

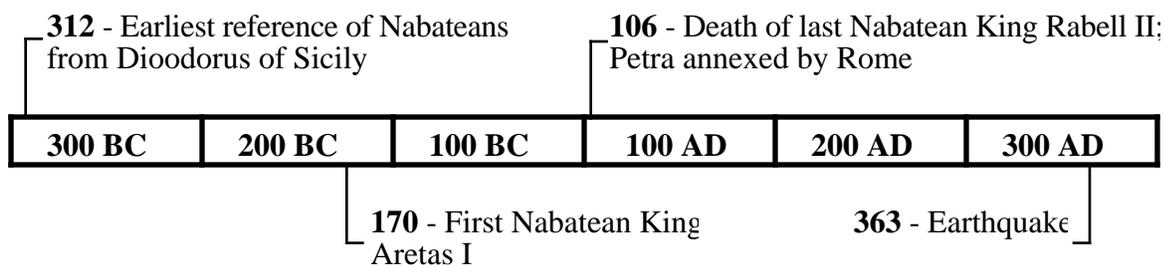
Petra: History, Myth, and Earthquakes

Located in southern Jordan, the ancient city of Petra houses some of the best-preserved monuments of antiquity. A succession of over 500 rock-cut monuments span its 45 square kilometers. During its prime, Petra must have been an awe inspiring place to live. For even today, over 2,000 later, the Nabateans' weathered monuments and rock cut tombs emote a sense of wonder and other worldliness to their beholder.

The Nabateans emerged as a significant power in the Near East during the late Hellenistic and early Roman imperial era. They established their capital, Petra, along the North Arabian trade route that connected Babylonia and Egypt. The earliest known account of the Nabateans is given by Diodorus of Sicily. Although writing in the 1st century BC, Diodorus describes a battle between the Nabateans and Antigonos the One-Eyed in 312 BC. Diodorus characterizes the Nabateans as a nomadic people and suggests that they were of Arabic origin. Numerous studies have been undertaken in an attempt to better define the Nabateans' specific origin. The bulk of the evidence places the Nabatean homeland somewhere in modern Saudi Arabia, from which they migrated along the coast and finally settled at Petra.

Petra proved to be an ideal location for the first Nabatean king, Aretas I, to launch his dynasty. Tucked away in the Wadi Musa Valley, Petra guaranteed security to its inhabitants. The primary entrance to the city was through the Siq, a narrow gorge about 3 kilometers long, 100 meters deep and narrowing in places to a width of only 3 meters. Thus, the passage to the city need only be guarded by a few men and could be blocked with boulders to prevent enemies from entering the city. As masters of hydraulics, the Nabateans created an intricate system of cisterns, runnels, catchments, and a gravity-fed pipe line fed by the Ain Musa. Consequently, at their height, the Nabateans were able to provide sufficient water for 30,000 people despite an annual rainfall of only 6 inches! Petra's position at the crossroads of trade gave the Nabateans control of the principal caravan routes which trafficked gold, precious stones, myrrh, incense, spices, Phoenician purple, wood, and exotic animals. Thus, as the Nabateans grew rich from their caravan trade, the former nomads became sedentary city-dwellers. Many archaeological remains from Damascus to the Sinai bear witness to their urbanizing activities; however, their capital Petra remains the most spectacular example.

Petra prospered for 276 years under the Nabatean dynasty reaching its zenith under Aretas IV (9 BC –40 AD). However, upon Rabel II's death in 106 AD, the Nabatean kingdom was annexed by Rome. Under Roman rule, Petra was given metropolitan status and became the capital of the Roman province of Arabia. The region was gradually Romanized and, little by little, its Nabataean character faded. With Roman rule new trade routes were established and Petra gradually went into decline. During the 5th and 6th centuries Petra became a Byzantine administrative center. Then, in 636, the region switched hands again, this time to Muslim rule.

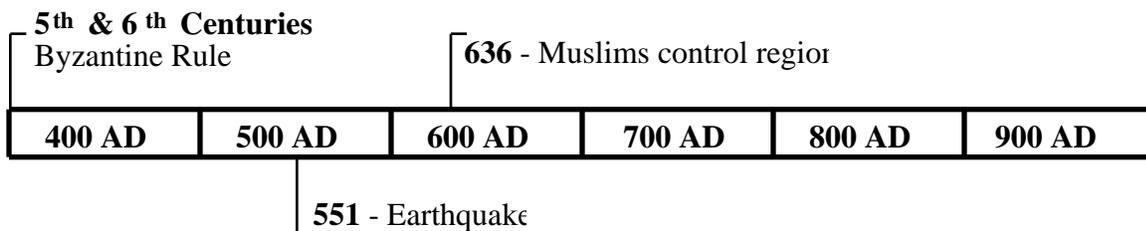


Since Petra was not on the Pilgrim’s route to Mecca, what livelihood the city had thus far maintained rapidly declined. By the time of the Crusades, the city had long been long abandoned but three small forts were built as an outpost atop el Habis, a mountain that overlooked the ancient city. The Crusaders, however, did not stay long, as there is no mention of Petra in any record beyond 1276. After 1276, it seems both the East and West had forgotten the ancient city for its location and history cease to appear in any written text. Despite accounts of classical writers such as Diodorus of Sicily, Eusebius, Pliny, Strabo, and Josephus, most scholars of the following era viewed Petra’s existence as little more than a legend. Consequently, it wasn’t until Petra’s rediscovery in 1812 by Swiss explorer John L. Burckhardt that the myth of “a rose-red city half as old as Time”¹ became a reality.

An aura of mysticism has always encompassed the city of Petra and her surroundings. Situated within the harsh desert, Petra’s vitality was dependent upon an intricate hydraulic system fed by a perennial spring. This spring, the Ain Musa (Spring of Moses), is fabled to have been one of the places where Moses struck the rock with his staff to produce water for his wandering people after their flight from Egypt. Not surprisingly, the valley in which Petra is situated, the Wadi Musa (Valley of Moses) is also named after the Biblical patriarch. In addition, Moses’ brother Aaron is believed to be buried atop the Jebel Haroun (Mount of Aaron), a mountain just south of the city. The belief that Aaron was buried so near Petra is especially noteworthy because it played an important role in Petra’s rediscovery by John Burckhardt.

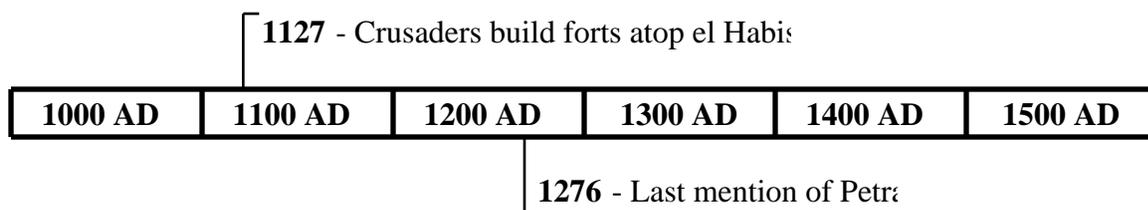
While enroute for Cairo, Burckhardt heard tales of a wondrous ancient city hidden in the desert. Aware that declaring a desire to visit these ruins would likely be interpreted as spying, he devised a plan to be inadvertently led to them. Having heard that the tomb of Aaron was near the ruins, Burckhardt let it be known that he had vowed to sacrifice to the Prophet. No one could object to such a noble cause, thus, he was able to obtain a Bedouin guide to lead him directly through Petra under the pretext of fulfilling his vow to Aaron.

In addition to the lore at Petra associated with Moses and Aaron there is also lore concerning their pursuer, Pharaoh. The first monument one encounters as she crosses the Siq into Petra is the great Khaznat al-Faroun or Treasury. (photograph on page 1) Khaznat al-Faroun means “Treasury of the Pharaoh” and as the name implies, there is a myth associated with it. According to legend, Pharaoh and at least part of his army escaped the closing of Dead Sea and continued after Moses. While in pursuit, Pharaoh had insisted on carrying his treasury; however, realizing that it was slowing his progress he created the Khaznat al-Faroun by magic and placed his fortune in the urn atop the monument’s outer façade for safe keeping. Hence,



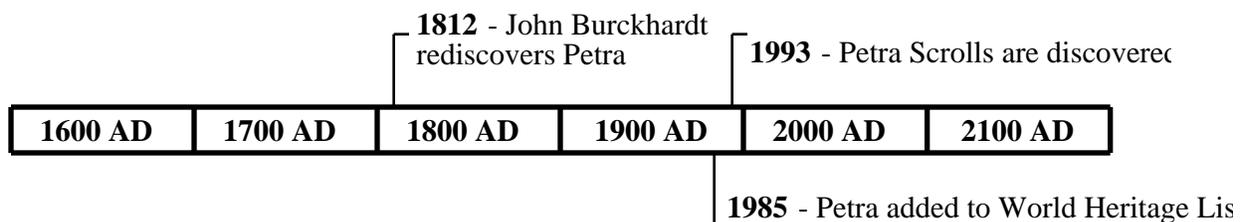
¹ From Dean Burgon’s prize winning poem, “Petra”

when one visits Petra today, the urn atop the Khaznat al-Faroun is covered with bullet marks from people hoping to release Pharaoh's treasure. (Note the Arab marksman depicted shooting at the urn in Léon de Laborde's 1826 etching below.) Local lore would also have you believe that Pharaoh created the Qasr al-Bint Faroun. The story follows that after disposing of his treasury, Pharaoh still felt hindered and hence created the Qasr al-Bint Faroun (the Palace of Pharaoh's Daughter) to house his daughter while he chased after Moses. In reality, the Khaznat al-Faroun was probably commissioned by the Nabatean king Aretas IV as a funerary monument and the Qasr al-Bint Faroun was a temple dedicated to the chief male deity of the Nabateans, Dhushares.



Contrary to the previous myths, we know from a number of credible ancient sources and excavated remains that a major earthquake shook the Mediterranean in 363 AD. One particularly relevant source is a letter that appears to have been written with the sole purpose of describing the destruction that resulted from this earthquake. This letter, Harvard Syriac 99, includes a list of 23 sites that were damaged, including RQM, the Semitic name for Petra. Especially noteworthy is the fact that it includes the precise date and time the earthquake occurred, “Monday, at the third hour, and partly at the ninth hour of the night...on 19 Iyyar of the Year 674 of the Kingdom of Alexander the Greek” (Monday, May 19, 363 AD). In addition, the Syriac letter uses the phrase “more than half” when describing the destruction at Petra which suggesting that a considerable amount of the city was destroyed. (Hammond 66) Such destruction is corroborated by archeologist Philip C. Hammond who has documented a 4th century architectural collapse while excavating the main theater and other sites at Petra. This letter is especially important because it is believed to have been written in the early 5th century AD (400 AD), which is relatively close to the actual time the earthquake occurred. According to archaeologist Kenneth W. Russell, the “violent and abrupt destruction of Petra” is further documented by the abundant find of crushed ceramics, iron-handled copperware, and collapse rubble within an excavated house at Petra. A hoard of coins dating to the appropriate time period was also found on the floor of this house. While excavating at another house, a Swiss team discovered the skeleton of a woman and a hoard of 180 coins. Suleiman Farajat, director of antiquities at Petra, has since noted that the woman probably died in the earthquake of 363 AD. (Hills 3) On the following page, a map illustrating sites affected by the 363 Earthquake is provided.

Until recently, it was also hypothesized that Petra was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 551 AD. However, new information regarding the livelihood of Byzantine Petra has come to light with the discovery of 152 carbonized papyrus scrolls. In 1993, Hamoudi al Bedoul, a local Bedouin, discovered the first remains of these charred papyrus scrolls while excavating at a Byzantine Church in Petra. The 152 “Petra Scrolls” represent the largest collection of ancient texts yet discovered in Jordan. They contain a variety of personal records including sermons, wills, and contracts from the 5th and 6th centuries. It is tempting to believe that the scrolls were preserved by the 551 earthquake; however, the scrolls contain documents from 528, or earlier, till the reign of Tiberius Mauricius 582-602. Although this does not eliminate the possibility that the effects of an earthquake preserved the scrolls it does greatly decrease the likelihood that they were preserved by the earthquake that occurred in 551. The contents of the scrolls also raise questions as to the severity of the earthquake. None of the documents that have been deciphered refer to damages or lost property that could be attributed to an earthquake. In fact, according to leading papyrologist Ludwig Koenen who is in charge of deciphering half of the Petra Scrolls, “present indications create the overwhelming picture of Petra as a viable city with a functioning hinterland throughout the sixth century.” (Koenen 530)



Displayed below is a photograph of one of the Petra Scrolls.

There are still countless secrets and enigmas waiting to be discovered and unraveled at Petra. In fact, it is estimated that only 1% of this ancient city has even been excavated. On December 6, 1985 Petra was recognized as a world heirloom and added to the World Heritage List. Ever since then, the organization has been giving technical and financial assistance for the study and restoration of monuments. Hopefully, the prospect of financial backing by the World Heritage Society will encourage more archaeologists to excavate at Petra. It is important that Petra continue to be excavated for there are still many questions concerning the ancient city and the succeeding people who inhabited it. For example, why did people eventually abandon this noble oasis? Was it simply a factor of trade or had Petra's importance as a trading center diminished so much from the times of Nabateans that it was no longer an important factor in the city's eventual demise? How have earthquakes affected the stability and vitality of Petra over time? What happened to the Nabateans? Were they simply integrated into the succeeding groups of people? Did they move elsewhere? The questions are endless. With each new artifact that is discovered and text that is deciphered our view of Petra and her people becomes more complete, but it is constantly evolving.

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