

Mahmood Mohammed Salim Alfaqeer
Academic Tourist Guide, Petra
albtrawe75@gmail.com

Karl Schmitt-Korte
Independent Scholar, Frankfurt
schmitt-korte@gmx.de

**Mahmood Mohammed Salim
Alfaqeer and Karl Schmitt-Korte**

The New Dushara Sanctuary at Al Maḥāfir in Petra

Abstract

The present article describes a newly discovered Nabataean sanctuary at Al Maḥāfir in Petra (northern part of Jabal An Nijr). It is the first time that an eye-idol has been found together with an inscription of Dushara, the supreme god of the Nabataeans. In addition to this report an interpretation is offered about the relationship of this Sanctuary to the Great High Place (Al Madhbaḥ) on Jabal At Ṭaff. In this study, M. Alfaqeer is responsible for the discovery of the sanctuary and the reading of the inscription, whereas K. Schmitt-Korte discusses the possible relationship between both sanctuaries.

Location

The most outstanding features of Petra are no doubt the famous rock tombs. Another much less spectacular group of monuments are the sanctuaries that were chiseled into the rocks at var-

ious places in and around Petra. They have been extensively described by G. Dalman (1908 and 1912). Some years later G. L. Robinson counted 11 high places (Robinson 1930). A few more monuments have been found since and they are likely not the last.

The new sanctuary consists of an unfinished altar, an eye-idol with an inscription, and a fairly small platform with a number of symbols (petroglyphs). The location of the new sanctuary is not easy to describe. In the south of Petra there are two mountains in the region between Al KHaznah and the theater. To the west, it is Jabal At Ṭaff with the famous Great High Place (Al Madhbaḥ); to the east, Jabal An Nijr with the Dushara Sanctuary. Both mountains are separated by the steep valley Wādī Al Maḥāfir.

From a starting point near the theater the steps go up towards the obelisks and Al Madhbaḥ. At the top of these steps,

near a Bedouin coffee shop, the road makes a sharp turn right, leading up to the obelisks. If, instead, one continues a little straight ahead, one must climb on the rocks to the left, pass by an ancient pool, and arrive at a small platform. From there one must go around a small rock and continue northwards until one comes to a second small platform. This is just above the Dushara Sanctuary where some rudimentary steps now lead down to the platform and the altar. The region around the sanctuary is called Al Maḥāfir, which is located to the north of the ancient quarries of Jabal An Nijr.

From the sanctuary one can look upwards to the edge of the Great High Place at a distance of about 300–500 m (estimate). When looking down into the valley of Petra one sees the Tomb of Unayshu straight ahead and the theater a little to the left. Even this description does not guarantee being able to find the sanctuary's precise situation. The best method to locate the site precisely would be to mark it on a stereoscopic map of Petra or by GPS coordinates (FIG. 1).

A second altar was started nearby some 50–80 m farther to the east of the Dushara place. It is also unfinished; only some vertical surfaces are hewn out and smoothed. This altar has a height of 5–6 m. One face of the rock shows a simple cross incised (*ca.* 20 cm), at a height of about 2.50 m, which may be a Byzantine addition intended to “Christianize” this otherwise insignificant site.

The view from the Dushara Sanctuary over to the Great High Place and farther beyond to Jabal Hārūn in the far distance forms a straight line, indicating that there seems to be some form of connection. Also, the sacrificial offering altar at Al Madhbaḥ, meant for the sacrifice of animals (sheep, goat), is oriented east towards Jabal Hārūn. It is astonishing that the highest elevation in the region of

Petra, the top of Jabal Hārūn, does have evidence from the Byzantine and Islamic periods but apparently no Nabataean forerunner. It is hardly conceivable that the Nabataeans ignored this prominent location. On the other hand, there are neither inscriptions nor petroglyphs nor niches that one would normally expect around a possible Nabataean site. In view of this, we wonder whether Jabal Hārūn may have been the Holy Mountain of the Nabataeans that no ordinary mortal was allowed to visit; sacrosanct and forbidden for the Arabs, similar to Mount Sinai for the Jews. Some journalists have even queried whether Jabal Hārūn at Petra might be the “true” Mont Sinai, but this is nonsense. The excavations of the team from Finland have exposed extensive Byzantine remains, but no Nabataean evidence. The whole question of Jabal Hārūn may well deserve further attention.

Discovery

No doubt the site is difficult to find, which accounts for the fact that it has not been recorded before. The sanctuary was discovered by the first-mentioned author several years ago. He described his find to the second author during a conversation in Petra and produced a complete copy of the inscription. Being a Bedouin from Petra with a BA degree in archaeology from Mutah University, he provided the correct decipherment of the Dushara text, including the irregularities in the writing. He then proposed to conduct the second author to the site, where the reading could be verified and appropriate photographs were taken. It was subsequently agreed to study the new discovery together and to present it jointly to an archaeological audience whenever the possibility would present itself. This took several years of mutual patience. Both authors were grateful for

the opportunity to record the new site on the occasion of the ICHAJ 15 Conference in Irbid in July 2022.

The Altar

The top of the projecting rock is partly chiseled away. The entire surface was left uneven, not smoothed in the usual Nabataean manner. Vertical grooves on the top of the block show that it was intended to be worked down further. The whole structure conveys the appearance of a large but unfinished altar block with a height of 6–7 m (FIGS. 2 and 3). When we were visiting the sanctuary, located within viewing distance of Al Madhbah, the thought passed through our minds whether the Dushara altar may have been prepared in competition to the High Place on Jabal At Taff, but we had no way to judge this thought in an objective manner.

The Inscription and Eye-Idol

The inscription is incised in the northern face of the rock. The Nabataean letters are hammered (pecked) crudely into the block, looking down towards the valley of Petra. The eastern and the western faces remained empty. To the left of the inscription is a typically Nabataean eye-idol, obviously chiseled by the same hand and in the same technique. It measures *ca.* 20x40cm (FIGS. 4 and 5):

D-V-S-R-A A-L-H Q-V-M-N-A
Dushara ilah qaumana
 Dushara, the god of our nation

The whole inscription including the eye-idol measures 1.80 m in length. The letters are highly irregular in shape, the “shin” having a height of 32cm. The name “Dushara” is well written, the shape of the letters agreeing with the classical script. Several letters are joined

at the bottom by a curved line. The letter “he” (fin.) has the typical shape of a bag, showing that it terminates the word “ilah”. The word “qaumana” was particularly difficult to read, but it is beyond any doubt. The “alif” at the end has been given a lower “tail”, evoking the shape of an arrow pointing to the eye-idol. For sure, this was quite intentional to demonstrate that the inscription and the idol are one. The inscription was worked using a metal tool and, overall, gives the impression of having been done in haste.

“Dushara,” the national god of the Nabataeans and the chief god of their pantheon, is widely attested in epigraphy (Cantineau 1930/1932: 80). The name signifies “He of Shera,” meaning “The One (or the Lord) of the Ash SHarāh Mountains,” *i.e.*, the once wooded mountain ridge towering over the region of Petra. This is the Mount Seir of the Old Testament, the country of the Horites and the Edomites (*e.g.*, Gen. 32:4 and Deut. 2:4).

The Nabataean word “ilah” for God (A-L-H / alif-lam-ha) is related to the Arabic “Allah” (A-L-L-H / alif-lam-lam-ha) and the Hebrew “El” (A-L / aleph-lamed) or “Elohim” (A-L-H-Y-M, / aleph-lamed-he-yod-mem). It is basic and does not require further explanation. The most interesting word in this inscription, no doubt, is “*qaum*” (qaf-waw-mim) in Nabataean and Arabic respectively, and “*qum*” (koph-waw-mem) in Hebrew. Hitherto this word is only known in composite form or in personal names, especially theophoric ones. The following list is a choice of some typical examples. To keep the presentation of the various words simple, we are giving the texts in Latin transcription and in English translation, avoiding the need to print them with Nabataean, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, or Latin characters:

Shay al-Qaum: “The god who does not drink wine”

Qaumu: Perhaps an abbreviation of the former or an independent personal name

Abu Qaumu: Father of Qaum

Ibn Qaumu: Son of Qaum

Abd-Qaumu: Servant of Qaum (Cantineau 1930/1932: 141)

The root “*qum*” (Q-U-M / koph-vav-mem in Hebrew) or “*qaum*” (Q-W-M / qof-wa-mim) is common to Hebrew-Aramaic as well as to Arabic. It has two meanings. The most basic is “upright, to stand upright, to be straight,” with a number of associated words. The second meaning refers to tribal or ethnical terms such as “clan, tribe, people, nation.” It is obvious that both meanings are interrelated; people who are standing upright or standing in for someone form a group, family, or folk.

The god Dushara is found with a group of epithets. Some examples are (Cantineau, 1930/1932: 80):

Dushara ilah qaumana: Dushara, the god of our nation

Dushara ilah marana: Dushara, the god of our lord (the king)

Dushara ilah rabel: Dushara, the god of (our king) Rabel

Dushara ilah manbatu: Dushara, the god of Manbatu (a name?)

Dushara ilah madrasa: Dushara, the god of al-Madras (in Petra)

Dushara ilah gaia: Dushara, the god of Gaia (el-Dji, *i.e.*, Wādī Mūsā)

Dushara ilah gaia dy be-dumat: Dushara, the god of Gaia who is in Dumat

Dushara a'ara: Dushara A'ara (a country, landscape?)

Dushara a'ara ilah marana dy be-bozra: Dushara A'ara, the god of our lord in Bostra

On some Roman provincial city coins of Arabia of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD we find explicit references to Dushara in Greek (“Dousares”) (Spjiekerman 1978):

Dousares theos Adraenon: Dusares, god of Adraa

Dousares theos Bostron: Dusares, god of Bostra

Dousares Medabon: Dusares, (god of) Medaba

Aktia Dousaria: The festival of Dusares (in Bostra)

All these expressions show Dusares (Dushara) as the god of some ethnic group or of a geographical location.

Other Dushara Inscriptions

The chief Nabataean god Dushara is mentioned in several Nabataean as well as some Greek inscriptions of which the following is a selection:

“This is the tomb which Kahlan the physician, son of Walan, made for himself and his descendants for ever. This tomb is inviolable...and consecrated to Dushara...It is compulsory for everyone...not to sell this tomb or give it in pledge or lease it or lend it or write any document about it, for ever. And anyone who does differently...will be liable to Dushara in the sum of three thousand Sela Aretas and to our lord King Aretas for the same amount. And may Dushara and Manutu curse anyone who alters anything of what is above... In the month of Iyar, year thirty five of Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, lover of his people ...” (Hegra, abbreviated text, AD 26) (Healey 1993: 166).

“This is the tomb and (all the places here) are sacred and dedicated to Dushara, the god of our lord (the king) and his sacred throne and all the gods. It is the responsibility of Dushara...that it should be done as (is written) in the documents of consecration...and no one shall be buried in this tomb without authorisation...for ever” (Petra, Wadi Turkmaniye, abbreviated text, undated) (Healey 1993: 238).

“Shullay, brother of the king, son of Taymu,...for the life of Obodas, the king, in the month of Te(bet, year...)” [Nabataean]
 “Syllaios adelphos basileos anetheken dii Doy(sarei...)” [Greek]

“Syllaios, brother of the king erected (this) for Dios (Zeus) Dou(sares)” (Cantineau 1930/1932: 46) (This famous inscription was written by Syl-laeus, the prime minister of King Obodas II on his voyage to Rome for visiting Emperor Augustus in 9 BC. Bilingual, Miletus, Asia Minor.)

In Puteoli, the ancient harbor of Naples, several parts of a stone altar were found with the inscription DV-SARI SACRVM, which demonstrates that the Nabataeans did have a Dushara temple even in Italy, certainly an exceptionally interesting witness for the chief of the Nabataean pantheon (Hackl *et al.* 2003: 119–122). A more detailed excursus on Dousares and the altars at Puteoli (Pozzuoli) has been given as part of a study of Oriental divinities in Italy (Tran Tam Tinh 1972).

Nabataean Eye-idols (Baetyls)

Amongst the rather numerous expressions of their religiosity (temples, niches, idols, nefesh, baetyls) the eye-idols have been called “the most original expression of Nabataean creativity.” They are rectangular frames bearing a schematic frontal view with eyes and nose only or, alternatively, with eyes and mouth only, but not the complete physiognomy. These are the silent faces of the Nabataean gods. The eye-idols can be divided into two groups, stationary ones (chiseled into the solid rock) and portable ones (sculptures carved from a piece of stone). Such idols are found in places like Petra, Iram (Wādī Ramm), and Hegra. Several of these idols have been interpreted by F. Zayadine (1989) and J. Patrich (1990). The numerous baetyls, sanctuaries, and other religious items will be covered in the comprehensive corpus of Nabataean sculptures by R. Wenning (forthcoming).

The new Dushara idol of the sanctuary at Al Maḥāfir fits exactly into this group, but in comparison with the others it is more crude, the eyes being placed directly onto the margin of the frame. Whereas the other idols are identified by their inscription as the goddesses al-Uzza, al-Kutba, Atargatis, and others, the new one is the first instance showing a male: the chief god Dushara himself.

The Symbols (Petroglyphs)

Below the altar, a part of the platform is strewn with symbols (petroglyphs), crudely incised into the rock. During our cursory examination we counted nine drawings of human feet (six pairs of sandals and three singles), 13 ibexes, seven “goats”, one circle (incomplete), and two uncertain objects; altogether 32 engravings plus one uncertain representation of a camel. Another part of the platform exposes several much-weather-

ered petroglyphs, and a further section is still covered by sand. The whole platform of the sanctuary has the form of an elongated triangle. It is not very large and may have provided space for some 50 worshippers.

The human feet (or sandals) appear to represent a simple form of memorial left behind by pilgrims as visual evidence for their worship. A particularly expressive pair of sandals is represented amongst the symbols at our Dushara sanctuary. Such “pilgrim feet” do also frequently occur at other elevated sites in Petra (FIG. 6). A prominent example for someone taking off his shoes as a ritual is the biblical record of the Burning Bush in Sinai. “And God said [to Moses]: Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5). A similar situation exists in Islam, in which the believers take off their shoes before entering a mosque, but here the religious practice is combined with the observation of hygienics.

This repertoire of rock drawings recalls the numerous examples found in Sinai, chiefly at Wādī Al Muqattab, in particular the ibex and the camel. Other animal symbols found in Nabataea are horse, goat, sheep, ostrich (rare), and animals of low stature, probably dogs. Among the Nabataean rock drawings, the ibex with his enormous horns is by far the most frequent motif. Of the other common animals, the goat, the sheep, and (much rarer) the camel are well-known for their use in ritual sacrifice. Ample information on animal sacrifice in antiquity is to be found in the Bible, and here the small cattle play the leading role. For this reason, we believe that the ibexes at the new sanctuary represent votive offerings by pious Nabataeans, made as a dedication to their god Dushara at this site. The Nabataeans were very pious people. Their religion,

beliefs, and customs have been the subject of many studies. The best summaries are provided by Starcky (1964), Hackl *et al.* (2003: 76–96), and Healey (2001).

Dating

The earliest Nabataean inscription for Dushara is the dedication by Aslah, son of Aslah in Petra (*ca.* 95 BC), and the latest is the stele of Jamlik, son of Maseku, in Bostra (AD 147), thus providing a range of approximately 250 years. There is no reason to doubt that the new Dushara inscription is contemporary with all the other epigraphical records of this god, but we cannot say which part during this wide span of time is more likely, the earlier or the later.

Since there is no mechanism for a direct dating of the new sanctuary, it is logical to connect it to the other similar places at Petra. The obvious candidate for such a comparison is again the High Place (Al Madhbah) on Jabal At Taff. In view of its large size and the prominent position, the whole complex is most likely to date from the heydays of the Nabataeans in the 1st centuries BC/AD, a view that has never been challenged. We are therefore inclined to assign the new sanctuary to this very period.

Interpretation of the Sanctuary

The following points deserve particular attention:

- The sanctuary is unfinished. The top of the altar still has cuttings for removing further blocks.
- There is no water basin, which usually forms an integral part of any Nabataean sanctuary.
- The site has no proper access; only a few rudimentary steps exist.
- The whole installation appears to

have been in use for a short period only.

- It is the first time that such a sanctuary has been found with the typical eye-idol identified as Dushara.
- The inscription evokes a strong nationalistic feeling, like a political slogan or even a war cry.
- The location has direct visual contact with the Great High Place and beyond to Jabal Hārūn.

The Great High Place (Al Madhbah)

It is quite startling how well one can see the Great High Place Al Madhbah on Jabal At Taff at a short distance from the Dushara Sanctuary, right across the deep valley, situated about 50 m higher than the Dushara location (estimate). People walking in the area of Al Madhbah are visible from the lower terrace of the “hidden sanctuary of Dushara.” The distance by air between both places may be around 200 m (estimate). We regret that we did not have the chance to take more precise measurements.

The unfinished character of the sanctuary demonstrates that it was never fully put into service. Was it only a temporary measure and, if so, why? One may wonder whether the inscription “Dushara—God of Our Nation” served as an ideological expression like, for example, the well-known exclamation “*Allahu Akbar*”.

The Great High Place obviously served as a multipurpose sanctuary where the various clans or families could put up their own tribal image, statue, or symbol, as in an exhibition hall, in order to venerate their specific deities at special occasions. The High Place Al Madhbah measures 14 x 6.5

m (*ca.* 100 m²) and can be estimated to have served an audience of about 200 people. The little platform (podium) in the center of the place measures 75 x 150 cm (*ca.* 1 m²) at a height of only 10 cm. It is obviously intended for the placement of a scaffolding or portable base/throne on which the holy image would be placed for adoration. The absence of any inscription or graffito additionally indicates the “neutral” character of the High Place (FIG. 7).

The two large obelisks on Jabal At Taff with a height of 6–7 m mark the entrance to the holy precinct, similar to the two columns Jachin and Boaz at the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (1 Kg. 7:15). The ruins near the obelisks on the way to Al Madhbah have been labelled by some scholars as remains of a Crusader castle, but in fact an examination on site did not show any evidence for such an identification. We believe that this building was the abode for the service personnel (priests) or, more likely, the storage place for the various family gods. An additional possibility is the question of whether Al Madhbah was used for regular public services in the open involving the major deities (Dushara, Allat, and al-Uzza *etc.*), like a cathedral. Regarding the display of the idols we have a valuable quotation from Suda (Suidas), a Greek lexicographer of the 10th century AD who describes the Arabian cult ceremonies with the words:

“Theus-Ares: This is the god Ares in Petra of Arabia. The god Ares is worshipped among them for they honour him especially. The image is a black stone, square, unshaped, four feet high, two wide. It is placed on a gold-plated base. To this they sacrifice and pour out the blood of sac-

rificial victims. This is for them the libation. The whole building is rich in gold and there are many dedications.” (Healey 2001: 96).

Theus Ares, also written Theusares, is a corruption of Dousares, the Greek form of Dushara. The knowledge of this passage in Suda prompted the idea of whether such an idol, when placed at Al Madhbaḥ, would have been visible from the lower position of the Dushara sanctuary. We have put this question to a practical test. One of us went up to the little platform on the Great High Place, equipped with a pair of binoculars and a 2 m long stick with a little air balloon attached to it, whereas the other, also equipped with a set of binoculars, stood by the altar of Dushara. Upon hand signals the stick with the balloon was lifted upwards in steps of about 20 cm each time, until it became visible from the lower high place. In this way we established a height of 1.45 m above which the top of the possible scaffolding or base with the venerated image would be within view for the attendants of the service at the lower platform. This test demonstrated that a scaffolding of about 1.5 m height plus the image itself would make a perfectly plausible combination. The experiment showed that there is obviously a spiritual connection between the two sanctuaries, and possibly also with Jabal Hārūn.

A scaffolding or base for the god/goddess has, in ancient Semitic religion, a special significance. The throne or seat (“motab”) of a deity is almost as holy as his/her image or idol. This may appear strange to our modern way of thinking, but on the other hand the throne or seat of a monarch and a bishop is something highly respectable even in our days. So, it would not be surprising if a Nabataean motab was made of gold, as Suda reports,

and such an installation would fit well the podium at Al Madhbaḥ. Authentic examples of such altar bases, although quite modest, appear on coins of Antoninus Pius from Adraa (AD 138). In Bostra, coins venerating Dushara (Aktia Dusaria) were minted until Herennius Etruscus (AD 251). Thus, Dushara is documented on coins of Syria for more than a full century (Spijkerman 1978) (FIG. 8).

The Obelisks

In this context it is also worthwhile to look at the two monumental obelisks on Jabal At Taff from a different perspective. They may well have a function beyond the pure “gate keepers” of the holy precinct. We interpret these stone pillars as the symbolic representation of Dushara and his consort Allat.

A “squashed” form of obelisk seems to occur in a completely different context: as a motif on Nabataean pottery. We propose to see this derivation from another angle. The depiction of an obelisk with the typically elongated form would not fit the round shape of a pottery plate (shallow bowl). But when compressed it will suit the round shape, especially with the combination of two such “cones” or in a triple arrangement (FIG. 9).

On Nabataean pottery the prevailing motif shows such a pair of cones that decorate the inner side of the typical shallow bowls. The bold triangles stand in sharp contrast to the otherwise finely painted floral motifs. For a long time, we have wondered about their meaning. They must have a specific symbolic value, most probably connected with the cult of the dead. We propose to identify this “pair of cones” as a spiritual reflection of the two obelisks. For over 40 years we have been searching to find any prior development of this unique motif,

but in vain. It appears suddenly on pottery that can be dated to the 1st century AD or later, without any parallel or forerunner. We think that the introduction of this pattern followed the completion of the two obelisks on Jabal At Taff that are also associated with the cult of the dead. The shallow bowls soon became the Nabataean offering bowl *par excellence*. The motif was translated from a monument of stone to a pattern on pottery.

Beliefs change and religions shift; nothing stays forever in the field of faith. With time the dual gods Dushara/Allat became a trinity: Dushara, Allat, and al-Uzza. The huge temple Qasr Al Bint in Petra reflects the same arrangement (trinity) in the subdivision of the cella, and this development was also reflected in the pottery where we start to find triple “cones.”

In Petra there are numerous examples of rock niches where the same dual or triple arrangement of a nefesh (stele) testify to the Nabataean gods (Dalman 1908 and 1912). They follow the same ideology as the pottery. In the tombs of the Nabataean capital, large numbers of potsherds with triple “cones” are found, usually characterized by a darker or almost black color of decoration, which testifies to a later period. On one single potsherd out of the many hundreds that we have seen over the years, a triple cone is depicted where the triangle in the middle has a “star” at the top, exactly like the nefesh in some rock niches at Petra (Dalman 1908: 154, 245, 329, and 1912: 49). These two patterns, double and triple “cones”, dominate the typology of painted Nabataean pottery (Schmitt-Korte 1989). Another possibility is to regard those bold triangles as a representation of the horns of an offering altar, but in this case it is difficult to explain their further development from

a pair to an ensemble of three (FIG. 9).

Rebellion against Isis?

Now we turn our attention to the question of whether the unfinished Dushara Sanctuary may have been a rebellious emergency solution for a hard core of believers who were temporarily banned from the Great High Place. But why? It appears that such a step may have been taken by a conservative group in protest against the introduction of some “foreign” deity, and, if so, the best candidate would be Isis, a widespread faith originating from Egypt. The cult of Isis was quite popular in Nabataea. A number of sites (rock niches) bear witness to this goddess, but the time of its introduction remains uncertain. Some scholars hold that the Khasneh in Petra was dedicated as a temple to Isis, based on the presence of the horn of Isis in the acroterion over the main entrance and also as the central figure on the tholos. This identification has a long history of controversy between scholars, a question that we do not want to enter here within the framework of the present study.

At any rate, a prominent follower of Isis was Queen Huldu, the first wife of King Aretas IV. She was the daughter of King Obodas II and already the queen at the beginning of Aretas’ rule (9 BC). In the third year of their joint reign we see Huldu on a beautiful silver coin of enhanced style, wearing a crown of Isis (Parlasca 1998) (FIG. 10). The Nabataeans were fond of such prestige coins whenever there was some outstanding event in the royal family to manifest their rule (Barkay 2019). In such cases the engraving of the initial pair of dies for this type of commemorative issue was entrusted to foreign craftsmen. Such prestige coins are identifiable by their enhanced style and (occasionally)

by engraving faults in the legend. On the present coin the date is off flan, but we have seen another example struck from the same pair of dies with a clear date of year 3 (7 BC). Another, although much less artistic, example is illustrated in Barkay (2019: nos. 104 and 104a), also showing “Year III” with the explicit description as “Bust of Huldu, diadem with Isis crown.” Two further specimen exists in our collection, also with the less elaborate form of Isis crown and also dated to year 3 (coll. Schmitt-Korte, illustrated in Parlasca 1998). Such less artistic examples were copies made by local artists subsequent to the initial high-quality prototype. Beyond their lower artistic quality, they have the same historical significance, shown by the astonishing fact that we know six such specimens from the same year. The appearance of the crown of Isis on other Nabataean coins (and other queens) is less clear since we have seen several “candidates” that were, however, not clear or detailed enough to be sure.

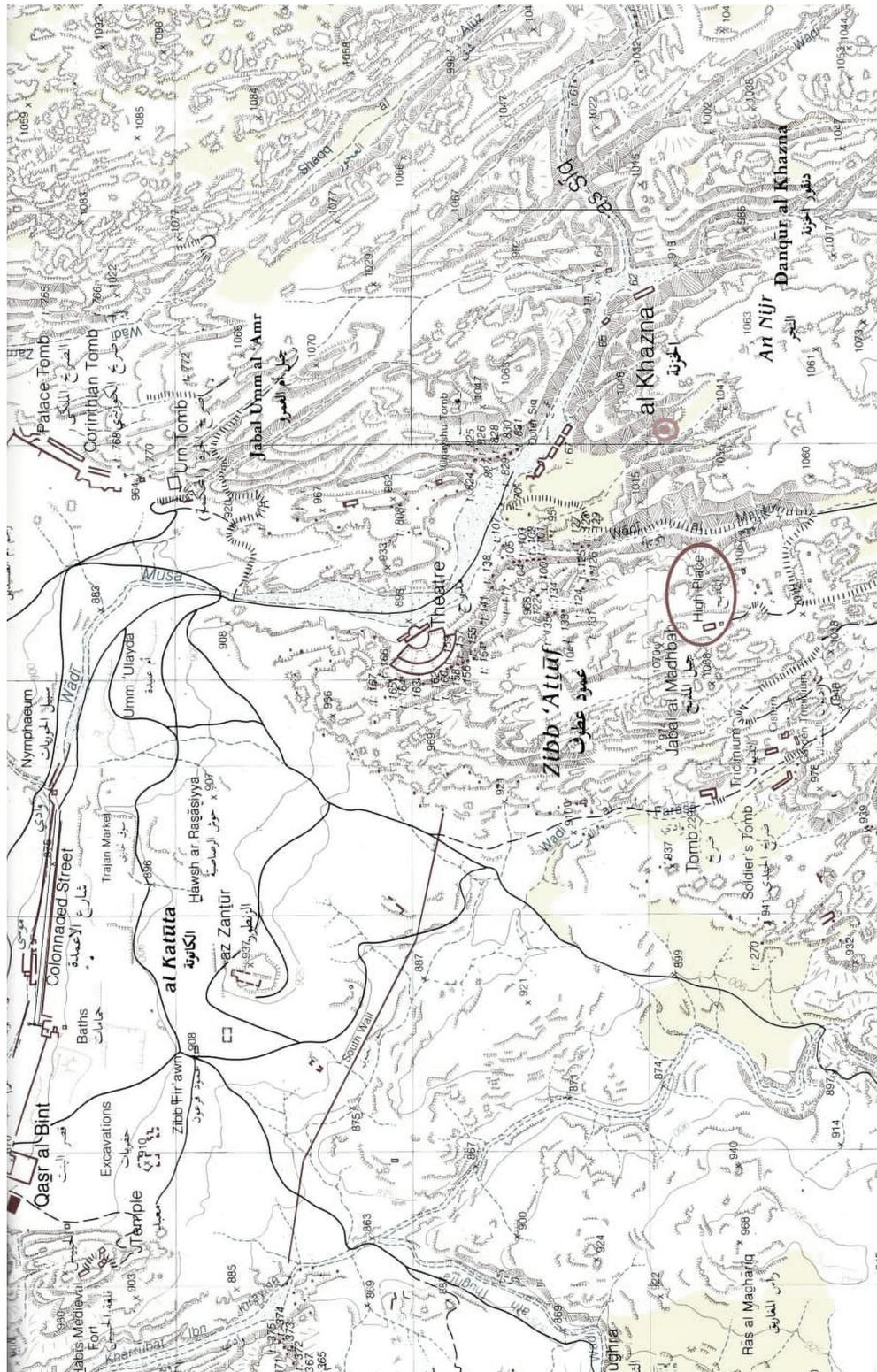
We may presume that this coin marked the official introduction of the Isis cult in Petra and evidently Queen Huldu is presented as her priestess. We have the feeling that this step was, among other aspects, a politically motivated action taken by Aretas in his struggle against his archenemy, the ambitious minister Syllaeus, who was attempting to take the throne. It could well be that the introduction of Isis at the sanctuary of Al Madhbaḥ did spark off a religious conflict between the followers of Aretas with Huldu and Isis in the background against the powerful Nabataean

minister and his influential entourage. It was only in the fourth year of Aretas’ reign that the matter of Syllaeus was settled once and for all by his execution in Rome at the order of Emperor Augustus (6 BC). This event gave Aretas full control over the kingdom.

Since the status of Huldu as priestess of Isis is now clear, it is imaginable that a group of traditionalists were appalled by these maneuvers and decided to walk out from practicing their rites of Dushara at the central sanctuary of Al Madhbaḥ. It is even conceivable that such a step may have been orchestrated by Syllaeus, hoping to tilt the balance of his fate in his favor. But such an interpretation must remain speculative. We estimate that the making (chiseling) of the alternative Dushara altar may have taken an experienced team of stone masons two to three months at the utmost and that the site was maybe engaged in subsequent services for a similarly short period. When the traditionalists made their peace after the final removal of Syllaeus, they may have decided to return to the Great High Place or they were readmitted by the majority and, consequently, the isolated sanctuary of Dushara fell into disuse. If this were so, it would date the Dushara altar to the year 6 BC.

In conclusion, it seems worthwhile to continue the study of this unique sanctuary of Dushara within the broader framework of the religious sites and practices in Petra and with the hope that additional aspects may help to prove, disprove, or modify our interpretation of this Dushara Sanctuary.

THE NEW DUSHARA SANCTUARY AT MAHAFIR IN PETRA



1. Location of the Dushara High Place at the rock of Al Mahāfir (northern edge of Jabal An Nijr). The site is near the letter “a” of the word “Al KHaznah” (map: Amman, ca. 2004).



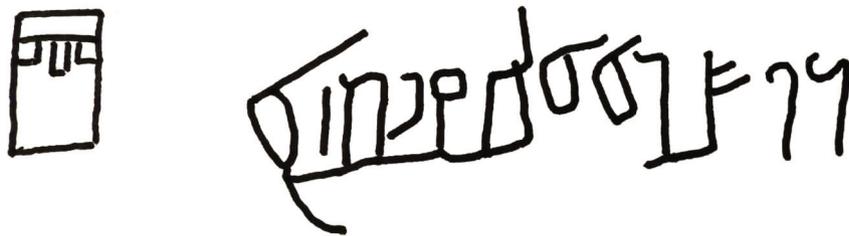
2. Overall view of the Dushara High Place from above with the unfinished altar (photo by K. Schmitt-Korte).



3. The Dushara altar with the inscription and the eye-idol (photo by K. Schmitt-Korte).



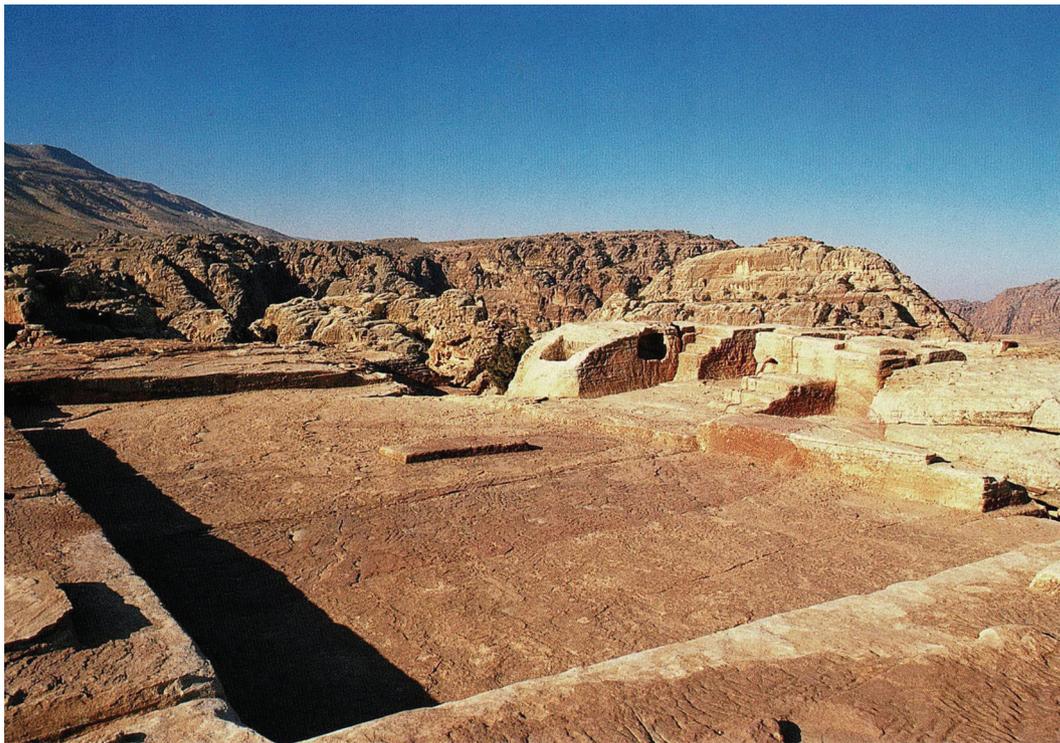
4. The Dushara inscription and the idol (photo by K. Schmitt-Korte).



5. Idol and inscription "Dushara, God of our Nation" (drawing by K. Schmitt-Korte).



6. Pair of sandals amongst the petroglyphs (photo by K. Schmitt-Korte).



7. The Great High Place with the small podium in the center (photo from Taylor 1993: 48).



•ΔΟΥΣΑΡΗΣ•ΘΕΟΣ•ΑΔΡΑΗΝΩΝ

8. Base or altar (“motab”) with idol of Dushara on coins from Adraa (image from Spijkerman 1978: page, fig. number).



9. Nabataean pottery showing double and triple “cones” symbolizing the gods Dushara, Allat, (and al-Uzza) (drawing from Schmitt-Korte 1976: pl. 21).



10. Queen Huldu with crown of Isis. Silver coin of Aretas IV, Year 3, 7 BC (coin in the collection of K. Schmitt-Korte; photo by K. Parlasca).

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