

A PRELIMINARY NOTE ON THE WĀDĪ MŪSĀ SALVAGE EXCAVATION 1996

by

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The opening in February 1996 of a side street through the triangle formed by the main roads in the centre of Wādī Mūsā next to the Arab Bank building revealed the existence of ancient structures in the area. This new street leads to Al-'Anbāt II Hotel that was then still under construction. The pit for the septic tank of the hotel also revealed the corner of a Nabataean water cistern. Excavations were conducted by the Department of Antiquities from 25 February to 12 June 1996 in two areas: Area I included the cistern and area to the south; Area II at the road cut was 31m to the north of Area I. The team consisted of Khairieh 'Amr, director; Sami Al-Nawafleh and Hani Qrarhi, excavators; Luay Mohamadieh, draughts-person and surveyor; Tawfiq Hunaiti, conservator assisted by Qais Tiwaisi and Bilal Al-Salamin, with logistic support from the Petra Antiquities office. Conservation of metal artifacts was done by Ibrahim Haj Hasan and Adel Tushan, and photographic processing was done by Salem Da'ja and Osama Jaber.

Area I

The outstanding feature in Area I is the Nabataean cistern, with internal dimensions of 5.40m N-S x 2.68m E-W. The top of the cistern could not be cleared as it is currently under another side street. Therefore it was decided not to remove the fill of the cistern as this would further undermine the street, and due to the short period given for the investigations (a month at the outset), it was thought that time should be invested in areas that will produce more important information. The fill inside the cistern did not totally go all the way to the top, and we could see four intact arches supporting the roof slabs, most of which were intact. Three steps of a staircase that would have gone all the way down to the bottom of the cistern were cleared at the north-west corner. The fill inside the cistern contained Ayyubid/Mamluk sherds, while a sounding next to the northern wall of the cistern recovered pottery dating no later than to the turn of the first century BC/AD. It seems the area was cleared during the Ayyubid/Mamluk period



1. Area I, Trench 2 showing complexes of walls from various periods built on top of each other.

and a substantial wall was built on the northern wall of the cistern. The Municipality of Wādī Mūsā was contacted and asked to block the side street above the cistern due to the danger that the partially filled cistern underneath may impose on vehicles and people.

Excavation to the south of the cistern, across the side street, was only possible in a 3 x 7m trench due to the presence of a traditional modern building to the east, a private house to the south, while the west was already destroyed for a terrace. Excavation went down 5.40m without reaching virgin soil, but showed complexes of walls from several periods (Fig.1). The earliest excavated deposits dated to the turn of the first century BC/AD and the area was in continual use up to the Late Byzantine then re-occupied in the Ayyubid/Mamluk and Ottoman periods. Unfortunately we could not determine the nature of any of the buildings due to the small area available for excavation.

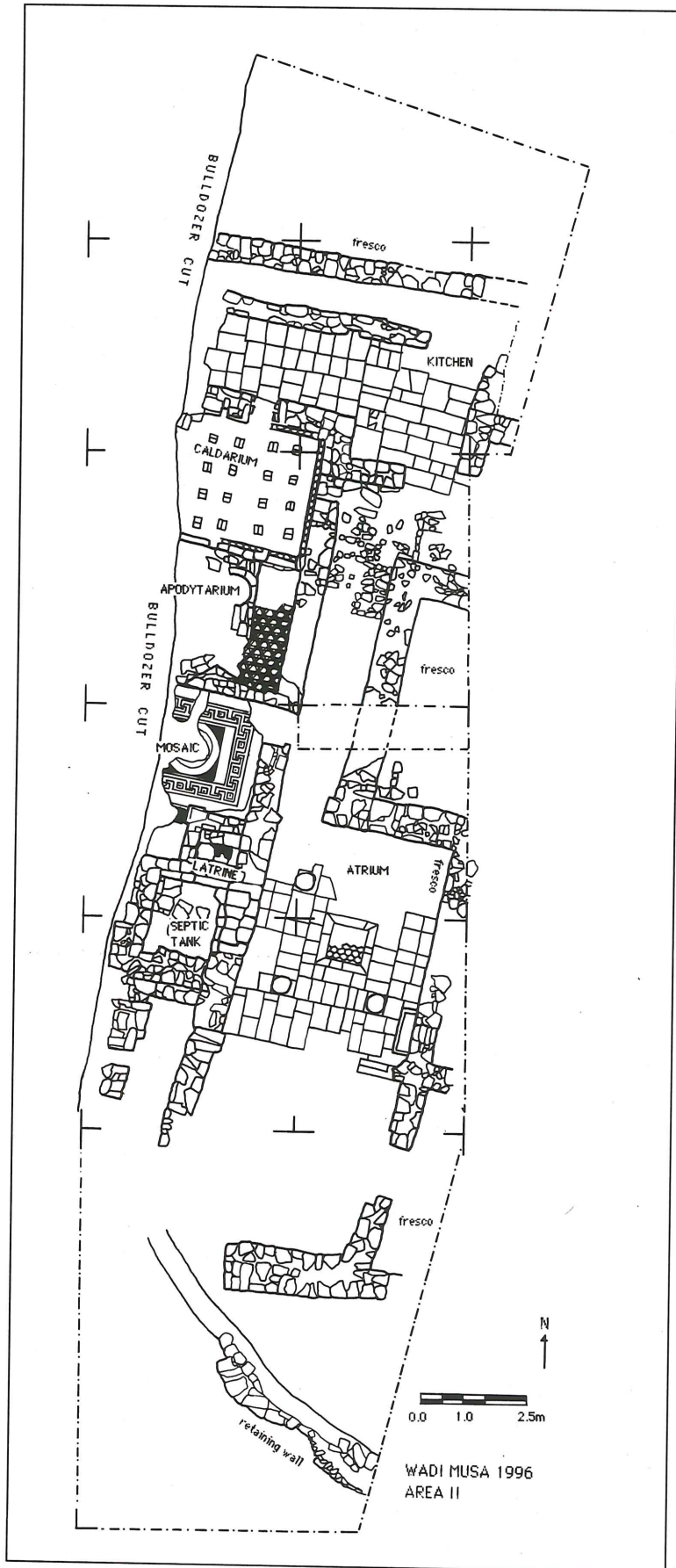
Area I was backfilled and another sanitation tank was archaeologically excavated for the hotel, leaving the cistern and structures to the south intact.

Area II

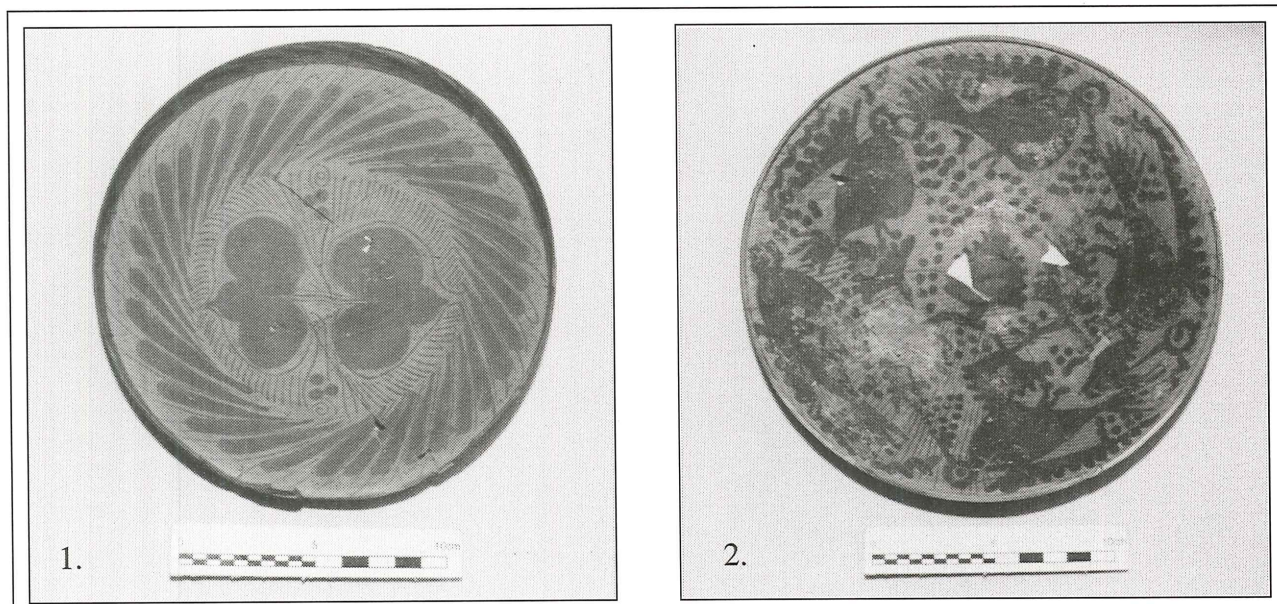
The area to the north of the cistern was occupied by a large villa, only the southern edge of which could be defined as the north and east lie under modern buildings, while the west was destroyed by the street, leaving an intact expanse of 30m N-S x 8m E-W (Fig. 2). The stratigraphy of the area is very basic, with an approximately 2m deep destruction level of building blocks and yellow clay matrix directly above the floors, topped by around 1.3m of loose ash and small stones rich in archaeological finds especially lamps and unguentaria, while the uppermost 1m was modern dump from the foundations of the surrounding buildings, also containing archaeological material. Below the floor levels, pottery of the later first century BC was recovered, while above the

floors, coins and pottery of the early and late first century AD, including several complete vessels (Fig. 3), were recovered. The partial destruction of several floors and the complete absence of any furnishings other than pottery indicate that the final destruction of the villa was some time after its abandonment. The conclusions are that the villa was built in the early first century AD, renovated around the middle of the first century, abandoned in the late first/early second century AD, then it was destroyed. A retaining wall was later built south of the villa and its area used as municipal dump in the late third/early fourth century AD.

As for the plan of the villa (cf Fig. 2), the entrance in the south leads into a large hall (*atrium*) with a flagstone pavement having a central square of hexagonal pavers surrounded by columns. Architectural-style frescos in bright colors of crimson red, golden yellow, olive green, greyish blue as well as black and white decorated the east wall, where an entrance led to another frescoed room, now left intact under a traditional house. An entrance to the north led into another frescoed room (with lively designs of green grasses, bunches of grapes and olive branches). To the west of the hall, there was a latrine and corridor, in which was found decorated blocks including a relief of Helios-Apollo. A corridor leading north from the hall opened onto a room to the west, with a mosaic floor of geometric designs in white, black, yellow and red (Fig. 4), then onto a bath complex. Adjacent to the mosaic room was a room having a *tersia di marma* floor (the *apodytarium*?) leading onto the *caldarium* (Fig. 5). Unfortunately, the furnace was destroyed by the new street. North of the *caldarium*, a large room with flagstone paving had a *ṭabūn* oven, and a complex drainage system under the pavement connecting to the *caldarium* and areas to the north and east. Fine Nabataean bowls were found on this pavement, as well as a limestone "lion head fountain"



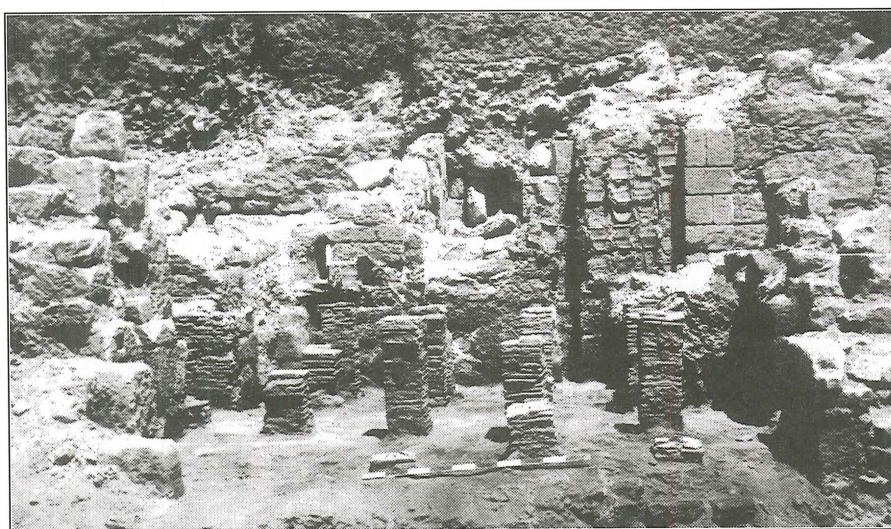
2. Plan of the Nabataean villa (drawing: L. Mohamadieh).



3. Painted Nabataean bowls: 1. from inside the *caldarium*; 2. from the latrine room. This bowl is unique in that birds eating bunches of grapes are represented on a hatched background, a feature typical of the late first/early second century AD. The form and ware of the bowl are also typical of the same period.



4. Late first century AD mosaic in the Nabataean villa.



5. The *caldarium* of the bath complex in the Nabataean villa.

(Fig. 6). A corridor north of this room had several cooking pots smashed *in situ*. A large hall occupied the northern exposed end. Its southern wall, exposed to a length of 7.50m E-W, had remains of frescos on its



6. Lion head fountain found adjacent to the bath complex in the Nabataean villa (Photo: S. Lapedjian).

northern face. The designs in the east were similar to those in the southern hall, while the west edge had designs of free flowing strokes within a red border. The hall extended for 4.30m N-S before disappearing under the modern building housing the Arab Bank.

Unfortunately, the excavated part of the villa was demolished in July 1996. The Department of Antiquities built a retaining wall to preserve what may be left of the building to the east.

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