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THE IDUMEANS
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NABATAEANS IN SOUTHERN SINAI

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Abstract

During the late 1970s-early 1980s several discoveries in southern Sinai changed the view about the Nabataeans in that region. Before, most scholars believed that they passed through or settled in southern Sinai only after the cessation of their kingdom, but the new discoveries showed otherwise. A small Nabataean temple found and excavated on the summit of Jebel Serbal serves here as a departure point to a broader discussion on the role of the Nabataeans in that region.

INTRODUCTION

Until 1979, information on the Nabataeans in Sinai was only derived from rock inscriptions. By the late 19th century, 2742 inscriptions were included in the *CIS II*¹, previously collected by several explorers. Later, Negev (1967, 1971, 1977a, b) published additional 104 inscriptions collected, and a brief survey in southern Sinai by Stone and Avner added 1074, including inscriptions collection from colleagues and hikers, reaching a total of 3920 Nabataean inscriptions (Stone 1992a, b, 1994). Certainly, many inscriptions in southern Sinai still await discovery and recording.

Based on the epigraphic phenomenon, most scholars described the Nabataeans as only passing through Sinai, leaving behind no substantial remains. Palmer (1877:190-193) thought that the inscriptions were unimportant, but attributed them to both travellers and locals. Euting (1891: VII-XII) suggested they were inscribed by merchants and other caravan officials.² Moritz (1916:27-32, quoting from Cantineau 1930:24-25) saw them as the work of pilgrims from Hejaz on their way to sacred mountains: Jebel Musa and Jebel Serbal. Negev (1967:254-5) thought they came for copper mining, but later (1977a:73; 1987, 1991) revised his view, and based on the corpus of personal names from the inscriptions, showed that the Nabataean were actually indigenous in Sinai.³ Meshel (1971:65-6, 2000b), based on the wide distribution of the inscriptions, argued that they were inscribed by a local population only influenced by the Nabatean culture. Teixidor (1998) asserted that the inscriptions were left by an isolated group of a few families of Nabataean Bedouins. Since all eight known dated inscriptions are later than 106 AD,⁴ it was commonly believed that the Nabataeans reached Sinai only after the annexation of their kingdom to the Roman empire (e.g. Cantineau 1930:61; Negev 1967:254-5; 1980:314, Zayadin 1990:164-5; Teixidor 1998:84; Grossmann 2000:156).⁵

In 1979, the view of the Nabataean presence in Sinai changed as a result of several discoveries, which also enabled re-evaluation of the inscriptions' importance. One was the discovery and excavation of a small Nabataean temple on the summit of Jebel Serbal, southern Sinai. This site is at the focus of this article and serves as a departure point for a broader discussion on the Nabataeans in southern Sinai.

¹ See abbreviations in the Bibliography list.

² Euting emphasized that many inscriptions are also found away from trade routes. In his opinion, they were inscribed in-between caravan seasons, while camels were grazing.

³ In another publication (1986:115-117) Negev dated the Nabataean presence in Sinai mainly after 106 AD but with some beginnings during the first century AD.

⁴ *CIS II* 963, 964, 1325, 1491, 2666; Negev 1967 Nos. 1, 2, 1981 No. 9.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion on earlier scholarly opinions as to the Nabataeans in Sinai see Cantineau 1930:22-25.

JEBEL SERBAL

Jebel Serbal is a granite mountain in SW Sinai (G.R. 56321676),⁶ 2070 m above sea level. It is not the highest mountain in Sinai, but is the highest above its own vicinity, steeply rising 1350 m above the Feiran Oasis, the largest in Sinai, 5 km long (Figs. 1, 2). During the 19th century several scholars visited the mountain, some mentioned Nabataean inscriptions on the summit (Burckhardt 1822:604-610; Bartlett 1849:32-64; Lepsius 1853:205-207; Wilson 1880:74). Burckhardt and Wilson described a large cairn built at the top, which Wilson (*ibid*) interpreted as an installation for fire signalling in times of danger. Lepsius (1853:532-562) suggested identifying Jebel Serbal with the biblical Mount Sinai, as did Currelley, following Petrie's opinion (in Petrie 1906:251-254).

Since 1968 Jebel Serbal has been frequently visited by hikers and researchers. During my first visit to the mountain (June 1979) I observed several elements. The main one was the cairn and debris of granite rocks mentioned by the early explorers, *ca.* 8 x 8 m, and up to 1.1 m high (Fig. 3). Interpretation of the cairn as built for fire signals was unconvincing, rather, it seemed to be the remains of a small building. More so, many pieces of hard, white plaster found among the rocks indicated the building's importance. Faint clues were observed in the debris of a square within a square structure, recalling a ground-plan of a small, quadrangle Nabataean temple. A few small sherds of fine Nabataean pottery supported this impression.

In a small valley just below and southeast of the summit, additional elements were observed: two rock shelters protected by built walls at their front, the remains of several tent bases or huts, *ca.* 3 m in diameter, and a stone staircase, originally 30 m long, leading up from this valley to the summit. Although mostly collapsed, some steps remained intact (Fig. 4). Smaller staircases were also observed along a trail leading up to the summit from the spring of 'Ein Loza (west of the summit, 1820 m a.s.l.). About seventy Nabataean inscriptions were photographed in the small valley and on the summit rock (Fig. 5), twenty of which were already published in the *CIS*, II (2104-2123), a few were published by Negev 1971, Nos. 30-33 while others were catalogued by Stone (see index in Stone 1994:234), based on photographs of myself and of others.⁷ One inscription mentions the title אֲכַפְלָא (high priest, Fig. 5).

Following the first visit I returned twice to the summit with a small group of volunteers⁸ to excavate the building, with the logistic support of A. Goren, the archaeological staff officer of the Israeli Administration in Sinai. The excavation confirmed that the cairn was indeed a small Nabataean sanctuary. Following is a brief, general description of the site and the excavation results:⁹

The summit rock is *ca.* 6 x 8 m, rising vertically on three sides. To its north and 3.5 m below, is the flat rock space, *ca.* 12 x 25 m, which served as an open courtyard, surrounded by steep and deep cliffs on three sides (Figs. 6, 7). On the eastern side, two parallel low walls were built. The outer one, on the cliff edge, is more massive, and a rectangular cell is incorporated in the northern end, 1.3 x 1.8 m and 0.6 m high. On the eastern side of the courtyard is a large isolated bolder 1.80 x 0.9 m and 0.8 m high which most probably served as an altar. North-west of the courtyard is a natural rock knoll *ca.* 1.5 m high, with a line of stone debris at its foot. Removal of the fallen stones exposed the remains of a staircase, 7 m long, with two preserved steps, well-built of roughly cut granite blocks. The amount of debris, however, indicates that four steps were originally built.

The sanctuary remains are situated on top of this rock knoll (Figs. 6, 7). Following the removal of the debris, the top of walls were revealed, rendering the general ground-plan of an inner square, 2 x 2

⁶ All Grid References here are UTM.

⁷ The corpus is now under preparation for online access on the website of the Hebrew University, by M. Stone and E. Damboritz (<http://rockinscriptions.huji.ac.il/site/index>). Unfortunately, deciphering of the new inscriptions has not been completed yet, but photographs and data of part of the inscriptions can be accessed. Searching and counting names and words from the catalogue is not yet possible.

⁸ I am grateful to the volunteers: Gideon Haran, the late Ira Fiddleman, Ziona Moshe, Arieh Naeh, and Yoni Peperman for their help climbing up to the summit twice with the excavation equipment, and working under difficult conditions.

⁹ A monograph with a detailed excavation report was submitted in 1997 to the Egyptian Council of Archaeology, as well as the finds. It was also submitted to the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) but remained unpublished and stored in the IAA archive. For a preliminary Hebrew publication see Avner 1982.

m, and an outer rectangle, 4.2 x 5.8 m, opened to S-SW and forming a *pronaos* (Figs. 8, 9). Numerous fragments of hard, white plaster were found among the stones, as well as a few pottery sherds. The *pronaos*, 3 m wide and 2.4 m deep, was flanked by two walls, poorly preserved to only one incomplete course. Along the left wall was a low ledge of white plaster, *ca.* 35 cm wide and 4 cm high, laid on the natural rock floor and embedded with some small flagstones. A small circular platform of plaster was incorporated in the ledge's centre, 32 cm in diameter and 7 cm high (Fig. 8). The rest of the perimeter walls were preserved up to 0.5 m, while white plaster, up to 2.5 cm thick, was found both inside and outside (Fig. 10).

The inner square, 2 x 2 m, was 0.5 m high, with a flat top. Excavation inside it showed it was actually a podium, *i.e.* the Nabataean *mwtb* (see below). Between the podium and the outer walls a narrow corridor was left, 0.5 m wide. It was covered by stone debris on top of a silt and arkose layer, 0.3 m thick. A vertical lining of white plaster supporting the fill remained in the front of each end of the corridor (Fig. 8) indicated that the fill was intentional. Excavation of the fill yielded the majority of finds, which were deliberately concealed there. The fill, the podium and the outer walls were all resting on the flat natural rock. In the *pronaos*, just in front of the inner square, a stone slab was laying on the rock surface, measuring 42 x 35 cm, and 4 cm thick (Fig. 8).

THE FINDS

Only 34 pottery sherds were collected in the dig. With the exception of two, all were non-diagnostic body sherds, both regular and fine Nabataean pottery. One small sherd of a rouletted hemispheric bowl could be dated to the first century BC and AD. Five sherds were "white Nabataean pottery" or "cream ware", and four others were Late Roman "Red Ware".

Two fragments of well-haped sandstones architectural profiles were found in the *pronaos* debris, with *kima* and two steps (Fig. 11). They are similar but not identical, therefore originating from two different architectural elements, probably windows in the outer walls. They certainly indicate some splendour of the original building.

Ten Beads and crystals were found (Fig. 12): Two crystals and three biconical beads of purple amethyst, still found today on Jebel Serbal, one biconical orange carnelian bead, two elongated polished alabaster beads and two of opaque glass, one actually imitates an alabaster bead. Five shell items were found (identified by J. Daphni): Two are cowry shells (*Cypraea nebrites* and *Cypraea sp.*), one was shaped as a pendent. In addition, one ring was made of the aperture of *Turbo sp.* and a small bracelet fragment probably cut from *Lambis truncata sebae*. All are Red Sea species, but another is fresh water snail, *Melanopsis sp.*, most probably brought from the nearby spring of 'Ein Loza.

Twenty-seven fragments of fine glass were found, two from bowl rims, one from a base and the others are body sherds. Their general dating, by the late D. Barag, was 1st century BC and AD.

Seven metal objects were found (Fig. 13). Five were interred in the lower level of the passage, one found in the *pronaos*, one over the eastern wall and one was found after the excavation, among stones which collapsed from the outer eastern wall (see Note 10).

1. A copper foot of a bowl cast as an eagle leg and claw, 42 x 56 mm, 64 gr., with two wings and two drilled holes that still bare the remains of iron nails.¹⁰ Based on the wings' curve, the leg supported a metal bowl 30 cm in diameter or greater, originally one of three or four legs.

2. A pair of copper ibex horns, 115 mm long, 132 gr., with a peg at the bottom.

3. A copper disk 63 mm in diameter, 1 mm thick, 25 gr.

4. An incomplete decorated silver ring, 7 mm wide, 16 mm in diameter.

5. A fragment of a small copper bowl with a folded rim.

6. A fragment of a larger copper bowl or platter, with a folded rim (25 x 66 mm).

7. A crumbled fragment of a crater or a bowl (14 x 25 mm, 2 mm thick).

¹⁰ The object was found by Y'acob Shalvin while visiting the site following the excavation, among stones collapsed from W. 7, in L. 2. I thank him and the late Hanan Eshel for handing it to me, enabling its chemical analysis and publication.

Four metal objects were analysed by I. Segal and A. Kaminski, for chemical composition and technology of manufacture.¹¹ The results showed that the ibex horns and eagle foot contained 7.2% tin and 25% lead, undoubtedly deliberately added in order to increase alloy fluidity and improve the cast. The crater fragments were made of tin bronze, containing 2.5% tin and 0.2% lead. Other elements such as arsenic, antimony, iron, *etc.* were present in low contents (*ca.* 0.1%).

One silver coin was found (Fig. 14, not chemically analysed, described by D. Barag and D. Ariel): It is 4.21 gm, 16 x 18 mm, axis 12: *Obv.*- Heads of 'Abdat (Obodas) III, and the queen, the former with diademed curly hair falling on his neck, the latter draped. *Rev.*- Diademed head of 'Abdat III with long curly hair falling down on the nape of his neck. The abbreviated inscription reads: "[עבדת מלכא מלך נבטן] 11 שנת" ['*Abdat the king, king of Nabatea*] Year 11).

This silver coin of 'Abdat III is in a good condition and the first to be found of year 11 (20/19 BC). (*Cf.* Meshorer 1975:91, No. 29, Year 10), nor does it appear among coins published by Schmitt-Korte 1990b (*eg.* Nos. 16, 19, 20, and 24).

Botanical and organic remains (identified by M. Kislev) included the following species: six carbonised date pits, five dried complete apricots, one *Zizyphus* and two dried *Crataegus* fruits. Also found was a lump of unidentified organic material with poor remains of a copper bowl, and an unidentified tree bark. Most fruits continue to grow in the mountains today, apricots are the product of intentional horticulture and is still cultivated in Bedouin gardens in the high mountain area. The organic material lump (examined by M. Gursky in the Israeli Police Laboratory, Jerusalem) contained fat and sucrose, but remained unidentified. A radiocarbon date from this lump rendered calibrated date- 30 BC-80 AD.¹²

Faunal remains, analysed by Liora Kolska-Horwitz¹³ included 70 animal bones, mostly found over the outer walls. Fifty-one of the bones were too burnt for species identification and five of the nineteen identified ones were burnt too. The identified bones were two of gazelle, eight sheep or goat and nine domesticated chicken (*Gallus gallus*). The fact that 80% of the bones were burnt indicate the sacrificial role of the animals in the site, much like the botanical remains.

THE SERBAL SITE AND FINDS, DISCUSSION

LOCATION OF THE SANCTUARY

The sanctuary was built on the mountain top with a magnificent, complete panoramic view. As mentioned before, Jebel Serbal is the highest in Sinai above its own vicinity, 1350 m above the Feiran Oasis (Fig. 2). Several trails lead to the summit from Wadi Feiran through Wadi 'Aliyat and Wadi 'Ejla, all are steep and strenuous. An additional trail makes a long detour through Wadi Rim, southeast of the mountain, is passable by laden animals. It is well built with massive retaining walls. Built trails in south Sinai are usually ascribed to Byzantine Christian monks, but in this case it is highly likely to be Nabataean. All trails lead up to the spring of 'Ein Loza (the "almond spring"), from which another hour on foot is needed to reach the summit, with no access for animals. Small staircases and a larger one just below the summit (Fig. 7) were built in an attempt to somewhat ease the strenuous ascent. Nevertheless, pilgrimage to the sanctuary required a whole day climb from the Feiran Oasis, which also meant at least one overnight stay. The small valley just below the summit to the southwest, with the two grottos and tent bases, was the only choice for camping near the sanctuary. Carrying building stones, large amounts of lime and water for making plaster, wood for scaffolds *etc.* to the summit certainly required enormous effort and determination, as well as organisation. The sanctuary's location and its difficult access attest to the importance and sacredness of high mountains in the Nabataean religion (see below).

¹¹ The chemical and metallographic study of these object, by I. Segal and A. Kaminski, is included in the detailed report submitted to the IAA and to the Egyptian Council of Archaeology.

¹² Rt1839. 1980±45 BP, 86.2% probability. I thank Israel Carmi of Weizmann Institute for the radiometric dating.

¹³ For a detailed report and discussion on the faunal remains see Kolska-Horwitz 2005:195-203.

ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS

The sanctuary's courtyard, as described, is a natural, flat rock surface just below the summit rock (Figs. 13, 14). The remains of two walls preserved on the north-western side served as a *temenos* limit, probably belonging to different phases. The rectangular cell incorporated in the outer wall of the courtyard was not excavated, for lack of time, but is assumed to be either a tomb (possibly of a priest) or a receptacle for offerings. The inner *temenos* wall was only loosely built and is probably later. The courtyard, ca. 12 x 25 m (up to the staircase), could have accommodated some 400 people. The isolated rock block on the eastern side of the courtyard (Fig. 6, 7) was obviously placed there deliberately, most probably as an altar. Its position provided an open space for the worshippers to stand nearby, allowing the prevailing wind to carry the smoke and odour away from the congregation. The staircase was actually not compulsory but it contributed some emphasis to the sanctuary building.

The sanctuary itself follows a simple plan- an inner square within an open rectangle (Figs. 8, 9). This is one of the two basic types of Nabataean sanctuaries, as found at Khirbet Tanur, A-Ram, Kh. Dharib and elsewhere (Glueck 1966; Hachlili 1975:95-101; Netzer 2003:65-115; Villeneuve & Al-Muheisen 2003). It is also found in the sanctuaries of Si'in the Hauran (Butler 1916). The term "quadrangle" usually attributed to this type is actually a direct parallel to the Nabataean term- רבעהא mentioned in an inscription from Madain Salih (CIS II 160) and in another from Tell ash-Shuqafiya, the eastern Nile Delta (Fima & Johns 1990, Figs. 1a, b, Line 1). Sanctuaries of this type were usually built outside cities, next to ancient roads, but one sanctuary of this type within a town is known to date, at Qasrawet, northern Sinai (Oren & Netzer 1978; Oren 1982). The Serbal sanctuary is the smallest of its type presently known, however, as mentioned above, any construction project on this remote and high summit is bold and admirable. As mentioned, construction required transporting building stones, wood for scaffolds etc. to the summit. Materials for plaster alone, i.e. burnt lime, clay and silt are calculated at 3.9 tons, plus several tons of water.¹⁴

The orientation of the building towards the south-west seems to be dictated by the summit topography, not by a sacred orientation. This may accord with the lack of a dominant orientation in thousands of Nabataean standing stones found in the Negev and Sinai (Avner 2000), in contrast to the majority of earlier *masseboth* that face the east (Avner 1984, 1993, 2001, 2002 Ch. 4). It seems that the Nabataeans held a pantheistic belief, perceiving god's spirits as being everywhere, a perception still preserved in early Islam (*Qur'an* 2:115).¹⁵

Nothing in the building indicated the original height of the walls or the existence of a ceiling. However, the amount of debris and arkose from the decaying stones implies a one story building, ca. 3 m high. Based on other sanctuaries of this type, the inner space was actually open to the sky, with no ceiling (Hachlili 1975:97). The square podium- the Nabataean *mwtb*- served as the seat or a throne of a deity, specifically- *Dushara*, as is mentioned in inscriptions- "...*Dushara and his mwtb*..." (CIS II:198, 350, Healey 1993:154-158, 238; Wenning 2001:88-90). The *mwtb* obtained sanctity of its own, symbolising the mountain on which the god dwells (see below). Its importance is attested to in the Suidas Lexicon, describing *Dushara* (*Theus-Ares*) as "...*a square block of stone four feet tall and two feet broad. It stands on a golden base*..." (Adler 1931 II:713). Here, the object supported by the *mwtb* could well be the incomplete stone slab (42 x 35 cm, and 4 cm thick, Fig. 8) found laying in the *pronaos* just in front of the podium. Due to its unusual shape, the only such slab on the summit, it is suggested to be a standing stone (*massebah*, *betyl*) representing an abstract, aniconic deity.¹⁶ The stone is larger than most Nabataean standing stones in the desert (Avner 2000), but its suggested position can be supported by the occurrences of *betyls* on top of *mwtb* on coins (see above). It also recalls the stone slab found *in situ* in the *editon* of the Nabataean sanctuary of Qasrawet (Oren & Netzer 1978:96-7; Oren 1982:205, Pl.

¹⁴ Calculation of the walls surface (in and out) yields 83 sq m, which requires ca. 1.4 m³ or 3.9 tons of dry plaster materials and ca. 5 tons of water for the plaster alone.

¹⁵ *Qur'an* 2:115: "To Allah belong the east and to the west; wherever you go there will be the presence of Allah..."

¹⁶ On Nabataean aniconism see Patrich 1990; Mettinger 1995, Ch. 3. For the *mwtb* supporting *betyls* see e.g. Patrich 1990:58, 91-92; Healey 2001:158-9, Wenning 2001:88-90, all with further references.

27: B).

Pilgrims most probably entered the sanctuary and circumambulated the podium in the narrow passage. This interpretation finds support in the ground plan of similar, larger Nabataean temples, and from a rock-cut installation at Madain Salih (Jaussen & Savignac 1909:422-3, Fig. 211; Healey 1993:10, Pl. 12).¹⁷ The low plaster bench on the *pronaos*'s left side most probably served as an offering bench, while the small circular platform in its centre could have supported some cult objects, probably the bronze crater from which fragments were found in the dig (see above).

As mentioned before, the remains of hard, white plaster on all walls, with the amount of plaster found in the debris, indicate that the entire building was plastered. Therefore, this small sanctuary was visible from distances, much like the visibility of the chapels at Jebel Musa and Jebel Katerina, or Aaron's Tomb near Petra today, although these are not white-plastered. The carved sandstone profiles also indicate the aesthetic nature of the building.

INTERPRETATION OF FINDS

Several finds can be seen as sacrifices- the burned fruits and the burnt bone, while others were offerings: beads, shells, crystals, organic lumps and unburned fruits. The occurrence of beads and crystals recall the situation in the Bedouin sanctuary on Jebel Moneijah (see below).

The copper objects demand further discussion. The disk, although not chemically analysed (to avoid damage) was identified as tin bronze. It is generally similar to a mirror, but unlike most Roman mirrors (*c.f.* Anlen & Padiou 1989) it lacks a shaft to be inserted into a handle, and it has no decoration on its back. A more likely interpretation is symbolic, since disk objects are known in cultic context from various periods and cultures.¹⁸ In the classical Near East, including the Nabataean culture, disks often appear next to the crescent symbol, therefore, interpreted as the sun (see *e.g.* the lintel from 'Abdat, Wooley & Lawrence 1936:116; Negev 1997:85). The sun could be perceived as both male or female deities, but here it possibility represented one aspect of *Dushara*. In the facade of tomb A3 at Madain Salih, two inscriptions are engraved. In H1, *Dushara* is the protector of the tomb and the dead,¹⁹ while H2 reads "... *he who separate night from day...*" with no mention of the deity's name (Healey 1993:81-85). Logically, both inscriptions address the same god,²⁰ and therefore, *Dushara* appears as *Helios*, a sun god (Healey 2001:93, 102-107). The sun was worshiped by many peoples in the world (Frazer 1925, Ch. 12) and certainly by the Nabataeans, as described by Strabo (XVI.4.26).

The eagle leg supported a bronze crater, 30 cm or more in diameter, but its design could be more than merely decorative, since eagles are very common in Nabataean art and architecture. For example, in Kh. Tannur (Glueck 1966: Pl. 140), in Petra (Dalman 1908:117, Fig. 34, *etc.*) and many examples on the tombs' facades of Madain Salih (Jaussen & Savignac 1909, Figs. 138, 160, 162-165, *etc.*). Based on its contexts, mainly in tombs, the eagle is interpreted as representing a sky god, identified with *Dushara* and *Ba'al Shamin*, (Sourdel 1952:19-31, 66-68; Glueck 1966:471-479; Wenning 1996:257-8, 2009:583). Hence, the crater which the eagle leg supported, could have served for the cult of *Dushara* or was dedicated to him.

The occurrence of ibex horns in the sanctuary is certainly not accidental, since they were also found in a Nabataean temple at 'Aynuna, on the Sa'udi coast of the Red Sea, probably the Nabataean Leuke Kome.²¹ The horns could have been connected to several objects: **1.** Since its chemical composition is identical to that of the eagle leg, they were possibly cast together to be applied to the same metal ware. In this case, the horns could have been applied to the rim or shoulder of the crater, that served for libation or other cultic purpose. **2.** The horns were attached to the metal body of an ibex statuette which did not

¹⁷ On the role and meaning of circumambulation (Arabic- *Tawaf*) see d'Alviella 1910; Buhl 2000; Eck 2005.

¹⁸ For example: a clay disk in the sanctuary quarter of Megiddo (Megiddo I, Pl 103) and in Tel Nasbeh (McCown 1947:204).

¹⁹ Additional connection of *Dushara* to death comes from his identification with *Dionysos chthonios* (Patrich 2005).

²⁰ In the ancient Near East, the sun was often related to the world of the dead (see *e.g.* Healey 1980).

²¹ Ibrahim 'Ali Ghabban, lecture in the Arabian Seminar, London, July 1997. On the question of Leuke Kome location see Nappo 2010 with references.

survive. If so, a close parallel is the smaller bronze ibex found in the Byzantine town of Rehovot (Tsafrir 1979:128), in a Christian context but still in a Nabataean cultural realm.²² 3. The ibex horns were attached to an altar or *mwtb*. This option is supported by the occurrence of ibex heads on an alter/*mwtb* on several coins of Adra'a, Syria, late 2nd century AD (Hill 1922:xxiv-xxix; Spijkerman 1978:60-61, Pl. 10:1, 4; Kindler 1983, Pl. V:6a, probably also 7, 8, 8a).²³ A good example of these coins is kept in the numismatic collection of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem (Fig. 15).²⁴

Presently, no preference is given to any of the above options. Nevertheless, there are ample indications for the adoration of the animal- as a symbol of a deity. Ibexes often occur in Near Eastern art since prehistory. It is the most recurrent item on decorated Iranian and Mesopotamian pottery of the 6th to 4th millennia BC (Ackerman 1967). It recurs in cultic context in the Chalcolithic copper hoard of Nahal Mishmar (Elliott 1977:6-9; Bar Adon 1980:42-45, 100-101) and it decorates plastered walls of the Chalcolithic village of Tell Hujayrat al Ghuzlan, in 'Aqaba (Schmidt 2009). The ibex is the predominate item in rock art of all periods in the Negev, Sinai, southern Jordan and elsewhere.²⁵ From presentations of ibexes on Late bronze pottery and Ivory carvings, it seems to represent a young god (see figures, references and discussion in Avner 1993). In south Arabia, the god 'Attar was identified as an ibex and perceived as a rain giver (Serjeant 1967:35-40), much like its role in prehistoric Iran (Ackerman 1967). The cultic connection of the ibex is also seen in Sabaeen incense burners to which ibex figurines are attached (Barnett 1964; Avanzini 2005). The importance of the ibex in the Nabataean cult finds expression also in the occurrence of Nabataean ibex-shaped pottery vessels from Muhayy in Jordan (Bienkowski 1991:82), from Mamshit in the Negev and fragments from Moyat 'Awad and Hatzeva in the 'Araba (Erickson-Gini 2010:133, Fig. 4.60). She suggested that these vessels were used for baby feeding or for oil storage, but they could also be used in cultic context, such as libation.

In light of these few examples, the ibex as a mountain animal may have well represented Dushara- a mountain god and the head of the Nabataean pantheon. His temple was built on a high mountain-top, that brings rain to the desert. The ibex connection to *Dushara* is also expressed on the Adra'a coins, where the title- "*Dusares the god of the people of Adraa*" attends the ibex heads on the *mwtb* (Fig.15, and references above). The mountain itself could be perceived as the *mwtb* of the god, as is inferred from the word of Stephanus of Byzantium (6th century AD, quoted from Starcky 1966:986): "*Dusare- a jutting cliff and the highest mountain in Arabia. It is named after Dusaros, the god worshiped by the Arabs...*". *Dushara* is often related to Jebel ash-Shara, east of Petra or to the Edomite Mountains in general, but also to mountains in Arabia (Starky 1966:986; Healey 2001:87; Zayadin 2003:59). Indeed several mountain high-places are known around Petra such as Jebel Madhbah and Jebel Khubtha.²⁶ The Serbal summit, nevertheless, is by far the highest and hardest to access.

If the three copper objects discussed here indeed relate to *Dushara*, they possibly reflect three aspects of the god: The bronze disc as a symbol of a sun god, both life giver and protector of the dead; the ibex horns representing the mountain god and rain giver; the eagle- a sky god and carrier of the souls of the dead to heaven.

²² Many names on Byzantine, Greek epitaphs from Rehovot are Nabataean (Negev 1991:130-136), while part of the private European names still bear Nabataean fathers' names (Negev 1981:84-88; Figueras 2004:235-240). This means that other Nabataean persons could have had pure European names. Accordingly, the vast majority of excavated skeletons from the Byzantine Negev were identified as local- Arabian (Hershkovitz *et al.* 1988; Nagar 1999; Nagar & Sonntag 2008).

²³ In the referred publications, the massive object on the reverse is identified as an altar, however, since it supports a *betyl*, it should be seen as *mwtb*. The animal heads on both sides are identified as ibexes, though their long neck make them more similar to gazelle. However, since the gazelle is a plain animal, unlike the ibex, the identification of the horned animal as an ibex is preferable (see further below).

²⁴ I am grateful to the late D. Barag who provided me with the photograph and the permission to include it here.

²⁵ An article on the ibex in rock-art is now under preparation by Avner.

²⁶ Musil 1907:80-97; Dalman 1908:157-183, 332-344; Brünnow & Domszewski 1904:239-249; Starcky 1966:1006; Wenning 1987: 216-220, 2003; Maoz 2008.

JEBEL MONEIJAH

Jebel Moneijah is located 4.5 km north of Jebel Serbal (G.R. 53431740), 1165 m above sea level, steeply rising 515 m above the Feiran Oasis (Fig. 16). Its full name is Jebel Moneijat Musa, *i.e.* the mountain of Moses' conference (with God), based on a Bedouin tradition. In 1868 the summit was visited by Wilson and Palmer (1969:213; Palmer 1871:173-4) who described a Bedouin cult place with a small enclosure (Fig. 17, today 5.5 x 5.5 m and 1.5 m high) where the region's inhabitants used to sacrifice to Moses and leave votive offerings. Palmer copied 15 Nabataean inscriptions engraved on the enclosure's stones (Fig. 18) but did not consider them important. Later, 17 inscriptions were included in the *CIS II* (2659-2663, 2665-2669, 2671, 2673-2679). These inscriptions contained a large cluster of priestly titles: אִפְכָּלָא/אִפְכָּלָא (high priest)- six times, מְבַקְרָא (sacrifice overseer)- four times, כֹּהֵנָא (priest)- once and כְּתָבָא (scribe)- once (Fig. 18).²⁷ The time span of the Moneijah sanctuary is unknown, but one inscription (*CIS II* 2666) mentioned "year 113", most probably 219 AD.

In 1976 the site was visited by S. Levy and A. Goren. They added 13 inscriptions from the trail leading up to the summit, which were published by Negev (1977b). One inscription added one occurrence of the title אִפְכָּלָא. Levy (1977, 1987:396-7) described a Bedouin custom, still practiced until recently, based on interviews with informants. In brief, once a year shepherd girls went up to the enclosure with their flocks to perform a ceremony dedicated to *Musa* (Moses), the patron of shepherds, to ensure the herds' fertility. Besides the annual event, Bedouins from all southern Sinai were undertaking pilgrimages to the mountain for several holidays and private occasions. One man (Jum'a) from the Feiran Oasis was in charge of the enclosure and its maintenance.

During my three visits to Jebel Moneijah (1979 and 1996) beads, buttons, coins and other small offering objects were still placed in a small niche in the southern wall. Around the enclosure there were several circular platforms, 2-3 m in diameter, with a low stone wall on their perimeter (Fig. 19). They were described as camping places by Levi and Goren, but in antiquity they could also be platforms for "sky burials". On the enclosure walls, the published inscriptions were visible and legible, but I also noticed others inscribed on stones incorporated within the walls. This means that the walls may actually still contained more, unseen inscriptions. Altogether I counted 45 inscriptions in the enclosure alone and three more 7 m to the SW. Forty-four inscriptions could be read, copied or photographed. This count increased the number of אִפְכָּלָא/אִפְכָּלָא to eleven and מְבַקְרָא to seven. Remarkably, Jebel Moneijah is the only site known to date in the entire Nabataean sphere, including the Negev, Jordan and Northern Hejaz, with such a high number of priestly titles.²⁸ The titles attest to a Nabataean sanctuary built in the past on this summit, more important than that of Jebel Serbal (with only two inscriptions bearing priestly titles). The sacred tradition of this site is obviously pre-Christian while the current Bedouin tradition actually echoes the Nabataean cult, or even older (see below).

One of the informants of Levy about the Bedouin customs was Jum'a, in charge of the precinct, who also conducted a repair of the enclosure in 1968. His position recalls another related Nabataean title- בִּיתָא ("in charge of the house") found in eleven inscriptions in southern Sinai.²⁹ The referred "house" is most probably a temple, similar to a "house" in a Nabataean inscription from Madain Salih (Healey 1993:34, 230).³⁰ More so, the title recalls the words of Diodorus (III:42.2-4): "...This region is called the 'Palm Grove' (*Phoinikon*) and contains multitude of trees of this kind, which are exceedingly fruitful and contribute an unusual degree to enjoyment and luxury.... Moreover, an altar is built there of hard stone and very old in years, bearing an inscription in ancient letters of an unknown tongue. The oversight of the sacred precinct is in the care of a man and a woman who hold the sacred office for life"

²⁷ For the titles' meaning see Savignac 1933:412; Negev 1977b:229; Healey 2001:163-165, with references.

²⁸ For references to a few other occurrences of Nabataean priesthood titles see Healey 1993: 160-162, 2001:163-165.

²⁹ Ten inscriptions (*CIS II*:1612, 1814, 1969, 1985, 2068, 2086, 2501, 2514, 2648, 2845) bear the same name- עבדאלבעלי בר עמיו בר חלצת one (2226) belongs to בר עליי ...'

³⁰ The title occurs seven times in the Bible (2Kings 18:18, 19:2, 22:5; Isaiah 22:15 *etc.*), on the Siloam inscription (Avigad 1954) and on a seal from Tell Duweir/Lachish (Hooke 1935). However, in most of these cases the title is secular. For the Nabataean title see Negev 1977b:229.

(Trans. C. Oldfather. *LCL* 1935). A close description has been given by Strabo (XVI. 4.18).³¹

THE NABATAEANS IN SINAI

The discovery and excavation of the small Serbal sanctuary challenges the common view that the Nabataeans only passed through Sinai or only settled here after the annexation of their kingdom to the Roman empire in 106 AD (see the Introduction). The coin of 'Abdat III, dated 20 BC, was newly minted with no wear, so it cannot be interpreted as brought to the sanctuary long after the kingdom era. Most pottery sherds are typical Nabataean, 1st centuries BC and AD, and the ¹⁴C dates from organic material falls between 30 BC and 80 AD *i.e.* from the time of 'Abdat III to Rabael II. Some Late Roman pottery sherds attest to a prolonged use of the sanctuary into the 3rd century AD, corresponding with the dated inscription from Jebel Moneijah (*CIS* II 2666- "year 113" *i.e.* 219 AD) and the other seven dated inscriptions from Sinai, all from the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (see Note 4).

NABATAEAN RELIGION IN SOUTHERN SINAI

The intensive occurrence of priesthood titles in southern Sinai, unparalleled in any other Nabataean territory, must attest to the religious importance of the region. On Jebel Serbal, *Dushara*, the chief Nabataean god, was assumably worshiped, based on interpretation of the copper objects. On Jebel Moneijah, unfortunately the deity/deities worshiped is/are unknown.³² Interestingly enough, three other mountains in southern Sinai bear the same Bedouin name (*i.e.* the mountain of Moses' conference). Two are in the north-western part of southern Sinai and one, just east of Jebel Musa (Mt. Moses). Since the Bedouin tradition seems to continue the Nabataean one (Levi 1977; Negev 1977b), apparently several mountains in southern Sinai were sanctified by the Nabataeans. Jebel Musa itself could be one, since many Nabataean inscriptions are found on the mountain and at its foot. According to Palmer (1871:6), Jebel Musa was originally named Jebel Moneijah, but since it became sacred to Christians, the name was transferred to the neighboring, lower mountain.

Besides on Jebel Serbal and Jebel Moneijah, priestly titles and Nabataean deity names occur in a number of other inscriptions in southern Sinai. High priest (אפכלא/אכפלא) is mentioned in three additional inscriptions (*CIS* II:969, 2188; Negev 1971, No. 33), the title ביתיא ("in charge of the house") is found in eleven inscriptions (see Note 29), and כתבא, a scribe, is mentioned once more (*CIS* II: 825). Other inscriptions mention names of priests (כהן) of the deities they served, of: *Uzia* (*CIS* II 611, 1236, 1748), *T'a* (*CIS* II 506, 766, 1748, 1750, 1885, 2491), *Alat/Aala* (*CIS* II 526), *Bubak* and *kayubak* (*CIS* II 572, 698, 3048). The total numbers of clergy titles in southern Sinai are as follows: אפכלא/אכפלא- fourteen times, מבקרא- eleven, כהנא/כהן- twelve, ביתיא- eleven, כתבא- twice, and עלימא- most probably in charge of a cemetery (Hebrew- בית עולם, Aramaic- בית עלמין).

The occurrence of deity names in inscriptions is also important. *Dushara* is mentioned only once in the *CIS* II (912), but three others inscriptions bearing his name were added by Stone and Avner from Wadi Shellal, SW Sinai, where he is mentioned together with *AlBa'ali* (Fig. 20).³³ *AlBa'ali* is also mentioned in *CIS* II 1479, so he is currently known in four inscriptions.

³¹ The "Palm-Grove" is identified either at Wadi Feiran (Negev 1977c:553) or at Al-Tur- Rhaithou (Wenning 1987:188; Teixidor 1998:86). Today the Feiran Oasis is the largest in Sinai (5 km long, Fig. 1), much larger than the scattered small groves of Al-Tut. Since both groves are based on natural water resources, this was most probably the situation in the past as well. Therefore, Wadi Feiran, is the best candidate to be identified with the ancient "Palm Grove". The Nabataean inscriptions from the Wadi Feiran area, especially of Jebel Moneijah, the sanctuary of Jebel Serbal and the lack of any similar remains at Rhaithou, strongly support this identification.

³² A possible clue to the deity/deities worshiped on Jebel Moneijah may come from the names of two of the priests mentioned in the precinct. One is גרמאלבעלי בר ואלת (*GarmalBa'ali son of Walat*) the other עבדאיהו בר עמי (*'Amiyu son of 'AbdAhyu*), *CIS* II 2677, 2678 respectively). Hence, three deity names occur here, *alBa'ali* (*Ba'al*), *Walat* (*Alat*) and *Ahyu* (*Yahu*). For the identification of the deities see Zayadin 1990:159-164).

³³ The inscriptions were recorded by M. Stone and myself during the brief survey of inscriptions in Sinai in 1979-1980 (six excursions of a 5 days each) and first read by the late J. Naveh and by H. Misgav. For further information see Stone 1992b, esp. Nos. 5618-5858 and Sites 90-97 in the inscriptions website (see Note 7).

Nabataean/Arabs deity names occur as theophoric elements in personal names: *Walat=Alat* (*Timwalat*, 'Abdwalat- 18 times); *AlGa/AlGaia* ('Abdalga- 10 times); *Dushara* (*Timdushara*, 'Abddushara- 8 times); 'Abdat (*Tim'abdat*, 'Abd'bdat- 6 times); 'Uzai/'Uzia ('Abd'uzai- 5 times); *Shai'a* ('Abdshai'a- 4 times). However, many more Nabataean personal names contain non-Nabataean theophoric elements: *Ba'al* ('Abdbab'ali, *Garmalba'ali* etc.- 480 times), *El* (*Timalahi*, *Sa'dalahi* etc.- 466 times), *Ahyw*- most probably *Yahu* ('Abdahyw- 14 times,), *Qos* (*Qos'dar*- once) and *Tra*- probably *Asherah* (or *Atarata / Atargatis*) once.³⁴ Interestingly enough, the non-Nabataean gods greatly outnumber the Nabataean ones.

The Mountain sanctuaries, with the variety and numbers of clergy titles, indicate the existence of a Nabataean religious establishment in Southern Sinai during the Kingdom and after.³⁵ Also, since *Ba'al*, *Yahu*, *Asherah* and *Qos* are pre-Nabataean deities, they imply an older, autochthonic population that existed in Sinai. It adopted the Nabataean script, or even the Nabataean culture, but incorporated their older pantheon.

FURTHER CLUES OF AUTOCHTHONIC POPULATION IN SINAI

A repertoire of 1263 different Nabataean names was collected by Negev from the entire Nabataean sphere, 468 names occur in Sinai and the Negev (mostly in southern Sinai) 419 of which are unique to these regions, (Negev 1991:90-93, 96, 180-189). Two private names are obviously older, biblical ones. The name *Paran* (פארן) is known in 47 inscriptions, all but two are from the Wadi Feiran-Wadi Mukatteb area; one from Wadi Hajjaj, SE Sinai (Negev 1977a: No. 233), but inscribed by פארן בר עבדאלבעלי a citizen of Wadi Feiran, (c.f. *CIS* II 1512), and one more from northern Hejaz.³⁶ The almost exclusive occurrence of *Paran* in the Feiran basin indicates that this was the geographical location of the biblical Paran Desert and Mount Paran (Gen. 21:21, Num. 10:12, 12:16, Duet. 33:2). Another biblical name common in Nabataean inscriptions in Sinai is *Qini/Qinu/'Ibn-al-Qini* (קיני, קיני, אבנאלקיני) and similar forms.³⁷ It occurs 72 times in SW Sinai, especially in the areas of turquoise and copper mines (Negev 1991:9, 58) where it was already mentioned on Stella 163 at Serabit al-Khadem,³⁸ dated to the early 2nd millennium BC. All these inscriptions follow the regular Nabataean characters and formulas. Hence, it seems that the older, autochthonic population of southern Sinai, actually absorbed the Nabataean culture. The predominance of the older theophoric elements in private names in Sinai, demonstrates that their role in the population was very significant.

EARLY NABATAEAN INSCRIPTIONS

It is true that all eight known dated Nabataean inscriptions are later than the kingdom era, from 151 to 267 AD (see Note 4). However, in two areas in southern Sinai, inscriptions of Aramaic characters bearing Nabataean names were found in the brief survey of Stone and Avner. Three were by the southern Jebel Baraqa (SE Sinai, Fig. 22, Stone 1992a, #32-34) and one in Wadi Mukatteb, SW Sinai. These inscriptions must have been much earlier than the dated ones, based on two arguments. One- an early Nabataean inscription, of "*Hartat King of Nabatu*" from Elusa (Woolley & Lawrence 1915: Fig. 56), attributed to Aretas I, ca. 168 BC (e.g. Naveh 1982:154-6), is written in Aramaic script. Second-

³⁴ These figures are based on my own count from the *CIS* II, and from Negev (1991:2, 9-69, 80). Unfortunately, the total numbers can be calculated only after the inscription catalogued by Stone will be fully deciphered and available online (see Note 7). For the identification of *Ba'ali*, *Alahi*, *Ahyu* and *Tra* with *Ba'al*, *El*, *Yahu* and *Asherah* see Zayadin 1990:159-164).

³⁵ A "Saracen priest" was still mentioned in southern Sinai around 570 AD by Antoninus of Piacenza, describing rites performed by him while worshiping a sacred stone (Wilkinson 1977:87).

³⁶ Forty-three occurrences of *Paran* (פארן) were recorded in the *CIS* II, while Negev's total count (1991:54) is 46 times in southern Sinai. The name occurs in one inscription from Northern Hejaz, it is mentioned by Negev (1991:54, Note 1) but I did not manage to follow his reference. Interestingly enough, the name also occurs as *Frn* in four Safaitic inscriptions (Harding 1971:464; Winnet & Harding 1978:601).

³⁷ For the biblical *Qeni/Kenites* see Glueck 1970:96-8; Talmon 1959; Abramsky 1975.

³⁸ Petrie 1906:118, Fig. 121; Černý 1935:385. Gardiner *et al.* 1955:147, No.163).

Hieronymus of Cardia, in his first account on the Nabataeans (312 BC, quoted by Diodorus, 19.1.96), mentioned that they sent a letter to Antigonos, written in “*Syrian characters*”. It is possible, therefore, that the Aramaic inscriptions from Sinai are earlier than the emergence of the Nabataean script, in the late 2nd century BC (Naveh, *ibid*). Although only four such inscriptions were found, they provide a clue to Nabataean or at least Arab presence in southern Sinai already in the 3rd or 2nd century BC.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE KINGDOM ERA

In northern Sinai, Nabataean settlement is well attested in the port cities and along the major road from Egypt to Palestine, Phoenicia and Syria (Oren 1980:123-146). Of special importance was the rediscovery of Qasrawet, a Nabataean town dated from the 2nd century BC to the 4th century AD (Oren 1977, 1982, 1987). In southern Sinai, on the other hand, little was known about the Nabataean besides the rock inscriptions until the late 20th century. Nevertheless, a number of sites in the south do reflect Nabataean presence and activity during the kingdom period.

A Nabataean complex was discovered by E. Bergman in 1979 on Jebel ‘Egma, at the top of Naqb Judeid (G.R. 58262250) and was partly excavated by A. & O. Goren (unpublished). It consists of a fortress, two additional buildings, the remains of a stone built tent camp and a large rock-cut water cistern of a type well known in the Negev (Figs. 23, 24). The finds recovered included typical Nabataean pottery, both regular and fine, decorated sherds, 1st century BC and AD, as well as Late Roman pottery. The tent camp is of a type known in tens of sites in the Negev. They are all located next to ancient roads and greatly differ from the hundreds of regular habitation tent camps. Therefore, they are interpreted as military camps, guarding the roads (Avner 2013). The complex of Naqb Judeid obviously guarded the top of the ascent, one of several, that connected southern and northern Sinai. The only plausible justification for such an investment in construction and military man-power is the protection of trade caravans. Hence, the site represents a stronghold built and maintained by the Nabataean government. The continuation of the stronghold into the Late Roman period is also important and will be addressed below.

In the oasis of Dhahab, SE Sinai, Meshel (2000a) excavated probes in a large fortress or caravanserai built on the Red Sea shore, next to a small natural harbour (Fig. 25). Four stages were distinguished in the site: I & II- pre-fortress stages with Nabataean pottery sherds of the 1st centuries BC and AD. III. A Nabataean trapezoid casement fortress, *ca.* 54 X 46 m, with Nabataean decorated pottery and coins of Hartat (Aretas) IV (9 BC-40 AD). IV. A tower, 11 x 11 m, either built by the Nabataeans or during the Late Roman period. The later occupation is evident based on pottery and coins from Diocletian to Constantin (*ca.* 285-335 AD). The Nabataean fortress and the later tower certainly protected the small harbour, and therefore directly relate to marine trade in the Red Sea, as attested to in written sources (Strabo 16.4.18; *Periplus* 19.6.26-28) and discussed by scholars (*e.g.* Avi-Yonah 1968; Casson 1989:60-61, 143-145). The site could not be an isolated spot, as it required some hinterland and supportive population.

Tell Maḥrad in the Feiran Oasis was the Byzantine town of Pharan/Phara (Fig. 26), known from both archeological remains and written sources (see below). A survey of B. Mazar on the tell (referred to by Rothenberg 1961:166) mentioned the collection of pottery of the Iron Age II, the Persian and Hellenistic periods, numerous Nabataean sherds and pottery of later periods. Excavations on the Tell by Grossmann revealed Nabataean pottery and 2nd century BC Arab coins, below the Byzantine buildings, and even the remains of a Nabataean temple.³⁹ Near the Tell is a large cemetery, with Nabataean inscriptions on tombstones (Rothenberg 1970:20; Grossmann 2000:156). These data indicate that the Byzantine phase was actually preceded by a Nabataean town or a village, as mentioned by Ptolemy (below). In addition, skeletal remains from 87 (out of thousands) excavated Byzantine tombs around the tell indicated a local, civilian population, not of European monks as was expected (Hershkovitz *et al.* 1987, 1988). This means that the Byzantine population of the town and oasis was mainly local, that began adopting Christianity

³⁹ Some Nabataean pottery was published from Pharan (Grossmann *et al.* 1996: 26-28) while the Arab coins were only briefly mentioned (Grossmann 1997:3). The remains of a Nabataean temple were also only mentioned but presented in a plan (Grossmann 2001:139-40).

in the mid-4th century AD (Schmitt-Korte 1990a, *c.f.* Politis 2007).

The three sites mentioned here provide a glimpse into a Nabataean presence and activity in southern Sinai during the Kingdom era and later. The Dhahab harbour and fortress represent the Nabataean marine trade in the Red Sea, while the Naqb Judeid stronghold controlled one out of several roads connecting southern Sinai with the north. These two sites possibly indicate that some of the Nabataean marine trade did not reach Aila, but passed through Dhahab- Wadi Nassib- the Watiyah Passage- Naqb Judeid- Qasrawet, to one of the northern Sinai seaports. This route did not gain attention in discussions on Nabataean trade, but is inevitably inferred by the very existence of these sites. They imply that the southern Sinai population was not isolated (*contra* Teixidor 1998:83, 86) but involved in the Nabataean trade during the kingdom era and after its annexation to the Roman empire. The town of Pharan will be addressed just below.

THE NABATAEAN COMMUNITY OF WADI FEIRAN

The “Palm Grove”, the Feiran Oasis (see Note 31), seems to have gained a high reputation in classical written sources (Diodorus 3.42.2-5; Strabo 16.4.18) and later through the narrative of Ammonius (4th century AD, Mayerson 1980a; Caner 2010:141-171). The modern Arabic name, Feiran, directly relates to the town of Pharan and to the biblical Paran (פֶּאֶרָן). In the 2nd century AD Pharan was mentioned as a *kome* by Ptolemy (V.16; Stevenson 1991:128), but later as a *polis* by Eusebius (*Onomasticon* 142, 22-25; Freeman-Grenville 2003:92). Phara is also marked in the *Tabula puentingeriana* (but lacking the sign of a town). Unquestionably, the town was located at Tell Mahrada (Fig. 26), on the western end of the present palm grove of the Feiran Oasis.

As discussed above, the priestly personnel recurring in the Feiran area inscriptions is unparalleled anywhere in the entire Nabataean sphere. They attest to a well organised religious institution that most probably enjoyed a high position in the Nabataean society. This can be inferred from the tomb and inscription of Kamkam, the priestess and her daughter, at Madain Salih (Healey 1993:154-162; Al-Fassi 2007:64-5). In addition to Jebel Moneijah, a scribe (כתבא) is mentioned in another inscription (*CIS* II: 825). Other occupations are deduced from personal names such as a manager or agent, palm farmers, metal smites, weavers, *etc.* (Negev 1991:83, 160).

The title הפרכא (=hyparchos) is mentioned in *CIS* II 790, indicating a governor or military commander (Graf 1994:282-3). Based on palaeography, compared with the dated inscriptions, it should be dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. A military commander is also inferred from the personal name עזיתו/עזית (Negev 1991:50, No 872). These titles imply an administrative and/or military establishment, after 106 AD.⁴⁰ Later, in the late 4th century, an army unit from Pharan, headed by Obedianus (obviously an Arabic-Nabataean name) retaliated following an assault of Blemmyes Saracens⁴¹ on the monks at Rhaithou, saving Ammonius and three other survivors (Ammonius 14, 19, 33-37; Caner 2010:156-169). Details in the Ammonius Report (33) indicate that the action was not of an *ad-hock* militia. He stated that “the Ishmaelite men came from Pharan, six hundred in number, all **select archers**”. The number of warriors is probably exaggerated, but still implies a large population living in the Wadi Feiran area. The mention of the unit’s ethnic identity as *Ishmaelite* is important and accords well with the excavation results of the 87 tombs around the Tell as mentioned above. This unit most probably acted under a Byzantine administration, but it still represents the organisational abilities of the local population.

It seems, therefore, that the Wadi Feiran community maintained religious, economic, administrative and even a military organisational frameworks more than 200 years after the cessation of the Nabataean kingdom. This social-political order cannot be related to any exterior power. Only from the time of

⁴⁰ A parallel title to *hyparchos*, שלטן is suggested by Schmitt-Korte (1990a) in *CIS* II 1196, from Wadi Mukatteb, but the reading seems doubtful. However, the inscriptions, and some others, are accompanied by crosses. Based on strong arguments they were dated by Schmitt-Korte to the mid-4th century AD. For the duration of the Nabataean script into the 4th century AD see also Rosental 1962, Nehme 2005, Graf 2007:180-182; Politis 2007:187-8.

⁴¹ On the Blemmyes, in the Eastern Desert of Egypt see Sidebotham *et al.* 2008:366-371.

Diocletian can one imagine some Late Roman control over the Sinai population.⁴² Before the late 3rd century AD, the local community of Pharan and its surroundings appear as sedentary, self-sustained and well established, enough to collect taxes and pay salaries to various officials and personnel, including a local government, religious institutions and even to a military unit.

SUMMARY

The sanctuaries of Jebel Serbal and Jebel Moneijah contribute information about the Nabataean culture and cult in southern Sinai. The magnificent location of both, atop high summits accessed by strenuous trails, demonstrate the significance and importance of high mountains to the Nabataean religion. This accords well with the location of high-places on the summits around Petra and with the nature of the chief deity *Dushara* as a mountain god. Some of the copper objects from the Serbal sanctuary seem to bear symbolic implications relating to this god or even to his different aspects.

The Serbal sanctuary is safely dated to the Nabataean kingdom era and later, and therefore sheds light on the duration of the Nabataean settlement in the area. Comparison of the personal names from the inscriptions of both Jebel Serbal and Jebel Moneijah, with those in the rest of Sinai and other Nabataean territories (Negev 1977b, 1991), shows that these sanctuaries usually served the local population, while the names unknown in southern Sinai indicate pilgrimage from other regions. Most personal names mentioned in the Sinaitic inscriptions in general are *endemic* to this area and might imply some isolation of the population. On the other hand, the quadrangle ground plan of the sanctuary, the typical, fine Nabataean pottery and the coin of 'Abdat III, suggests contact between the Sinai population with the rest of the Nabataean realm. These contacts are also indicated by the Nabataean strongholds at Naqb Judeid, the fortress at Dahab and the Nabataean remains at Pharan. The pre-Nabataean theophoric components in private names attest to strong autochthonic elements in the populations. However, this population seems to be absorbed into the Nabataean cultural realm, adopting the Nabataean script, language, pottery and cult, probably also social manners and coherence (related by Strabo XVI.4.12,26). If the Nabataean polity served as an "umbrella" for various ethnic groups (Graf 2007:182), it actually shows the power of Nabataean culture, with or without a king and a government.

The inscriptions, the sanctuaries and the other remains, demonstrate a long term and well organised Nabataean community in southern Sinai, maintaining its organisational framework into the Christian era. These remains also indicate that there is still much to learn about the Nabataeans in Sinai, about other-older populations in the region and about desert communities in general.

⁴² This view, of an absence of military/administrative Roman presence in southern Sinai, is different than that expressed by Sartre (1982:38-9), Bowersock (1983:94-5) and others. Millar (1993:338) mentioned three Nabataean inscriptions from Southern Sinai referring to Roman chronology- as an indication for a Roman Empire presence in southern Sinai. Nevertheless, he admitted that Roman and even Nabataean settlement there can hardly be determined. In fact, evidence of Romans in southern Sinai is limited to only three other inscriptions. One, from Wadi Umm Sidra, only 18 km from Aila ('Aqaba), reads: "*VICTORIA AV CC*" (Rothenberg 1961, Pl. 77). The plural form- *CC* actually dates the inscription to the Tetrarchy time, around 300 AD. Another inscription, of a "*...STRATEGIES...*" from Wadi Haggag, eastern Sinai, is dated after 300 AD (Negev 1977a:62-67). Only one inscription, from Wadi Tweibeh, is earlier, mentioning "*... LEG III CYR...*" dated to 106 AD or somewhat later (Alt 1935:62-64; Coleman 1972). However, this inscription is also located only 18 km from Aila. Currently, therefore, we are left with no evidence for imperial Roman presence in southern Sinai prior to Diocletian's reform.

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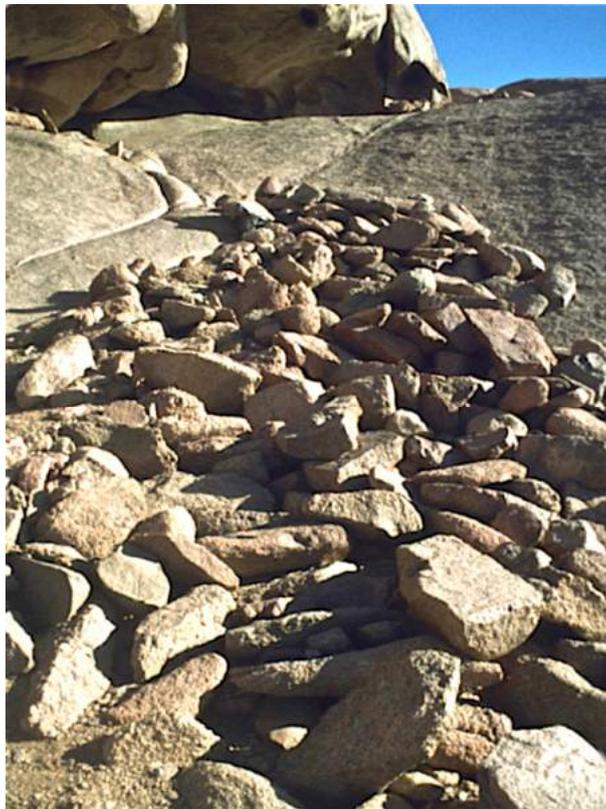
1. The Feiran Oasis, view from Jebel Moneijah



2. Jebel Serbal, looking from Wadi Feiran, east of the oasis



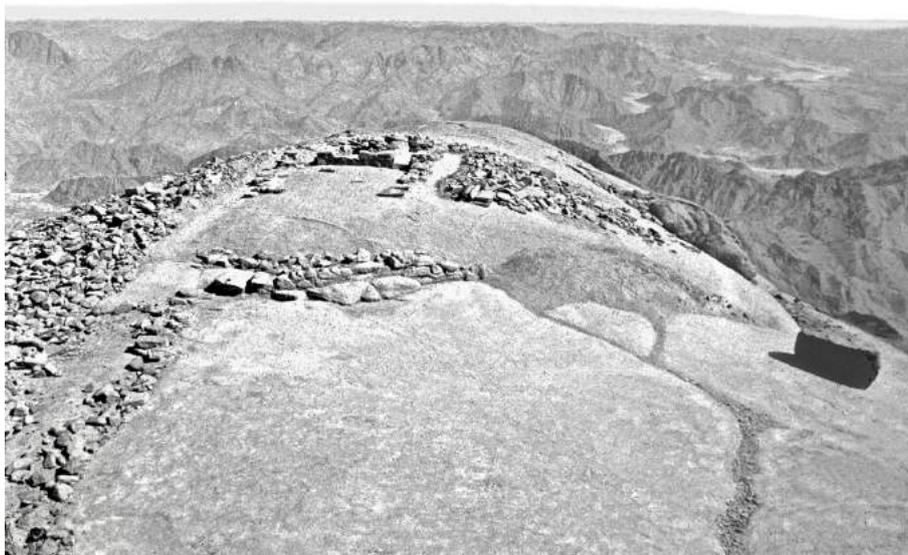
3. Jebel Serbal, stone debris before excavation



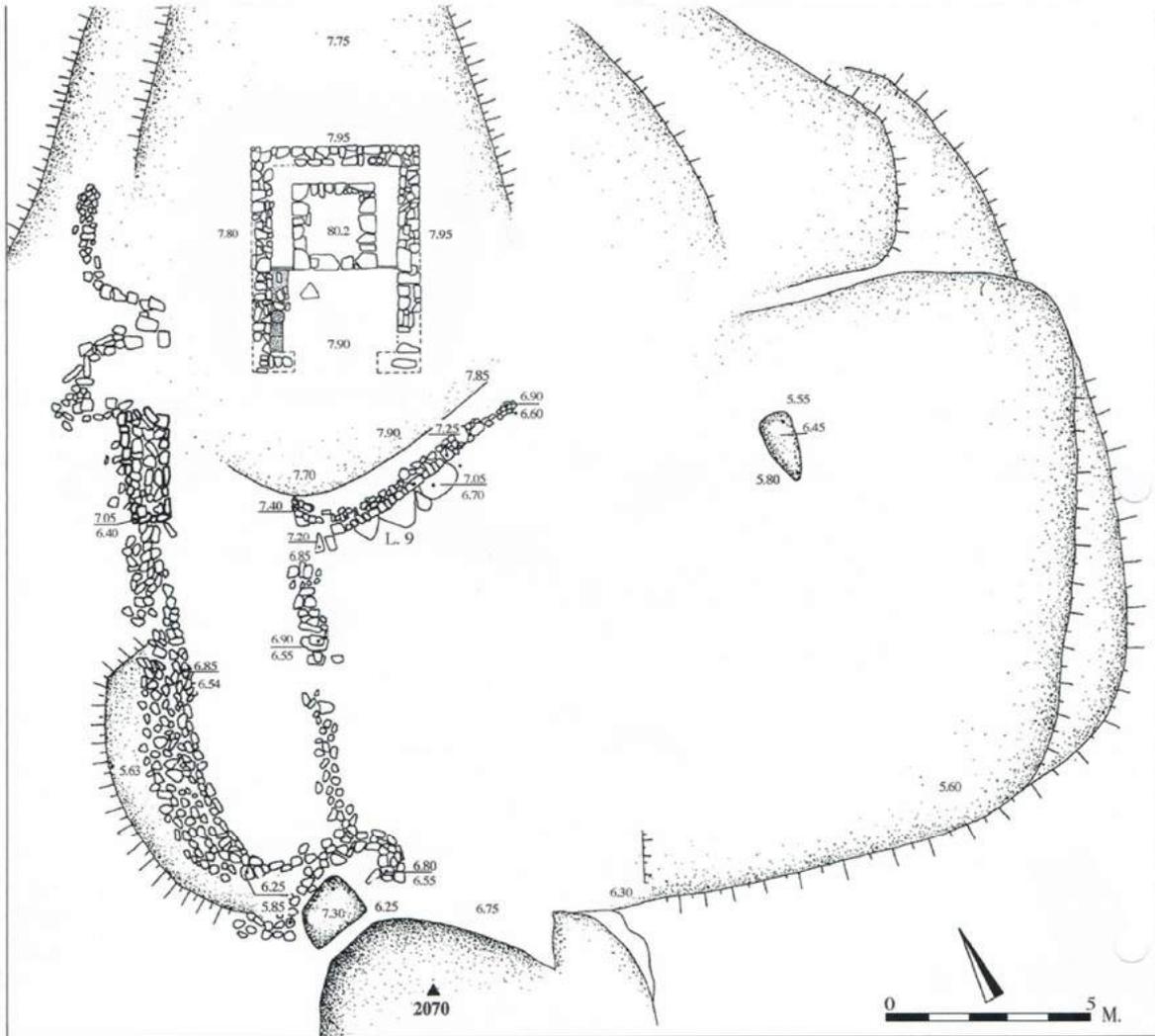
4. Jebel Serbal. The remains of a staircase leading to the summit



5. Jebel Serbal, Nabataean inscriptions below the summit, the arrow points to the title - h (-hאכפלא - high priest)



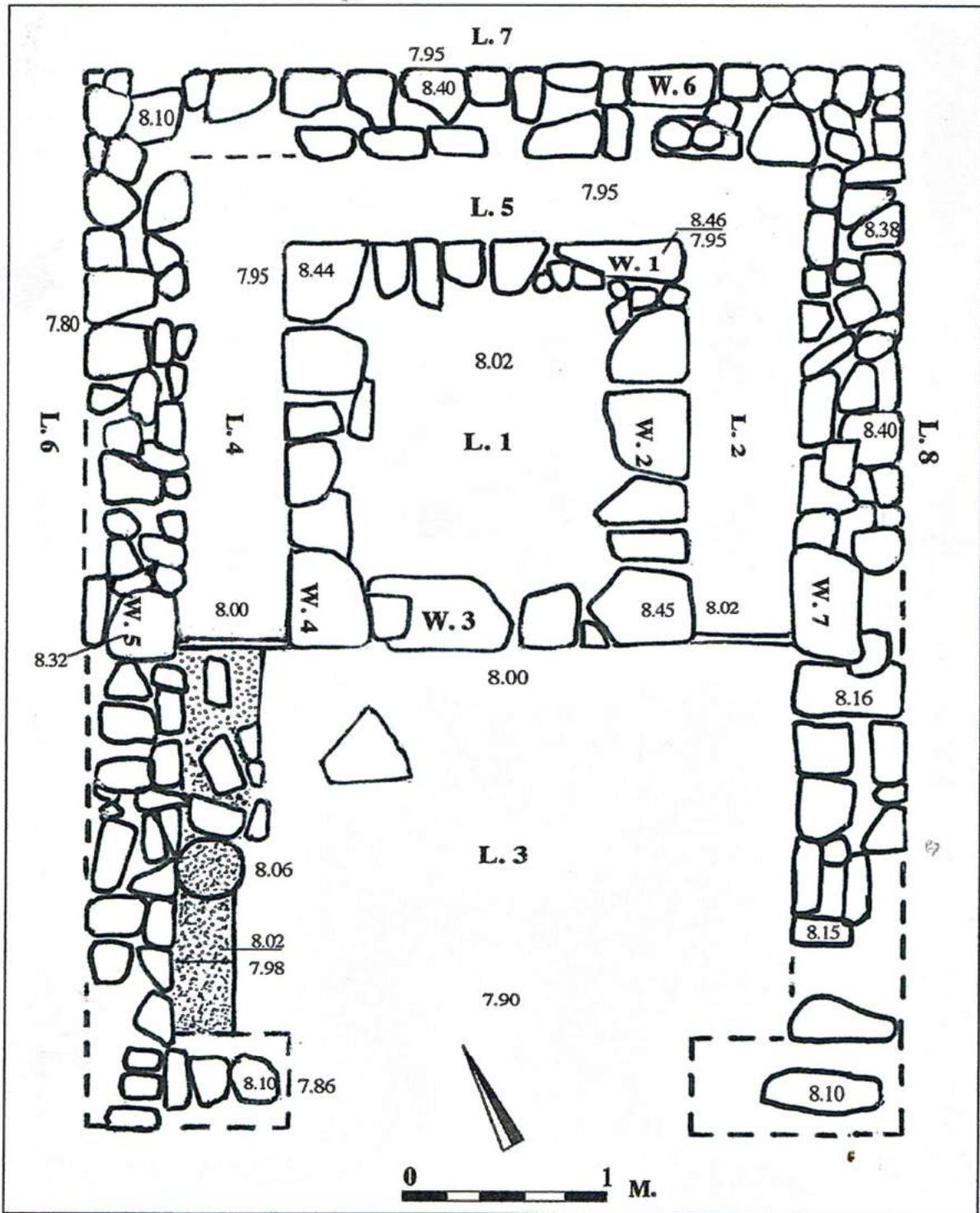
6. Jebel Serbal after excavation: On the left- part of *temenos* wall, center- a staircase and the sanctuary building, right- an altar



7. Jebel Serbal, general plan of the sanctuary



8. Jebel Serbal, the sanctuary building remains, from SW: on the left- a plaster bench, in front of the podium- a stone slab, on both ends of the passage- plaster leaning



9. Jebel Serbal, plan of the sanctuary building



10. Jebel Serbal, the podium from north, with thick plaster remains



Fig. 11 Jebel Serbal, Sandstone architectural profiles from the building debris



Fig. 12 Jebel Serbal, crystals and beads of amethyst, alabaster, carnelian and glass



13. Jebel Serbal, copper, bronze and silver objects, left to right upper row: eagle leg shaped crater foot, ibex horns and a disk. Middle- silver ring, bottom- crater rim fragments



Fig. 14 Jebel Serbal, silver coin of 'Abdat III, 20 BC



Fig. 15 Dara'a coin with *mwtb* and two ibex heads (Inst. Of Archaeology, Hebrew University, courtesy of the late D. Barag)



16. Jebel Moneijah as seen from the Feiran Oasis



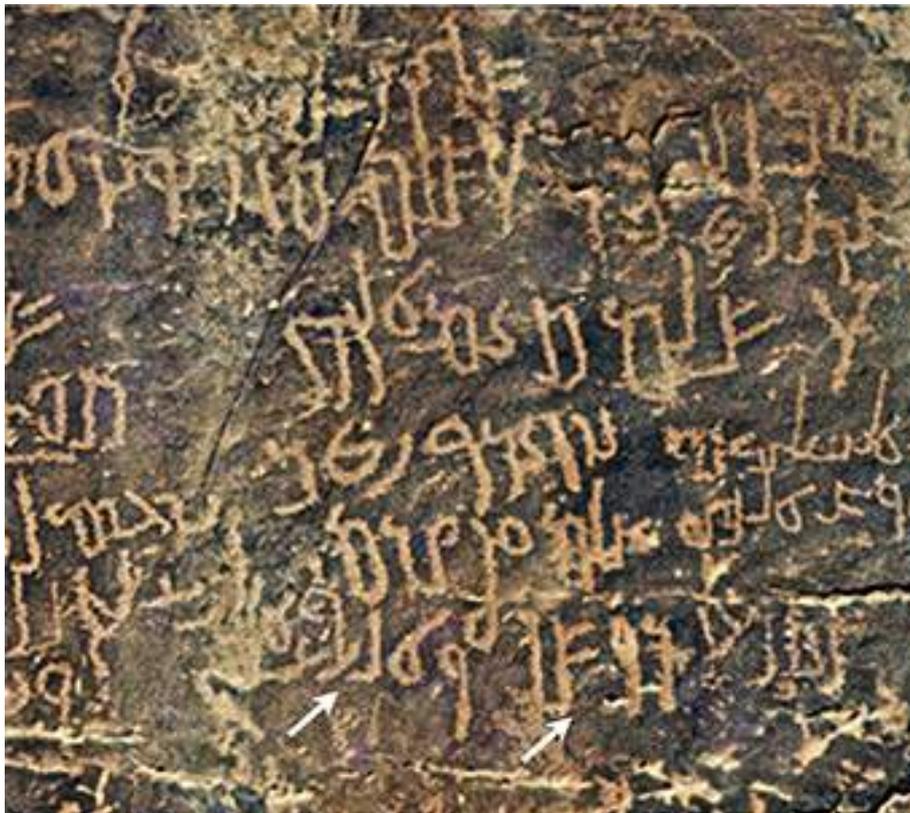
17. Jebel Moneijah, the Bedouin precinct on the summit, from north



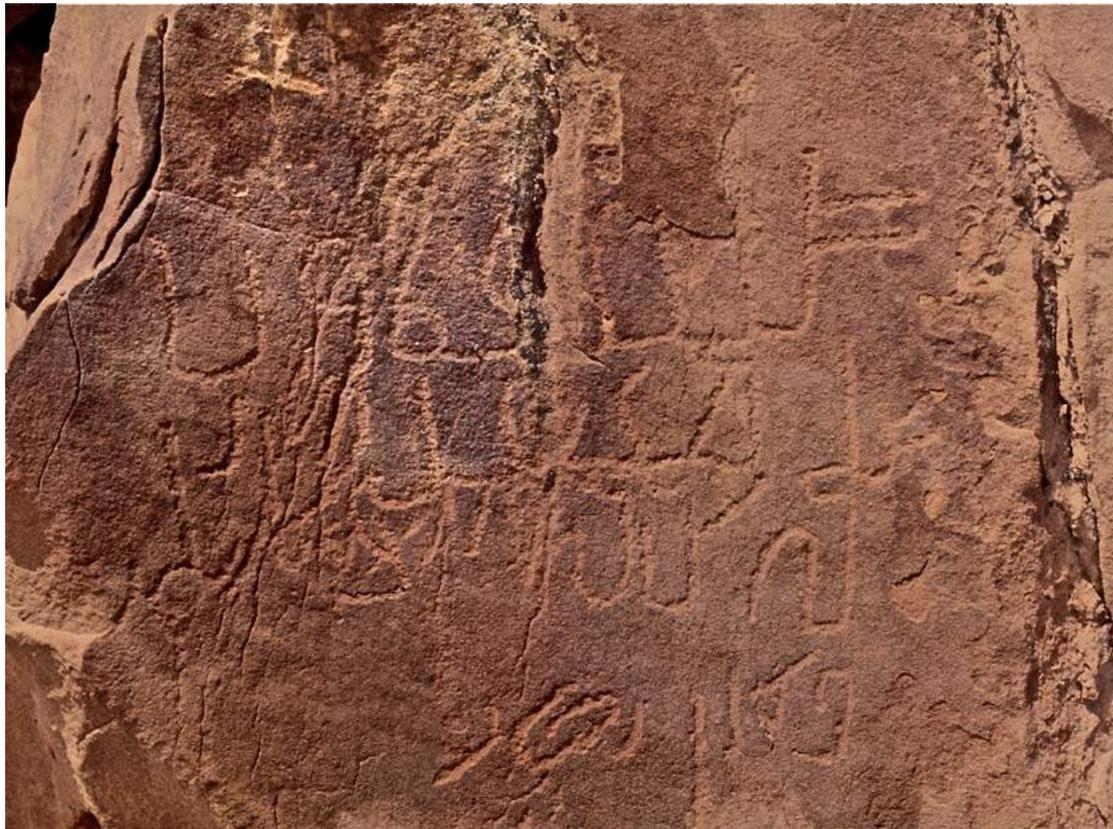
18. Jebel Moneijah, Nabataean inscriptions in the Bedouin precinct. The arrows indicate titles אפכלא (high priest), כתבא (scribe) and מבקר (sacrifice overseer).



19. Jebel Moneujah, a circular rock platform next to the Bedouin precinct, with Jebel Serbal in the background.



20. Nabataean inscription at Wadi Shallal, SW Sinai, the arrows indicate the deity names- *Dushara* and *AlBa'ali*.



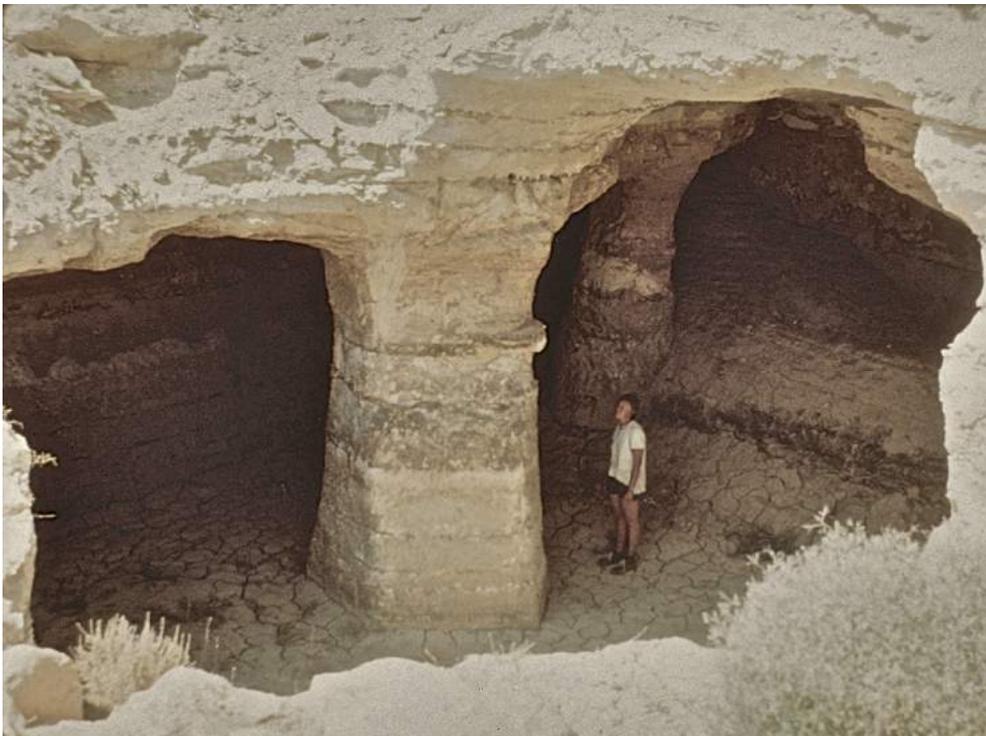
21. Wadi Mukatteb, two Nabataean inscriptions, the name *Paran* is inscribed in the bottom line



Fig. 22 Jebel Baraka, SE Sinai, an Aramaic script mentioning *Fatih son of Amru*



23. Ras Naqb Judeid, central Sinai, remains of Nabataean fortress (photo, O. Goren)



24. Ras Naqb Judeid, Nabataean water reservoir (photo, A. Goren)



25. An aerial photo of the Dhahab Fortress, with the probes excavated by Meshel



26. Tell Maḥrad, the Feiran Oasis, the acropolis of the Nabatean-Byzantine town, a view from Jebel Tahuna