

## CHAPTER VI

*Petra: rediscovery by Burckhardt in 1812—Prehistoric period—Iron Age—Settlement by Nabataeans—Nabataean pottery, script, language, deities and rulers—Attacked by Greeks—The Roman occupation in A.D. 106—Monuments*

THE name and some idea of the nature of this unique ancient site are known throughout the civilized world, and the ease and rapidity of modern communications, both by air and road, have enabled tens of thousands to have a direct personal knowledge of the place, something for which in earlier and more arduous days they would not have had the opportunity, or even perhaps the inclination. When I first visited Petra in 1932 in company with some fellow archaeologists at the end of a season of excavations near Gaza in Palestine there was no easy way to Petra, nor could we have afforded it if there had been. Instead we drove in a station wagon—six of us and two of our young Bedu workers—from Gaza via Jerusalem and Amman, and except for a brief stretch near Jerusalem there was not a yard of surfaced road the whole way. But it was an adventure, with Petra as its culmination, and nobody was disappointed or disillusioned. For Petra is everything that the travel agencies write about—except rose red; mostly the sandstone is of a dark red ochre shade, with fantastic bandings of yellow, grey and white in some places. The only part which could be called rose red is the Khaznah area, and I know nothing to equal the first sight of this huge rock-cut façade glowing in brilliant sunlight after one emerges from the darkness of the great cleft which leads into the city. I have visited Petra very many times now, but always that first, breath-taking vision remains in my mind; nor does familiarity breed contempt here, for at every visit one has to rein up the horse or stop in one's tracks and gaze astonished, as if seeing it again for the first time,

at the sharpness and purity of line of the carving and the glowing brilliance of the rock.

But Petra really begins at Wadi Musa (the valley of Moses, this being one of the traditional sites where Moses struck the rock and the water gushed forth) and the village of Elji, for under this lie the remains of an outlying suburb of the city. The strong spring supplies all the water to the village, though none of it now reaches as far as Petra. It is possible that a good deal of the business and trade was carried out here, rather than that the great camel caravans should descend through the narrow, tortuous cleft into Petra itself. The first view of the area from the spring—Petra is invisible in the mountains—is astonishing and fantastic. The smooth-topped limestone mountains suddenly cease, and before you is a vast panorama of rugged sandstone peaks, white, brown and red in colour, while in the distance to the west can be seen the blue haze of Sinai. Trees cling to the slopes of the crags wherever they can find a foothold and sufficient water to keep them alive, and the whole effect is strangely like looking at a Chinese landscape painting.

All knowledge of the site of this unique city was lost to the Western world from the time of the Crusades, about A.D. 1200, until 1812, when a young Anglo-Swiss explorer named Burckhardt rediscovered it. He was exploring in the Middle East on behalf of an English learned society, and was making the journey from Damascus to Cairo, a very hazardous undertaking in those days. As he proceeded slowly down through Jordan, he began to hear tales from his guide and visitors of some extraordinary ruins hidden away in a mountain fastness. He first mentions it in his journal on August 22, saying he is particularly desirous of visiting Wadi Musa and its antiquities, of which he had heard the people speak with great admiration. He wanted to go straight on from Wadi Musa to Cairo, avoiding Aqaba, but his guide insisted on taking the longer route on the grounds that the other was too dangerous. He says:

The road from Shobak to Aqaba, which is tolerably good . . . lies to the east of Wadi Musa, and to have quitted it out of mere curiosity

to see the Wadi would have looked suspicious in the eyes of the Arabs. I, therefore, pretended to have made a vow to have slaughtered a goat in honour of Haroun (Aaron), whose tomb I knew was situated at the extremity of the valley, and by this stratagem I thought that I should have the means of seeing the valley on my way to the tomb. To this my guide had nothing to oppose; the dread of drawing on himself, by resistance, the wrath of Haroun completely silenced him.

Encampments of peasants were found at a place called by him Oerak, really Woairah, the Crusader Castle near Wadi Musa, and by them he was guided to Ain Musa, the spring, where he was pressed to make his sacrifice to Haroun as other pilgrims had done, for the tomb is visible from here, though very far off.

Having got so close to his objective, he naturally declined the suggestion, and finally in the village of Elji he found someone to guide him to the tomb of Aaron and also to carry the goat and a very necessary water-skin. As he descended from the village, he noted that "Here the antiquities begin", but he was quite unable to stop and examine them because of the suspicions of his guide. However, he saw the free-standing square tombs and the Obelisk Tomb before being hurried on through the Syk into Petra. Somehow he managed to get inside the Khaznah, for he gives quite a reasonable plan of it. His powers of persuasion must have been great, for he also got to see the tombs we now know as the Urn and the Corinthian Tombs, from whence he crossed over to the ruins to the Roman Temple. He was then, however, going a bit too far, for the guide started to accuse him of being a treasure hunter because of his curiosity and threatened him with his rifle. None the less, they continued on until they reached Al Barra, just south of Umm al Biyara, from which a good view of the tomb on top of Jabal Harun is obtained. By this time it was sunset, and being, as he says, "excessively fatigued" he decided to sacrifice the goat there and then. After doing this he had to return at once to Elji in the dark, and so saw no more of the ruins. But he deduces: ". . . it appears very probable that the ruins in Wadi Musa are those of ancient Petra, and it is remarkable that Eusebius says that the tomb of Aaron was shown near Petra".

Apparently one of the reasons why the local inhabitants were unwilling to show the place to foreigners was that they were afraid that as a result a host of foreigners would come to the place and interfere with their, perhaps not always legal, means of livelihood. This was just what happened after Burckhardt had told the world of his discovery, though it is to be doubted if the visitors interfered much with the villagers' activities. Nowadays, of course, they will go to almost any trouble to encourage foreigners to come, for a great part of their livelihood depends on a good tourist trade.

It is really only since about 1925 that it has been possible for any except very intrepid and wealthy explorers to visit Petra, for the local inhabitants maintained their unfriendly attitude for a long time, even massacring the members of the first Arab Legion Police Post established there to protect visitors. Yet in 1956 Miss Diana Kirkbride (Mrs. Hans Helbaek) was able to spend six months there on her own in charge of excavations, with no more trouble than an occasional row from someone who thought he ought to be employed on the work and wanted to know why he wasn't. The comparative ease and security with which a visit can now be made, however, does not make it in any way a less exciting experience; Petra is unique.

### *The History*

The history of Petra is still almost as elusive as its site once was, though thanks to recent explorations and excavations we now know something of its early story. Traces of Palaeolithic man in the form of the usual hand axes have been found on some of the higher mountain slopes, but in a remote and very inaccessible valley in the heart of Petra Mrs. Helbaek found a rock shelter of the Upper Palaeolithic period, probably about 10,000 B.C., where prehistoric man had apparently lived for at least part of each year over a considerable period of time. Characteristic flint and other implements were found there. She also found a number of Neolithic village sites in the neighbourhood and excavated one of them, Baidha to the north of Petra, which turned out to be as important as Jericho for the history of this remote period, about

7000 B.C. Here was a stratified series of villages, six in all, with finely built houses and workshops; bone and stone tools and weapons were recovered, and there is evidence of trade with far-away Asia Minor and the Mediterranean coast. There are also signs of a still earlier village beneath all this, which must go back to the Mesolithic period, but this has not yet been examined. Casual surface finds of flints have been made before in Petra, but this is the first time that actual settlements and dwelling-places of the period have been discovered.

Of the subsequent periods, the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages, no trace has as yet been revealed, and nothing further is known of its history until the Iron Age. By this time the country was known as Edom, and it had always been thought that the great massif of Umm al Biyara—the Mother of Cisterns—was the site of Biblical Sela which, like the Greek Petra, also means ‘Rock’, though in Arabic *sela* means rather a rock cleft, which is even more appropriate as a name for the place. Recent excavations, however, seem to indicate that though there was indeed a settlement of the Iron Age on this formidable rock, it was a late one, not earlier than the seventh century B.C. So that it could not have been, for instance, the place from which Amaziah of Judah (796–781 B.C.) cast down 10,000 of his prisoners after he had defeated the Edomites in battle. Archaeological evidence shows that the settlement covers the period of the seventh to the sixth centuries B.C., and that it was finally destroyed by fire, after which it was abandoned by the Edomites, and in the fourth century the Nabataeans moved in.

The Nabataeans and Petra are bound firmly together in history, for it was they who first began seriously to settle in the place, and to evolve types of architecture, sculpture, pottery and stone dressing peculiar to themselves. Perhaps the pottery is their most remarkable achievement, though it is the commonest and was obviously not held in any special esteem by them, for it is of a thinness and fineness only equalled by the best porcelain. It is even more remarkable than porcelain in some ways, for it is all thrown on the wheel and turned, or smoothed down afterwards, whereas porcelain is cast in a mould; furthermore, the

commonest form is a shallow open bowl, notoriously one of the most difficult forms to throw on a wheel even when it is made fairly thick. The interior of these bowls is covered with a very delicate decoration in dark brown or black paint, and the whole style and nature of the work is so characteristic that even quite a small sherd can be definitely identified wherever it is found (Plate 17).

Their method of dressing stone is equally individual; they used a single-ended pick and ran the cutting lines at an angle of 45 degrees across the face of the block, column, rock face or whatever they were shaping. Many examples of this can, of course, be seen in Petra.

They had also their own script and language; the former bears some resemblance to the Hebrew script of the time, but is curiously elongated vertically. Their habit of connecting some of the letters together, combined with the close packing of them due to their elongated form, makes reading of the inscriptions very difficult. Also inscriptions unfortunately are by no means common, apart from casual graffiti scratched on rock faces, and the longest we know is contained in some Nabataean papyri found in a cave on the shores of the Dead Sea east of Bethlehem. One long Nabataean inscription can be seen in Petra, on the Turkomaniah Tomb. Nevertheless it was from Nabataean that Kufic and consequently Arabic eventually derived. The language was apparently a form of Aramaic with strong Arabic influence in it; most of their personal names are Arabic.

The chief deities of the Nabataeans were Dushara and Allat; the former was always symbolized by a block of stone or obelisk, and the latter is frequently associated with springs and water. Dushara or Dushares (the Hellenized form) is from the Arabic Dhu-esh-Shera, which means He of Shera; the Shera are the mountains of the Petra neighbourhood, this being also their name today, and are called in the Old Testament "Seir", which is the same word. Jehovah is said to be "He of Seir", in other words the same person as Dushara, and Jehovah also inhabited a block of stone, sometimes call Beth El, the House of God, and had His chief shrines in high places, as did Dushara.