

PETRA CHURCH PROJECT, PETRA PAPYRI

by

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The publication of the Byzantine documents found in 1993 in the church at Petra is being undertaken jointly by the University of Helsinki and University of Michigan, under the leadership of Jaakko Frösén and Ludwig Koenen respectively. The following information has been provided by them, by Clement A. Kuehn, and by Zbigniew T. Fiehma, historical consultant to the project.

Between September 1994 and May 1995, the conservation work on the carbonized Petra papyrus rolls was carried out by the Finnish conservation team in the ACOR lab. In most cases, the outer layers of the rolls were destroyed, but the internal parts, often containing the beginning of the roll were better preserved. From the 152 rolls that have been opened, about 23 rolls will yield partially continuous text segments and about another 20 rolls will provide us with fragments of substantial information.

With the conservation phase completed, the publication phase began and work was conducted by the University of Michigan team in the summer of 1995. In the fall of 1995, the Finnish team began their work on the scrolls in Finland and arrived in Jordan to work with the original documents at the beginning of 1996. In all 22 persons from the two groups worked on the transcription and interpretation of the scrolls. It will be recalled that all parties involved had signed an access/publication agreement and the final division of the scrolls for publication purposes between the two groups was agreed to in late 1995.

All 152 rolls, some written on both sides, contain documentary texts written mainly in Greek. There are two lines of text in Latin in one of the scrolls and Latin 'loan-words' are used more often and differently in the Near

East than in Egypt. The papyri are economic documents dealing with possessions, dispositions and acquisitions of real estate and other types of property. There are sworn and unsworn contracts, agreements and settlements of disputes concerning loans, sales, divisions of property, cessions, registrations, marriages and inheritance. The various handwritings used by the scribes are almost identical with those found in Egypt, but the phraseology of the documents is somewhat different.

The texts cover a period of some 50 years between AD 528 and 578 (or perhaps AD 582), that is, during the reign of the Emperor Justinian and his successors. Many of the documents refer to Petra as Augustocolonia Antoniana Hadriana Metropolis of the Province Palaestina Tertia Salutaris. Names of other settlements, such as Augustopolis (identified with Udhruh), Eleutheropolis (Beit Jibrin), Zadakathon (Sadaqa) are mentioned, together with numerous places around Petra. Churches and other buildings are also mentioned, that is, the Chapel of the Saint and Glorious Martyr Kyrikos in Zadakathon, the Church of the Saint and Glorious Martyr Theodoros in Augustopolis, the Church of our All-Holy Mistress the Glorious God-bearing (n.b.) Ever Virgin Mary in Petra, the Hostel or Hospital of the Saint and Gloriously Triumphant Martyr Kyrikos in Petra, and the Church of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron. The latter may refer to the extant remains at Jabal Hārūn near Petra, where, according to tradition, Moses' brother was buried.

Among the key figures in the texts are men of administrative ranks: ecclesiastic, civilian, and military, who bear typical Byzantine honorific titles. Almost every man

bears the status name of the upper class, Flavius, and once, we find also a woman named Kyra signing a marriage contract in her own hand. Some slaves have been identified, not only as property, but also as farmers.

Although their identity cannot be always certain, seemingly the same persons appear over and over again in the texts. One of the main figures is one Theodoros, son of Obodianos, grandson of Obodianos who became an archdeacon of the "most holy church of ... in the metropolis." He also was a landowner and participated in extensive business transactions. Another important figure is one Bassus who, at first, seems unrelated to Theodoros and his clan, but he has a son named Patrophilos who had a daughter called Stephanous. One text (Inv. 68 , Papyrus Petra Thomas and Francesca Bennett), dated to May 23, AD 537, involves a marriage which joins the two families: Stephanous has recently married Theodoros who seems to be a minor (under the age of 25) and is represented by a curator. The subject of this settlement is, first, the inheritance of the dowry of a deceased mother; the dowry includes immovable property, such as a house or land. Because of damage to the text, it cannot yet be determined whose mother—that of Theodoros or that of Stephanous—originally owned the dowry. If it was the mother of the bride, then it seems that the father of the bride used the maternal dowry as a dowry once again when his daughter got married. The document also directs who inherits the dowry if this or that person dies. The scroll then progresses into a second subject, Patrophilos's will. It specifies that if he dies, his daughter Stephanous inherits all of his property. The combination of these two subjects makes the document unique among papyri found in the Middle East and Egypt.

Another roll (Inv.10, Papyrus Petra Khaled and Suha Shoman) reports a division of property among three brothers, Bassus, Epiphanius, and Sabinus, grandsons of the Bassus mentioned above. The same types of

property are always listed in the same order: vineyards, sown land, slaves, housing complexes with orchards. In the extant parts of the roll, the brothers divide 85 iugera among themselves; taking the lost third of the papyrus into account, this should mean a minimum of 127 iugera or 85 acres. As in Egypt, each field is described by its neighboring fields. The fields that border the fields subject to the division are usually owned by one or two of the brothers or by other relatives. Altogether, the members of the family owned about 75 neighboring fields, each being the size of at least one iugerum, that is, an absolute minimum of 202 iugera, or about 134 acres owned by this family, possibly in addition to other lands not mentioned here. The nature of the archive therefore presents a somewhat one-sided picture, the group of rich landlords: their fields, houses, and slaves, with only passing mention of animals and husbandry. Further research will probably show that all or most of the primary actors of this archive are related to Theodoros, and that this is a family archive whose last owner was Theodoros the archdeacon. Presumably, upon his death, the archive was left in the storage room of the church in which he and his father had served.

It is noteworthy that in roll Inv. 10, as well in some other rolls, districts, fields, orchards, houses, and even parts of houses have Greek transcriptions of Semitic, mostly Arabic or Aramaic, names. For example, one of the papyri refers to a dry-orchard called gannath al-salam, most likely translated as "Garden of Peace." Significantly, these people, while using Greek in their documents, named their houses and fields in their own tongue. This fact also points to the people's self-identification, far beyond the parameters of the written language.

One of the texts (Inv. 83, Papyrus Petra H.M. King Hussein and H.M. Queen Noor) concerns, among other things, a question about rights to the water from a spring at Za-

dakathon. That document also contains the historically known name of Abū Karib ibn Jabala (Abū Kherebos). The historian Procopius says that Abū Karib, the Ghassanid, ceded some tribal areas (probably in northern Ḥijāz) to the Emperor Justinian and was appointed by him as a phylarch (ruler) of the local Arab foederati in 528/29. The date is fragmentary in inv. 83, but sufficiently preserved to indicate that the document was written after Justinian's Novella 47 (AD 537) which ordered the mention of the emperor's regnal year at the beginning of dating formulae.

Previous understanding of the history of Byzantine Petra has been based on scattered pieces of information, and on a series of arguments *ex silentio*. Undoubtedly, both the ACOR excavations of the Petra Church, and the scrolls will make it necessary to reassess the history of Petra and southern Jordan. In the texts, the previously postulated economic decline cannot be traced, and there is no

evidence for the earthquake of 9 July 551 which is often thought to have caused the final demise of the city. Instead, the texts reveal the active and rich social and economic life of the city and its agricultural hinterland. As opposed to earlier times when Petra's wealth was generated by long-distance Oriental trade, the archives indicate that land-ownership was the backbone of Byzantine Petra's society. Significantly, the dating formulae in some dated Petra texts strongly imply that imperial orders reached the everyday praxis in the Near East more quickly than they reached Egypt. This confirms the continuing status of Petra as an important regional administrative center of the Byzantine empire in the sixth century AD.

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