. The city became *Hadriana* Petra in AD 131. Petra was an important administrative center where governors' assizes were held, as seen in the Nahal Hever documents. The *boule* of Petra is known as early as AD 124. The status of a Roman *colonia* had been granted to Petra by Elagabalus.<sup>1</sup> As such, the full titulature of Petra came into being as: *Augustocolonia, Antoniana, Metrocolonia, Hadriana, Petra Metropolis*.<sup>2</sup> Numerous Greek and Latin inscriptions of the second and third centuries AD, were found in the civic center, mentioning governors, military commanders and various officials.<sup>3</sup>

It is instructive to review if these historically documented developments correspond to the growth of the

city as seen in archaeological record. Early assessments of the urban history of Petra tended to assign the main urban expansion to the Roman period. Current research favors an opinion that the principal monuments of Petra, such as the Colonnaded Street, Qaşr al-Bint Temple and its Temenos Gate, the Temple of the Winged Lions, the Baths, and the Theatre had been built sometime in the later first century BC or the first century AD.<sup>4</sup> That is seemingly supported by the fact that the Roman period building inscriptions are lacking in Petra, which prompted a recent opinion that Petra in the Roman period was "...a smallish provincial town...with little development..."<sup>5</sup> In reality, it appears that these two opposing interpretive views on the urban history of Nabataean-Roman Petra should be more balanced. Certainly, a substantial urban development had already occurred in Petra before the Roman period. But the lack of the post-AD106 monumental building inscriptions is also due to the still inadequate archaeological exploration of Petra. Also, the dating of some of major monuments is neither certain in absolute chronology, nor fully supported in terms of comparative architecture.<sup>6</sup> Thus, some improvements and additions to the city plan should be associated with the Roman period. For example, results of the recent work at the Southern Temple indicate a major rebuilding at the temple site during the post-106 period.<sup>7</sup> Important contribution has recently been made by the Roman Street Project organized by the American Center of Oriental Research, funded by the USAID and supported by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.<sup>8</sup> The project was developed to enhance the touristic attraction of Petra and to address its urban history, by exposing a part of the civic center.<sup>9</sup> Five rooms located at the eastern end of the southern side of the Colonnaded Street were excavat-

<sup>1</sup> For the summary of historical information on Petra, see Fiema 1991: 85-86; 1997: 145-148.

<sup>2</sup> Koenen 1996: 187; as derived from the Petra Papyri.

<sup>3</sup> Starcky and Bennett 1968.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., McKenzie 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Millar 1993: 421.

<sup>6</sup> See a cautionary note by Parr 1996: 65, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Joukowsky 1997: 213-214.

<sup>8</sup> The author who directed that project in the field, wishes to express his thanks to Dr. Pierre Bikai, ACOR Director, for his support and assistance during this project.

<sup>9</sup> A preliminary report on this project is presented by Fiema (forthcoming). A full monograph is in preparation.



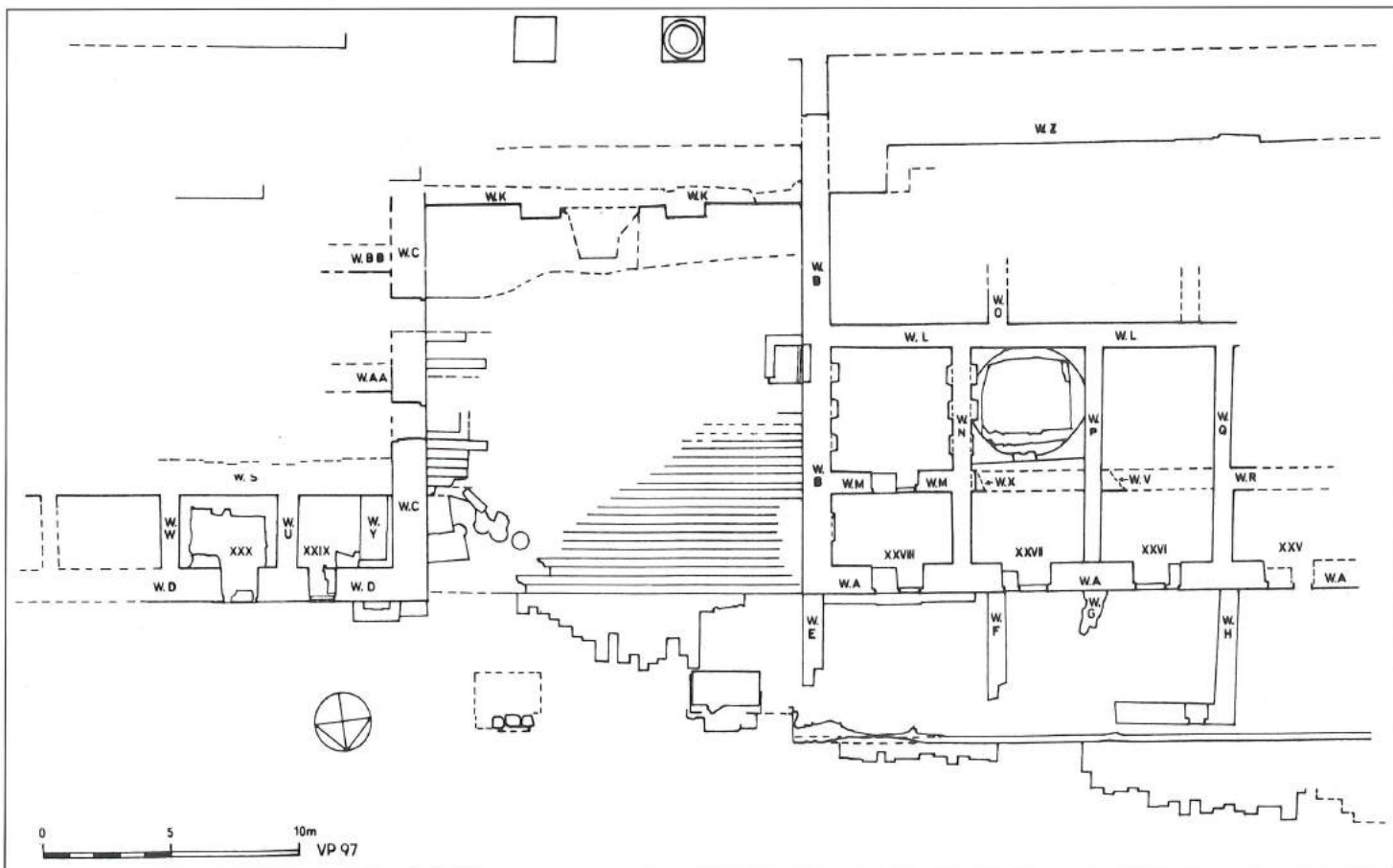
ed (FIG.1). Judging from their location, all rooms were commercial establishments, such as shops or taverns.

The main feature at the site is the stairway leading up to the Upper Market - a large artificial plateau held in place by series of retaining walls. The main substructure of the stairway consists of several large "steps," each at least 1 m wide, superimposed in turn by the series of small stone steps which are the bedding for the flagstone steps. East of the stairway is the area characterized by the series of parallel E-W walls which form two long and narrow spaces or galleries on the increasingly higher ground, which do not seem to feature any partitioning walls. The two gradually superimposed spaces were probably porticoes opened to the north. The impression of the entire area is that of a huge façade-in depth, as in an elaborate, theatrical backstage building, which provided an aesthetically acceptable frame for the monumental stairway.

Three rooms (XXVIII-XXVI) to the west of the stairway are roughly of the same size and appearance. Only Room XXVIII features some unique details. Two niches flank its door in the façade wall. This room, in opposition to the other, consists of two spaces separated by a wall. The upper floor was supported by the three arches in the back room and one in the front space. Currently, Rooms XXVII and XXVI are large, rectangular entities, each

spanned by five arches, but the soundings revealed the existence of early walls in location similar to the partitioning wall extant in Shop XXVIII. A puzzling masonry-built structure occupies the southern half of Shop XXVII. It is an almost square tank or basin with curved internal sides and rounded corners further enhanced by the corner triangles built atop the frame. Ashlars deposited inside in tight but unpatterned layers were sealed by a roughly flat stone surface. The installation is probably composite in both the components and the date. Its function, whether a pottery kiln, wine/oil press, and other installation, remains elusive. Shops XXIX-XXX are located east of the stairway. The main feature there are the benches set against the walls. In total, 138 coins were found in Room XXIX and 48 in Room XXX, mostly on the benches and some on the floor.

While the impact of earthquakes, well evidenced in the archaeology of Petra is also a factor at this site, the occurrence of flooding, due to its proximity to Wādī Mūsā-Wādī al-Maṭāḥa confluence in the area of the Nymphaeum, is equally significant. The floodings must have been responsible for the disappearance of the pavement in front of some shops, and for the damage inflicted upon the space in front of the stairway. Heavy alluvial deposits were encountered in most of the soundings. The Wādī



1. Plan of the Roman Street excavation.



Mūsā natural drain depression which runs E-W, was originally much wider, and the continuous flooding of the area eroded the lower parts of the sandstone formations while depositing the riverine material against the southern side of the wadi. As such, the width of Wādī Mūsā depression would gradually decrease throughout the ages, while the width of its southern bank would increase.

The urban beginnings at the site are shrouded in obscurity. Pottery recovered through the soundings is nowhere earlier than the beginning of the first century BC. Certain architectural remains are suspected to have belonged to an earliest and poorly known phase of the development, which should have taken place at the southern part of the site. The first recognizable phase at the site appears to have featured the three almost square rooms which would correspond to the backspace of Room XXVIII and the southern parts of Rooms XXVII-XXVI. The extant Walls B, L, Q and M and the subsequently demolished Walls X and V would have been the external limits of these rooms. What was in the front of so-defined rooms is unknown, but an early portico is an attractive hypothesis. Cobble-paved or beaten-earth tracks, being the predecessors of the extant paved street, would have stretched farther north. According to the relevant ceramic deposits, this phase should date to the Nabataean period, sometime in the first half of the first century AD.

The following phase witnessed a grand expansion at the site. The stairway was constructed, and the monumental arch built in front of it, which held a Trajanic inscription dated to AD 114.<sup>10</sup> Presumably, the requirements of the size and the gradient of the planned stairway deemed it necessary to add northern extensions to the original spaces of Shops XXVIII-XXVI. Newly constructed Wall A served as a façade wall. While the original façade walls were retained in Shops XXVIII and XXV, these were completely demolished in Shops XXVII-XXVI. The evidence for this postulated expansion includes the different appearance of the northern parts of Walls B, N, P, and Q, the variations in the arrangement and dimensions of arches in the northern vs. the southern parts of the rooms, and the details which emerged from the soundings. Also Rooms XXX-XXIX, if existed before, were now substantially remodelled. It then appears that the stairway is contemporary with the stylobate and the colonnade, the remodelled shops, and with the extant pavement of the Colonnaded Street. In fact, this new design would make perfect sense in connection with the arch in the front of the stairway. The ceramics crucial for dat-

ing these elements, uniformly indicate the later first century AD - beginning of the second century AD for this development. The coin of Rabbel II found in the bedding for the street's flagstone pavement, which sealed the stylobate's foundation trench, also conforms to this chronological reconstruction. Admittedly, this development could be dated to the last decades of the Nabataean kingdom, or could have begun then. However, it seems more reasonable to date the entire design to the Trajanic, or generally the post-annexation period. A destruction noted in some parts of Petra might have partially influenced this development. The Nabataean quarter at az-Zanṭūr ridge was destroyed by fire in the early second century AD.<sup>11</sup> At about the same time, the Temple of Winged Lions is reported to have suffered damage.<sup>12</sup> Whether these destructions were due to natural or human factors is uncertain,<sup>13</sup> but their occurrence could have provided an occasion to restore and expand the city. The major, if not the capital city of the newly organized province would have experienced a building construction prosperity and displayed a tendency for further embellishment.<sup>14</sup> Conspicuous grandeur and opulence of architectural designs is also noted for the second century contexts in other cities in the Near East.

During the following centuries of the Roman period, repairs and remodellings could have taken place in the excavated complex. The enigmatic installation in Room XXVII could have been constructed then, although it was probably modified later. The common ceramic types found at the site included storage jars, amphorae, and unused cooking pots - a repertoire characteristic for Rooms XXVIII-XXVI, supporting their commercial function. The abundance of coins found in Rooms XXIX-XXX is probably related to the specific mercantile operations conducted there. The overwhelming majority of the coins found there is dated to the fourth century AD, with some fifth century types. The dating brackets of numerous coins end just before AD 363, which may or may not be accidental. However, until the ceramic material is fully understood in terms of stratigraphic sequence and relationships, the impact of the 363 earthquake on this area cannot be fully ascertained or defined. Historical sources clearly indicate that the city was affected, and the corresponding archaeological data from other sites in Petra fully corroborate this fact.<sup>15</sup> The damage in the shops area could have included shifted walls, collapsed arches and columns, and damaged pavement. Yet, at least some of the damage must have been repaired afterward, as the fi-

<sup>10</sup> For the description and commentary, see Bowersock 1983: 84-85, note 28.

<sup>11</sup> Stucky 1996: 14, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond 1986: 29.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed presentation of data and their interpretation, see Schmid 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Fiema 1997: 147.

<sup>15</sup> For the full presentation of historical and archaeological data, see Russell 1980. The destruction of Late Roman dwelling complex at az-Zanṭūr is discussed by Kolb 1996: 51, 89. The post-earthquake perspective is presented by Parr 1986.



nal collapse of the arches inside the shops had occurred later.

The post AD 363 period apparently witnessed partial blockings of the doors in the complex, and the construction of the secondary walls on the sidewalk, forming what was termed as the Byzantine shops.<sup>16</sup> Two crosses incised on the front wall, and one on the partitioning wall in Room XXVIII were perhaps meant to "christianize" the previous non-Christian character of the edifice, or might have marked the church ownership of that room. However, Late Byzantine coins are not present at the site, with a single exception of an issue of Justinian I. The gradual abandonment of the shops probably progressed in a linear pattern from the east to the west. The earliest abandonment is attested for Rooms XXIX-XXX, sometime in the fifth century. The latest ceramics, dated to the sixth/seventh century AD, were found on the floor of Room XXVI - the westernmost excavated shop. The last to be utilized were most certainly the front spaces of the rooms, and the occupation could have continued there despite a depressing appearance of the half ruined or half-abandoned spaces.

Significantly, the results of the Roman Street Project largely correspond to those achieved through the British-Jordanian excavations at the street area, conducted in the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> It is hoped that all these will allow for more substantive statements concerning the urban development of the Petra's center.

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<sup>16</sup> These were excavated during the clearance of the street area, conducted by the British-Jordanian mission in the later 1950s (Kirk-

bride 1960: 117-119, Plate VII.1; Parr 1970: 351)

<sup>17</sup> Lanckester Harding 1958: 13; Parr 1960, 1970.