



View to the northwest with the Petra Church left of center toward the bottom

The ruins of ancient Petra are located within the spectacular eastern rim of the Jordan-Dead Sea Transform ("Dead Sea Rift") in southwestern Jordan, approximately half-way between the southern end of the Dead Sea and the head of the Gulf of 'Aqaba. Human occupation in the region extends back to at least the Middle Paleolithic (ca. 100,000 years ago). Petra is best known, however, as the capital of the Nabataean kingdom, an Arab state economically based upon the long-distance trade in incense, spices, and other exotic goods from south Arabia, India, and the Far East. After the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom by the Roman emperor Trajan in A.D. 106, Petra remained the most prominent urban and political center of southern Jordan through the sixth century, after which the city disappeared from written records. Rediscovered for the western world by the Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt in 1812, Petra's famous Siq and magnificent tomb façades have inspired authors and poets ever since. Understandably, the high visibility of Petra's tomb façades and the spectacular scenery of the Siq have overwhelmed the ruins of the ancient city itself, which mostly lies buried beneath centuries of wind-blown sand. While the main paved street of Nabataean-Roman-Byzantine Petra has been cleared of the sands which hid it for nearly a thousand years, the rest of the city, with few exceptions, remains buried. It is within the ruins of this buried city that a large Byzantine church was discovered on the 9th of April, 1990.

Actually, I had initially noticed the ruins of this church in 1973 during my participation in the sub-surface survey of the site conducted by the American Expedition to Petra (AEP), directed by Dr. Philip C. Hammond of the University of Utah. I had returned to the site several times during subsequent years, but never found myself with sufficient time to do a formal recording of it. However, during the 1989-1990 academic year, I received a National Endowment for the Humanities post-doctoral research fellowship at the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman. During my tenure, I at last had the time to do a more complete study of the site.

The church and associated structural remains lie approximately 125 m due east of my AEP Area I excavations, approximately 100 m due west of the Wadi el-Mataha, and 135 m north of the Wadi Musa. Sections of the church walls and its associated structures appear above the modern soil surface and protrude through extensive piles of rubble, the latter primarily extant as a result of ancient structural collapse, but further enhanced by the historic (pre-20th century) clearance of agricultural fields in this area by the Bidul. The rubble includes numerous column drums, Nabataean-style floral capitals with scroll volutes, cornices, door jams, etc. Several fragments of white marble slabs and red ceramic roof tiles also lie scattered across the church site [sketch, following page].

While examining the ruins to establish their extent prior to sketch-mapping, we noticed the presence of numerous large and small tesserae (ca. 1-1.5 cm² surfaces) of fine-grained yellow sandstone, beige limestone, pinkish-gray chert, and white marble in what is the southern apse of the structure. Upon closer examination of the current fill surface in this apse, multiple colored glass tesserae (ca. 0.4-0.75 cm² surfaces) were also observed (dark blue, olive green, light green, and amber). Beneath a tilted ashlar block, which seems to have fallen from the south wall of the apse, the cross-section of a mosaic ... was found protruding from the soil. This presumably has weathered intact off the interior face of the fallen ashlar, and now lies within a matrix of soil fill in the apse.

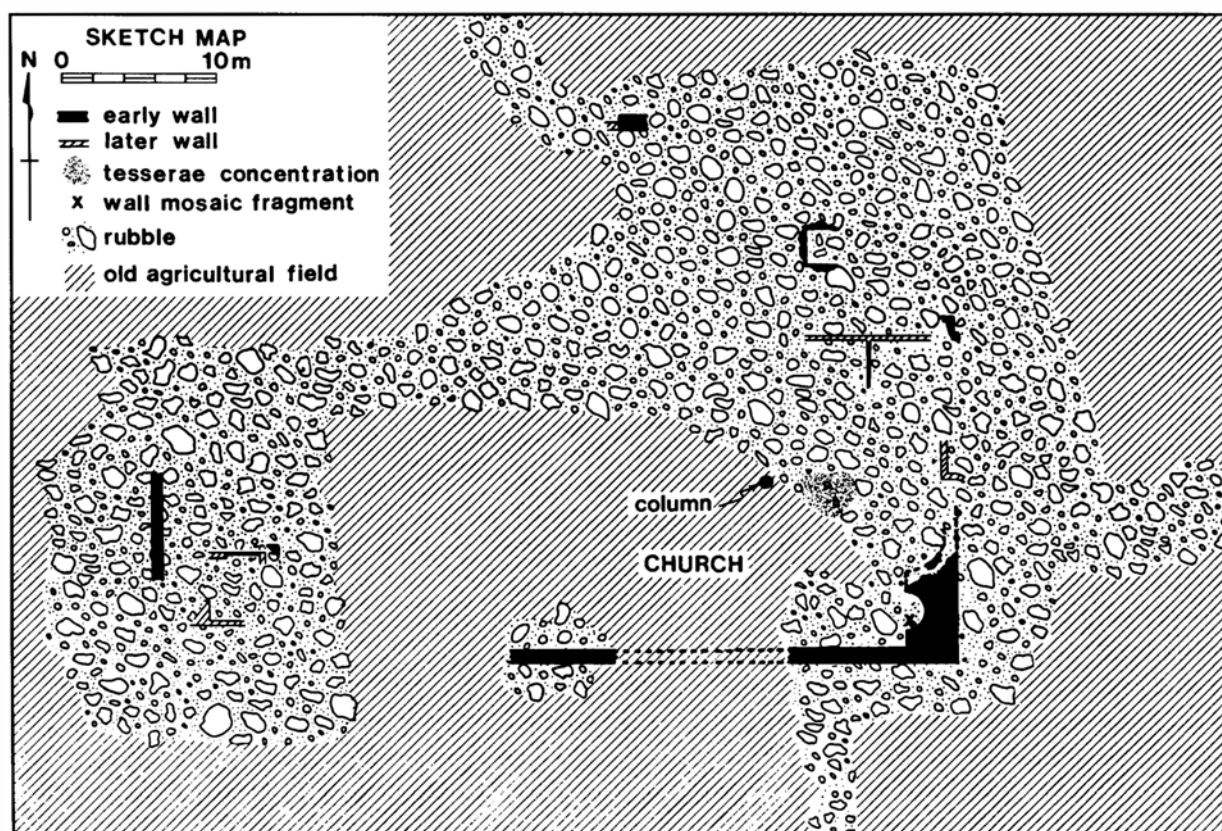
Although small glass tesserae were subsequently noted scattered across the eastern end of the church, a particularly dense scatter was found approximately 6 m west and slightly north of the central apse. Here, numerous small (ca. 0.3-0.75 cm² surfaces) glass and stone tesserae in multiple colors occur, including several with gold gilding under a thin layer of clear glass. Glass tesserae colors include multiple hues of blues and greens, black, yellow, and amber. A small sample of the scattered tesserae in this location were collected, as were a small sample of those in the southern apse.

A single column drum (55 cm diameter) which may be *in situ* lies just west of the interior cluster of tesserae. Its location would be appropriate for a north aisle column. Sections of a poorly-built wall appear to overlie the northern apse of the church, while other poorly-built walls also appear to overlie more substantial walls presumably associated with the church. Ceramics associated with these later remains appear to be late Byzantine, equivalent to those from the AEP Area I excavations dating to the 6th century.

From the visible remains, it would seem that this church was minimally 30 m in length and 18 m in width. After discussing these remains with Robert Schick and based upon field observations, the following tentative interpretations are offered: Both the size and associated materials suggest a church of major significance in the region, and it is suspected that it may



Surface remains before the excavation; left: the apse; right, a capital



be the basilica of the episcopal see of Petra. The glass tesserae presumably reflect ceiling and wall mosaics of exceptionally fine quality. From the depositional context and site topography, it is strongly suspected that at least 2 m of deposition overlie the floors of the church, which presumably possess further mosaics. Given the established seismicity of the region and the known effects of specific tectonic events at Petra, it is also suspected that the structure fell during one or more ancient earthquakes. It seems possible that sections of wall and ceiling mosaics may therefore lie semi-intact within the collapse debris.

While the excavation of this structure and its associated building complex is highly desirable, it is suggested that the simple clearance of the structure solely to uncover floor mosaics and possibly intact wall mosaics would not do justice to significant depositional data relating to



Thomas A. Dailey, Kenneth W. Russell, and Pierre M. Bikai at the site in October 1991

structural collapse; data which is critical in reconstructing the Byzantine chronology and history of Petra. Similarly, the potential for recovering sections of ceiling and wall mosaics within the collapse debris of the church warrants extremely careful excavation techniques, with a conservation staff on hand during excavation to deal immediately with uncovered materials. Obviously, a long-term preservation plan must also be developed, with consideration made for possible public (tourist) visitation of the site. An appropriate excavation and conservation program would necessarily be both time-intensive and monetarily expensive.

In order to determine the extent of preserved mosaics, to accurately date

them, and to make them accessible to the public, further research is required. The development of the site therefore involves 1) its archaeological excavation, 2) the conservation of recovered mosaics, 3) the stabilization of the ancient structure, and 4) the construction of a protective shelter over the site. Funding for this project ... has now been obtained from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) at the request of the Ministry of Planning and on behalf of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. This grant, which will support the archaeological excavation, conservation, stabilization and sheltering of the mosaic complex, was signed on the 29th of October, 1991. [Compiled from a memorandum written by Dr. Russell to Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Director General of Antiquities, on April 10, 1990, and from a press release dated November 30, 1991, which Dr. Russell also wrote. - ed.]