

## Petra, The Mountain of Aaron: The Finnish Archaeological Project in Jordan. Vol. 1, The Church and the Chapel

By Zbigniew T. Fiema and Jaakko Frösén. Pp. 447, b&w figs. 323, color figs. 69, graph 1, tables 45, plan 1. Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 2008. €125. ISBN 978-951-653-364-6 (cloth).

*The Church and the Chapel* is the first of three volumes reporting on a study of the archaeological landscape of Jebel Hārūn (Mount Aaron) at Petra, Jordan, with a focus on the ruins of the monastery. On a wider scale, this involves the entire mountain, including mapping and describing its cultural landscape: its uses as a Nabataean cult center, the Christian monastery, and the Muslim *weli* (memorial mosque). More narrowly, this archaeological study concerns the Monastery of St. Aaron as “a food-producing community of a coenobium type, reminiscent of a large Late Roman agricultural estate” (95).

This report, with clear description of how the work was done, thorough, careful, and honest detailing of the finds, and lush, helpful graphic and photographic illustration, is a major contribution to the archaeology of early Christianity in the Levant. The remaining portions of the fieldwork are to be reported in two additional volumes: volume 2, *The Nabataean Cultic Complex and the Byzantine Monastery*, and volume 3, *The Archaeological Survey*.

The Finnish Jebel Hārūn Project (FJHP) has conducted eight excavation seasons from 1997 to 2007 under the auspices of the Centre of Ancient and Medieval Greek Documents, Archives and Libraries of the Academy of Finland, lodged at the University of Helsinki. It is led by the coeditors/authors and principal investigators, project director Jaakko Frösén and chief archaeologist Zbigniew T. Fiema. Frösén, a major publisher of the Petra Church papyri, and Fiema, the chief archaeologist and publisher of the Petra Church Project (Z. Fiema et al., *The Petra Church* [Amman 2001]), have

gathered an impressive multidisciplinary team of Finnish and international scholars, many of whom contributed to this volume.

The FJHP combines traditional interdisciplinary fieldwork—stratigraphy and survey—with careful analysis and interpretation executed by thorough comparison with similar sites/structures and with comprehensive reference to current scholarship. Fiema stresses the project’s theoretical distinctiveness thus: First, through a “microscale examination of a single site” (53), the team is able to document distinctive local and regional variations while also refining understanding of the general ecclesiastical culture history of the region. Second, because of the scarcity of written sources, the team is able to build a “virtual history” based more purely on the phased material remains of the site, both as a “microcosm of monastic existence” and through its relationship to Petra proper (54).

A chapter by the cartographic team from the Institute of Photogrammetry and Remote Sensing of the Helsinki University of Technology provides a useful guide to the electronic transformation of field surveying using the plethora of remote imaging, photogrammetric, and digital techniques now available. They carefully present and evaluate each approach used and give useful charts and illustrations of processes, equipment, and software. An especially informative example is the well-described and illustrated section “Photogrammetric 3D Modeling.”

Background chapters include a literary history of the Aaron tradition and a history of

visits recorded by pilgrims, conquerors, and explorers, all of whom give rather fleeting glimpses of what they saw. There is little to no recording of pilgrimages during the life of the monastery, but there is clear evidence that the *weli* was frequented by Muslim and Jewish pilgrims from the 14th century onward.

The book begins with a brief introduction to the Jebel Hārūn landscape, but the key section is a long and detailed chapter presenting the “analysis and phasing” of the church and chapel (ch. 6). The evidence presented effectively refers to the specialists’ chapters that follow, with exemplary studies of the marble fragments, baptismal fonts, the narthex mosaic, Greek inscriptions, ceramics, glass, tiles and bricks, metal objects, and wall plaster. Fiema’s concluding remarks consist mainly of comparisons with contemporary churches, with emphasis on the Petra Church.

All the excavated remains are organized into a 14-phase stratigraphic sequence in which phases are characterized mainly by pre-church materials, construction, destruction, remodeling, and abandonment, with few apparent use phases (e.g., phase 5 [119, 133–35]). The method of presentation is basically architectural, with synthetic presentation of evidence and interpretation (rather than evidence and interpretation given separately), resorting to stratified soil and debris deposits for dating only as needed (relying extensively on the outstanding ceramic and glass analyses and fine comprehensive section drawings). A brief summary of this phased history of the church and chapel follows. Each architectural period is accompanied by a keyed plan and a composite isometric reconstruction (an excellent comparative presentation of these three isometrics is presented in fig. 1 [425]).

The first church-chapel, built on the ruined remains of a Nabataean site (to be discussed in vol. 2) in the mid to late fifth century, consisted of a large basilica. It was about the size and shape of the Petra Church, with clerestoried nave and an adjoining transverse-arched, hall-shaped chapel-baptistery, both interpreted to have had wood-trussed, sloping roofs. The church is single apsed, with flanking pastophoria; it is elaborately appointed, though there is limited evidence for a bema, altar screen, ambo, and marble flooring. After its destruction by earthquake in the mid sixth century, the rebuilders of the second version of the church-chapel not only reused what remained standing but worked a radical redesign by reducing the church to its eastern half, with a

narrower nave and more stodgy set of arches for clerestory support. The western half became a square atrium accessed from a narrow mosaic-floored narthex to its west. After less than a century, this second complex was also destroyed by earthquake in the early seventh century. The third version of the church and chapel, reconstructed in the late seventh century and destroyed once again (“yet another earthquake” [147]) in the late eighth century saw another radical transformation. The basilica was “domesticated,” as evidenced by cooking hearth partitioning on the floor. A flat roof was now supported by narrowly spaced transverse arches set on massive rubble and plaster piers. The chapel appeared to have preserved its ecclesiastical layout, from which the authors infer that the monastic life continued, but now the ecclesiastical cycle focused on the chapel as the sole worship hall. Thus, the ecclesiastical function survived that of the Petra Church by close to two centuries (Fiema 2001, 105). After a fourth natural disaster, probably in the late eighth century, the complex was not reconstructed, though there is evidence of squatter and spoiling activity. Ruins of another church at the summit of the mountain remain unstudied because the *weli* was built over it in the 14th century.

Interpretations are deliberate, detailed, and usually convincing, but I venture a few brief comments. The authors argue for a wood-trussed pitched roof on the chapel (113), even though there is no evidence, and the roof support system (closely spaced transverse arches) would make a flat roof much more likely. See, for example, the double church at Umm el-Jimal (H.C. Butler, *Ancient Architecture in Syria: Section A, Southern Syria*. Pt. 3, *Umm idj-Djimal*. Publications of the Princeton University Expeditions to Syria in 1904–1905 and 1909 2 [Leiden 1913] 180). In cases of such strong alternatives, it may be better to leave the options open.

However, more could be said about the surprising size of the initial church: “a large (ca. 24.5 x 15.5 m) basilica associated with a chapel with a baptismal font would have been much more than required for the liturgical services of such a [monastic] community” (434). For the authors, this largeness supports the hypothesis of the basilica’s memorial character, which, with the chapel’s use as a baptistery, leads to the conclusion that spaciousness was required for the flow of pilgrims. However, its large size also could have come from a desired

monumentality that reflected the site's sacredness. The redesign of the second church-chapel phase need not be a mere reduction but could be evidence of changing social and liturgical fashions, made possible because the first huge basilica-chapel was simply too large for the traffic reaching this remote mountain top.

The value of this study is in the care of presentation of data and interpretations for the material history seen in the architectural transformations from the fifth to ninth centuries, at a remote site without the written evidence that often overshadows local material evidence with exterior historical data. This work informs the larger history and earns its keep thereby. The intended audience is clearly fellow scholars in the field of early Christian ecclesiastical

archaeology. I hope that one or some of the authors will write a more popular volume for general audiences ranging from local inhabitants to tourists and the reading public. This work is a success as a professional, academic report, and I therefore reiterate the positive comments made at the outset of this review. We look forward to the remaining two volumes to complete this story of the Monastery of St. Aaron and its mountain.

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