

The Newly Discovered "High Place" At Petra In Edom



**By Professor George
L. Robinson, Ph.D.**

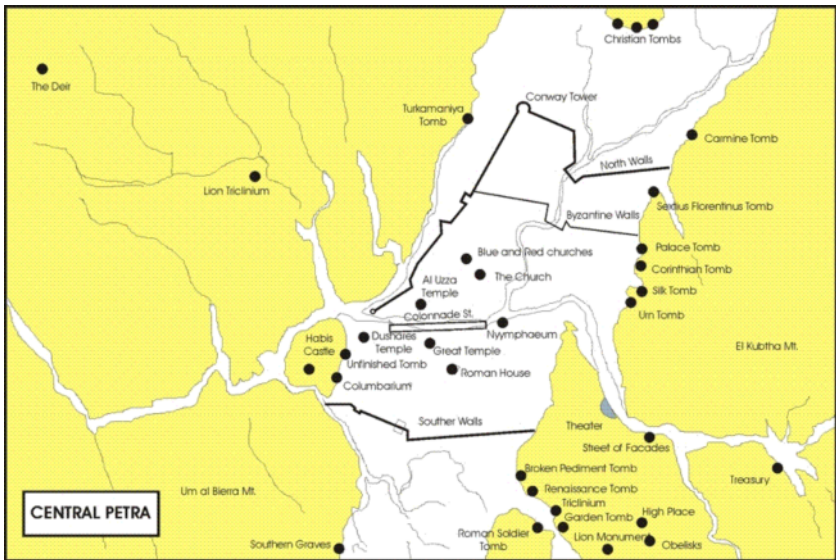


The Treasury Petra

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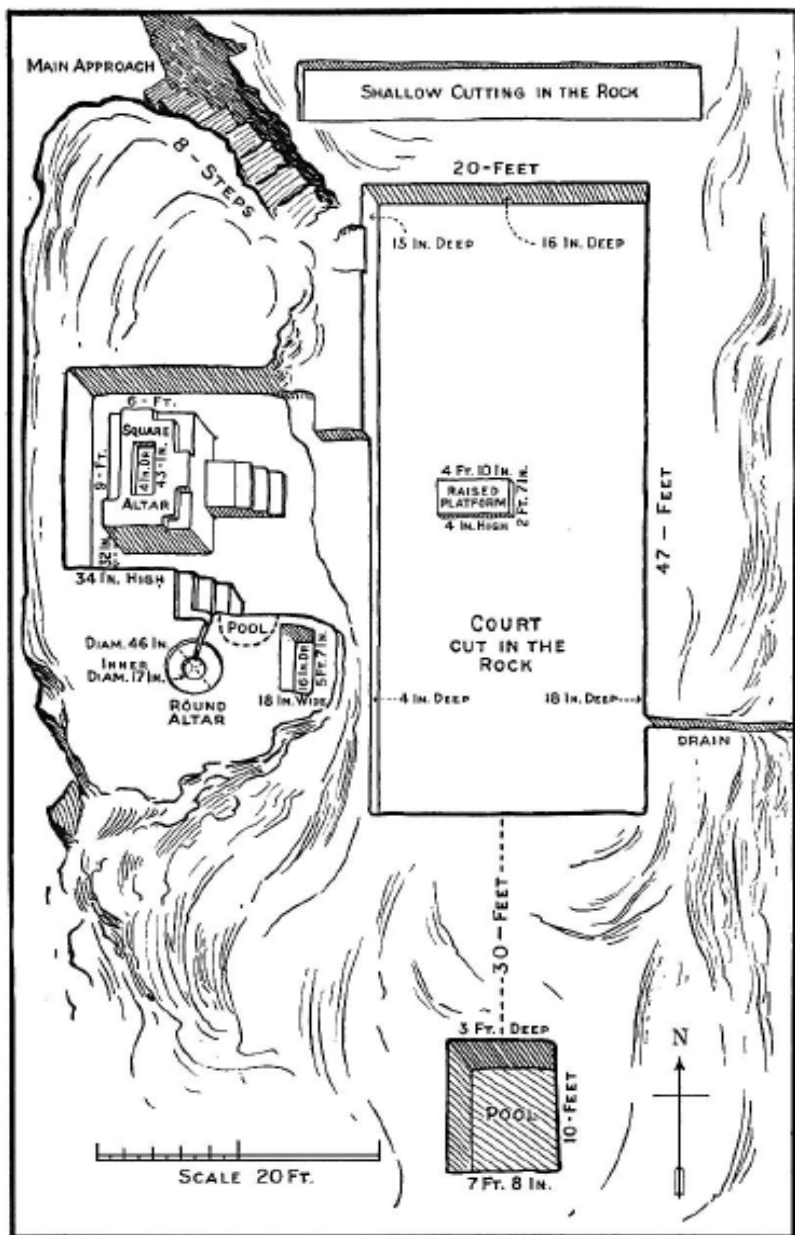


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THE regions east and south of the Dead Sea have been the last portions of Palestine to be explored. Among the few who have ventured as far south as Petra are Burckhardt in 1812, Irby and Mangles in 1818, Laborde in 1830, Robinson in 1838, Palmer in 1870, E. L. Wilson in 1882, Brünnow in 1896, Sir Charles Wilson in 1898, and an occasional missionary of late. Travel in these parts has hitherto been difficult and unsafe, owing on the one hand to the opposition of the Turkish government, which does not favour foreigners' running so great a risk, and on the other to the wild Bedouin themselves, who usually plunder those who undertake to make the expedition. Accordingly Moab, especially Edom and the northeastern portion of the peninsula of Sinai, still awaits careful exploration ; but now, inasmuch as the sultan has firmly established himself at Kerak, Tafele, Shobek, and Ma'an, the danger has much decreased.

It had been the writer's earnest wish for several years to visit Petra, the ancient capital of Edom. On arriving in Cairo, however, he sought in vain for a dragoman who was willing to venture thither from the south.. In Jerusalem also no native guide had the courage necessary to make the attempt. At length an Englishman was recommended, who, having been seven years• a missionary in Kerak, Moab, consented to do so, on condition that tents, equipment, and all luxury of every sort should be left behind. His stipulations were accepted, and on April 24, 1900, the Petra party, consisting of Rev. A. Forder, the writer, and three Moabite servants, set out from Jerusalem for Jericho. Crossing the Jordan bridge and



Plan of HIGH PLACE - Petra.

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climbing the Pisgah range, the second evening found us at Medeba, not far southeast of Mount Nebo.



THE "HIGH PLACE" AT PETRA IN EDM

There we saw the famous mosaic map recently discovered and dating probably from the fifth century A. D. The next day we struck east across the *Hajj* road and visited Mashita, where we saw an unfinished khan, or palace, probably built by the Sassanian dynasty of Persian kings, *ca.* 614 A. D.' The architecture is unique. Returning, we succeeded in photographing *en route* an immense flock of storks in the act of devouring the locusts, which were at that time plaguing the *Fellahin*. Proceeding southwardly from Medeba, we slept the first night by a huge rock on the bank of the picturesque Arnon, and reached Kerak the following evening. Here we obtained a military escort to Petra, and after three days' riding over the fertile tablelands of Moab and Edom, gradually ascending as we went farther south, we arrived eventually at Petra, the goal of our ambition. The whole country was intensely interesting, especially from Bosra to Shobek and Petra.

*Cf. TRISTRAM, *The Land of Moab*, pp. 195 f

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The valley of Petra is now called Waddi Mûsâ. A little stream of clear, sweet water flows down through the valley. The city itself is situated deep down among the mountains in a great depression. This depression is about three-quarters of a mile long from north to south by a quarter of a mile broad from east to west, and is bounded on every side by nearly perpendicular rocks of red or pink sandstone towering from two to six hundred feet above the valley. The whole basin was probably at one time a lake, the water having worn deep passages for itself among the rocks. The Sik, or gorge, through which the Wadi Mûsâ brook flows, is the most remarkable natural feature of the place. It is over a mile long, at certain points being scarcely more than twelve feet wide, and bounded symmetrically on both sides by perpendicular rocks of most exquisite colouring, from one to two hundred feet high. This gorge provides the only approach to Petra. Twenty-two minutes, according to the watch, were required by our animals to pass through. On coming out into the opening the first object to greet our eye was the famous Khuznah, or temple of the Muses, which is cut out of the deep rose- and chocolate-coloured rocks, and stands at least seventy-five feet high from the



THE TWO MAZZEBAHS, OR PILLARS

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Going on to where the valley widens still more, we saw a few scattered ruins of an ancient palace, a church, a bridge, and a triumphal arch. One mile northwest of these, situated considerably higher up, we visited the monastery, or Deir, from the roof of which we obtained a view of Mount Hor in the southwest. The entire place was strangely weird, yet fascinating; for here once lived the Troglodites or cave-dwellers of Edom, the sons of Esau, against whom Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Obadiah directed their prophetic warnings. In Hebrew the city was called Sela' or "the rock." [2]



THE FORTRESS, OR WATCHTOWER

On May 3 it was our good fortune to make what seems to be a most valuable discovery ; not that the place had never been seen before, for Mr. E. L. Wilson,³ as we have since learned, saw it in 1882, but that it was quite unknown to the scientific world and to us, until we discovered it. If we mistake not, we have found nothing less than the principal "high place," or sanctuary, of the sons of Esau, which henceforth will throw valuable light upon the religion of the Edomites (about which we know so little at present), and illumine the whole question of worship in "high places" so frequently alluded to in the Old Testament.

2) Cf. 2 Kings 14 :7.

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3) In Mr. Wilson's party were Rev. Douglas Putnam Birnie, of Rye, N. Y.; Mr. W. B. Ogden, of Chicago ; and Mr. W. H. Rau, of Philadelphia.



THE ROCK-CUT COURT

Climbing with considerable difficulty one of the many little valleys leading up the mountain sides which bound the depression of Petra, we eventually reached the lower portion of the summit of a mountain peak not far southeast of the theatre, and found, cut out of the solid rock, two pyramidal columns, about one hundred feet apart and about twenty feet high, having the appearance of ancient mazzebahs, or pillars of worship (cf. Deut. 12 : 2, 3). For many yards about the rock had been cut away, leaving these obelisk-like columns undetached ; the columns themselves suggested that there was probably a noted place of worship in the near vicinity.

North of these monoliths, a little higher up, were the ruins of a fortress comparatively modern and of little importance apparently, but which doubtless served as a fortification and watchtower for the city. These ruins invited me to the actual summit of the peak, and to my great delight, when

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I had succeeded in making the rather steep ascent, I saw before me on the flat surface of the mountain top a large court (47 X 20 feet), with an undetached slab slightly elevated near the centre of it for priestly purposes, perhaps—or possibly, as Professor Mathews suggests, for the altar of incense—the whole being hewn down some fifteen to eighteen inches in the solid rock. This court, as my compass indicated, lay almost exactly north and south.



THE MAIN APPROACH

Just north of the court was a shallow cutting running east and west, and intended possibly as a place for worshipers as they waited to offer sacrifice. From the northwest corner a flight of eight well-cut steps led down to the brow of a crest overlooking the most populous portion of the city.

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On the west side of the court were two large altars, three feet high, one rectangular (9 X 6 feet), with a passageway three feet deep and thirty-two inches wide running round it on three sides ; the other with two circular depressions in its upper surface, the inner one being the deeper of the two, and a drain, drilled through the rock rim of the outer depression, evidently intended for the blood to escape into a small pool prepared to receive it, in the side of the altar ; each altar being approached by a short flight of steps and facing the rising sun.



THE TWO ALTARS

About thirty feet south of the court was a pool or cistern (10 x 8 x 3 feet) containing water. The surrounding rocks were generally smooth, dipping somewhat toward the south, having been levelled probably in certain places to accommodate the worshipers. The entire area of the mountain top was about three hundred feet long from north to south by one hundred wide from east to west.

I at once looked upon my discovery as of great value, and, as soon as I arrived, began shouting to my companion, Mr. Forder, who with the guides had lingered by the pillars below, to come up and assist me in taking careful measurements, which, after some hesitation, he very kindly did. These may be seen more fully in the accompanying plan.



THE POOL, OR LAVER OF PURIFICATION, WITH THE COURT IN THE BACKGROUND

But how, now, are we to interpret it? Here we have by far the most complete " high place " as yet discovered, situated on one of the highest peaks in the near vicinity of the capital of Edom, with two "pillars," a large court, a slab-like platform near its north end, a rock-cut approach from the northwest, two altars —one rectangular with steps, and a trench or passageway about it on three sides, a hollow in its surface, and three of its corners cut down with mathematical exactness ; the other altar, round, provided with steps also, having two depressed concentric rings on its surface, a blood pool at one side, and a tomblike cavity on another; both altars facing the east, and without inscription or ornamentation; also a pool

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for water not far away, and every part standing on the points of the compass. What does all this mean ? Is it ancient, or comparatively modern?



THE SQUARE ALTAR

What light can it possibly throw on the religion of Edom?

Probably more light than specialists will at first imagine. For we must remember that, though it may not date from the remote period of Moses, or Solomon, yet it may still be of greatest assistance in defining the religion which was practiced long before it was actually made. In other words, a carefully constructed "high place" like this may stand as the exponent of religious rites practiced long prior in a cruder form. Just as Solomon's temple was the outward expression of a religion which Israel had believed and practiced with greater or less fidelity for centuries previous, so the high place at Petra may have been the material expression of a religion much older than the high place itself.

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The following observations commend themselves to the writer:



THE ROUND ALTAR

- 1.** That this "high place" was probably the chief one of Edom. It is situated close to the most populous portion of the capital.
- 2** That in it we have almost an exact counterpart of Israel's sanctuary, which likewise consisted of court, laver, altars, etc. Hence a close similarity between the sanctuaries of the sons of Esau and the children of Jacob.
- 3** That it is comparatively ancient, being entirely devoid of inscription and ornamentation, and cut out of the solid rock.
- 4** That it was the scene of bloody sacrifices because of the concentric depressions or pans which are sunken into the surface of the round altar, and because of the hollow in the top of the square altar which may have been intended for libations, or burnt-offerings.

5. And, finally, that more than one god was probably worshiped at this sanctuary. For there are two "pillars" and at least two altars; and we know from certain Arabian historians that the goddess Al Lât (fern. of Allah) was worshiped by the Nabathans as the mother of the gods, and also her son Dusares, the great Nabathan male god.[4] That this was the later, or Nabathan, form of worship does not alter matters ; for very probably these invading Arabs only modified the religion which they already found in Edom. This being so, we have a confirmation of the two passages in the Old Testament in which it is implied that Edom worshiped more than one god (cf. I Kings 11 :1 and 2 Chron. 25:14, 15, 20), and possibly an explanation also of the silence of the Old Testament concerning the religion of the sons of Esau ; viz., because it was so low, so sensual, and so degraded.

4) Cf. ROBERTSON SMITH, *The Religion of the Semitics*, p. 56, and *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, note 8, p. 179.



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