

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE PETRA PAPYRI

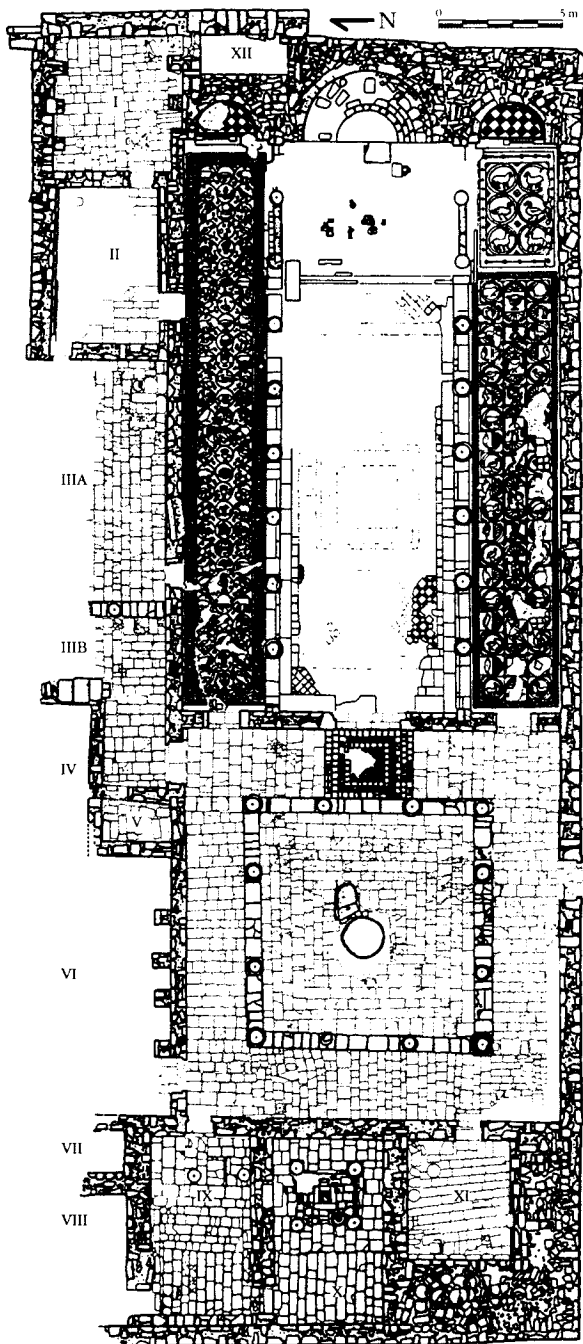


Figure 1. Ground plan of the existing remains of the Petra Church; the papyri were found in the room at upper left (Room I)

The Petra papyri were discovered in December 1993, in a room (Room I) adjacent to the Byzantine church excavated by the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR). The excavation of the papyri was carried out by conservator Catherine Valentour, assisted by archaeologists Deborah Kooring and Zbigniew T. Fiema, and assistant conservator Naif Zaban, as well as Glen L. Peterman, then ACOR Assistant Director, and several experienced excavators from among the Bedul of Umm Sayhun.

The Petra papyri are the largest corpus of ancient texts ever found in Jordan and, as contrasted with many papyrus archives from Egypt and the Near East, they possess a fully documented archaeological context.<sup>1</sup> The closest parallel to the Petra papyri, both spatially and temporally, are the 6th–7th century papyri found in the Negev town of Nessana (Nitzana/Auja al-Hafir).<sup>2</sup>

In Phase III (A.D. 363 to the mid-5th century) of the site, Room I was a bedroom in a larger residential block. With the incorporation of that block into the newly built church complex at the beginning of Phase IV (later 5th century), Room I would probably have become a “strong room” or storage room for items related to the liturgy or otherwise owned by the church. Probably, the storage of documents was among the last uses of the room, certainly before the fire which destroyed the church and carbonized the papyri; the fire is dated by the archaeological record to the beginning of the 7th century. It is not at all likely that Room I functioned as a *scriptorium*. Specific furniture and objects characteristic of a *scriptorium*, such as tables and inkwells, were not found. The lack of adequate windows for light and restricted accessibility to the room itself would largely prohibit its use as a working place for a scribe.

The lowermost deposits (loci 12A, 12B and 12), located directly on the flagstone floor of the room, con-

1. For a detailed analysis of the archaeological context of the discovery, see Fiema, *Archaeological Context*. This is a summary of that article.

2. Kraemer, *Excavations*, 3–5. The excavation reports from Nessana admit a certain confusion, and present a rather sketchy description of the archaeological recovery of the papyri.

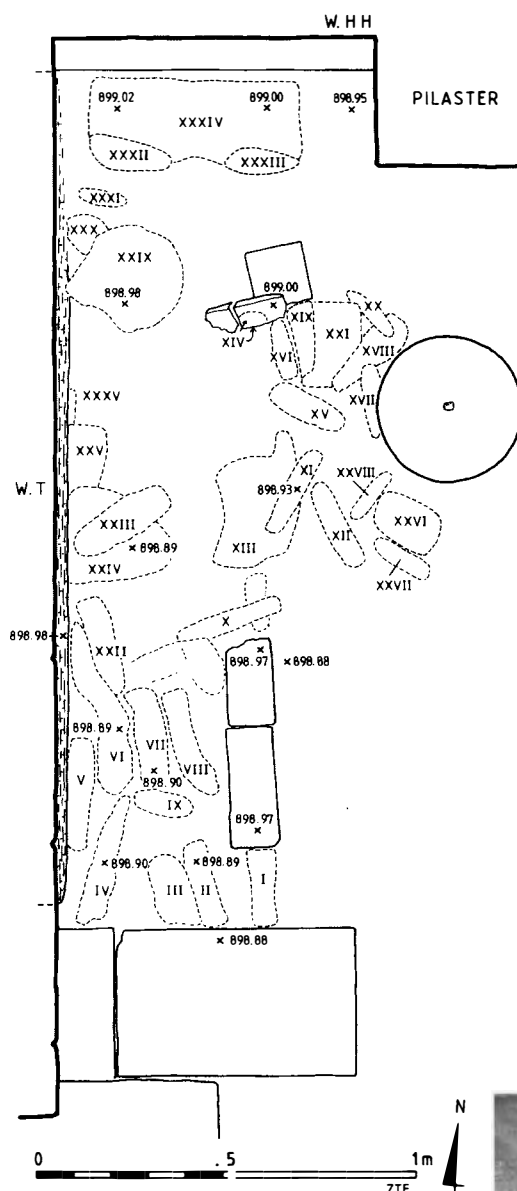


Figure 2. Room I, main deposit of papyri: Field Nos. I-XXXV

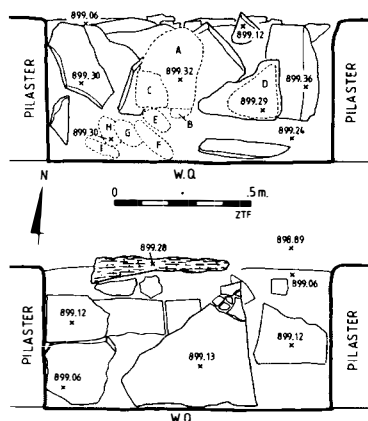


Figure 4. Room I, smaller deposit of papyri. Field Nos. A-I



Figure 3. Room I, main deposit of papyri, locus 12B, upper left, locus 12A, center

tain the destruction debris: carbonized papyri, charcoal pieces, ash, broken furniture, wall plaster flakes and burnt roof elements. The combined depth of all fire-related deposits, including locus 11—the collapse of the stone pavement of the upper floor—reached ca. 0.5 m. That, in turn, was covered by material from subsequent collapses of the walls of the room and by natural deposits, for a total of almost 3.5 m of stone and soil deposits over the carbonized papyri.

As a result of the extremely high temperature which accompanied the fire, the papyri in Room I underwent a carbonization process rather than a direct burning. Apparently, the heat built up inside the room and reached a level high enough to produce a "flashover." That destroyed the flammable materials in the room. It is likely that some papyri were burned to ash and thus did not survive. The actual preservation of the remaining papyri is also related to the composition of the room's ceiling, typical of the vernacular architecture of that time period. Clayey soil mixed with reeds and twigs filled up the interstices



Figure 5. Room I, smaller deposit of papyri before excavation

between the wooden beams of the ceiling, sealing that construction. Then a layer of mortar above the clay formed the bedding for the stone pavement of the upper floor. During the fire, and simultaneous with the burning of the beams, the clayey soil, the mortar, and flakes of wall plaster all fell down upon the papyrus rolls. Thus, a baked crust was formed over and among the tightly



Figure 6. Room I viewed from the south



Figure 7. Room I viewed from the northwest



Figure 8. Room I viewed from the east

tion of the central cluster; basically, it consisted of chaotic heaps south of the northern cluster. But the southern cluster formed a tight and spatially well-defined deposit; its main part occupied a space ca. 0.9 m long and 0.45 m wide. No shelflike wooden boards were recovered but staves or fillets which might have belonged to wooden containers were found there. Apparently, the papyri of the southern cluster were carbonized *in situ*, some in containers, others probably directly on the stone floor.

A smaller deposit of carbonized papyri was found in the area between the western and the central pilasters built against the southern wall of the room (Figs. 4–5). Two stone shelves had been inserted between the pilasters. Both shelves broke and collapsed on the floor between the pilasters, forming a deposit (locus 14), ca. 0.35 m thick. Several substantially smashed papyrus rolls were located among the fragments of the shelf, embedded

rolled papyri which prevented their total incineration due to a lack of oxygen.

The main deposit of the papyri (locus 12B), designated in the field as Papyri I–XXXV, was found in a space ca. 2.3 m long and ca. 0.45 m wide, located along the western wall of the room (Figs. 2–3). Three distinct clusters of papyri could be recognized: the northern, central, and southern clusters. While the northern and southern clusters became carbonized basically *in situ* (i.e., in the place of their original storage), the papyri of the central cluster may have originally belonged to the northern cluster. The northern cluster occupied the restricted space between the western wall of the room and the westernmost pilaster on the northern wall. The particularly dense and tight cluster of charcoal and papyri there indicates that there was probably a shelved “bookcase” located in this recess. The conservation of some papyri revealed a multiple-level accumulation of horizontal charcoal pieces (shelves) interspersed with individual papyrus rolls or roll fragments. The bookcase caught on fire and collapsed, partially spilling the contents of the upper shelves into the area where the central cluster was formed. Some charcoal pieces (staves, fillets) recovered from the northern cluster indicate that some sort of wooden containers were used to store papyri on the shelves. These containers would have ranged from small and delicate rectangular boxes to equally small but rounded, barrel-like casks or buckets. Also, consistent with the manner of storage of papyrus rolls in antiquity, the excavations and the conservation process have yielded samples of strings and textile wrapping for the rolls, all totally carbonized. Tightly rolled papyri were tied with a textile or papyrus-made string at the center of their length, and then, at least some of them were encased in textile “sleeves.”

No pattern could be discerned in the distribu-

at various angles in the matrix. The state of preservation of this deposit of papyrus rolls, designated in the field as Scrolls A–I, was exceedingly poor.

In addition to papyrus documents, the lowermost strata inside Room I provided a great variety of objects related to furnishing and furniture. These included: containers for storage, such as wooden boxes or chests (other than those directly related to the papyri); glass inlay pieces; and iron and bronze objects such as lock and key-plates and lock mechanisms. Apparently, there was at least one wooden coffer or chest inside Room I which had a lock-and-key mechanism. Combining all the data (including charcoal), it appears that the chest or coffer would have been sizable, ornately decorated, and well-secured by a lock. This may imply that, in addition to the papyrus rolls, Room I was also used for storing items of value (cash, precious stones, liturgical objects?).

Quantities of glass fragments were also collected from the fire-related strata. The majority of these were hanging lamps, both of hollow-stemmed and handled-bowl types. Both types are generally dated from the 4th to the 6th centuries A.D., although an early 7th century date is also possible. Parts of shallow glass bowls and goblets or flasks were also recovered. Practically no pottery was found in the lowermost strata. It is thus certain that the rolls not deposited upon the shelves were not stored in ceramic jars, as were the documents of Qumran, Wadi Murabba'at caves, or some archives from Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

From an archaeological standpoint, the manner of the papyrus deposition in Room I should somehow reflect the storage nature of the entire papyrus find. Generally, the deposition manner does not resemble a situation in which the documents were periodically and systematically filed, although it is also probable that the depositional pattern could have been partially disturbed after the fire. The papyri were not the only items stored in the room nor were they necessarily the most important ones. The intrasite spatial organization in the room appears somewhat haphazard in character. Room I does not seem to have been a much frequented place. The pattern of the main deposit of papyri may, in fact, represent a rather careless deposition or a reorganization-in-progress, perhaps never fully accomplished. After all, the location of the southern cluster of papyri directly on the floor, even if in wooden containers, is neither a practical nor safe way of storing important documents, perhaps reflecting relative neglect and an intentional lack of concern. However, the papyrus documents were apparently still of some significance, although not in active use and not subjected to periodical filing. It is probable that the papyri were deposited in Room I in a single episode. This manner of storage and the nature of the entire papyrus find much resembles that of the papyrus archive at Nessana.<sup>4</sup>

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3. Posner, *Archives*, 158–59.

4. Kraemer, *Excavations*, 4.