

The “high place” of Jabal Khubthah: new insights on a Nabataean-Roman suburb of Petra

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Within the framework of the study of Petra’s sanctuaries, and following on from work on the “Obodas Chapel” and on Jabal Numayr, our team undertook the study of what the archaeological literature has, for more than a century, termed the “high place(s)” of Jabal Khubthah,¹ which is concentrated on Jabal Umm al-‘Amr, the name given to the W part of the massif dominating the E side of Petra, on which side is carved the prestigious so-called Nabataean royal necropolis (fig. 1).

History of exploration

The chronology of the exploration of cultic spaces at Petra reveals the extent of the competition between Biblical scholars in Europe at the turn of the 19th c. concerning ruins defined as “high places”; it also explains the later persistence in the archaeological literature of a rather poorly-defined concept. The frantic exploration of the peaks of Petra lies within a dual intellectual context: on the one hand, that of comparing the Biblical texts with the archaeological remains, engaged in by clergymen in Palestine at the end of the 19th c.; on the other, that of a conceptual framework defined by that era’s historians of religion around the sacredness of peaks in the “Semitic religions”.² Since those days, the interpretation of Jabal Khubthah as an essentially religious space has never been questioned.³

The earliest visit to Jabal Khubthah for which there is a written record was in 1896 by A. Musil.⁴ He was followed (May 1904) by the Anglican pastor Archibald Forder. These expeditions were a response to the excitement caused by the discovery, in 1882, of the high place of the Madhbah by four American explorers.⁵ E. L. Wilson, a pioneer of photography, published the first description in *The Century Magazine* (Nov. 1885), accompanied by a spectacular engraving of what he designated “The Altar of Baal”.⁶ Shortly afterwards, W. B. Ogden, another member of this expedition, published his own account of the same voyage, illustrated with photographs by W. H. Rau, along with a brief description of the monument and a mediocre sketch.⁷ At the turn of the century, explorations abounded, as well as announcements; against a background of national and denominational compe-

1 L. Tholbecq, “Le haut-lieu du Jabal Numayr (Pétra, Jordanie),” *Syria* 88 (2011) 301-21; id., “Infrastructures et pratiques religieuses nabatéennes: quelques données provenant du sanctuaire tribal de la ‘Chapelle d’Obodas’ à Pétra,” in F. Alpi, V. Rondot and F. Villeneuve (edd.), *La pioche et la plume. Autour du Soudan, du Liban et de la Jordanie. Hommages archéologiques à Patrice Lenoble* (Paris 2011) 31-44.

2 For a historiography of high places, see C. Bonnet, “Entre terre et ciel. Parcours historiographique en ‘hauts-lieux’ sur les traces de Franz Cumont et d’autres historiens des religions,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 7 (2005) 5-19.

3 E.g. still very recently, Z. U. Ma’oz, *Mountaintop sanctuaries at Petra* (Qazrin 2008).

4 A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea. II. Edom, topographische Reisebericht* (Vienna 1907) 124.

5 The expedition, which left Cairo in 1882, brought together the Reverend Douglass (sic) P. Birnie, William B. Ogden and photographers William H. Rau and Edward L. Wilson, both of whom enjoyed exceptional careers. For Forder’s discovery see G. L. Robinson, “The high-places of Petra,” *Biblical World* 31.1 (1908) 8-21.

6 E. L. Wilson, “A photographer’s visit to Petra,” *The Century Magazine* 31.1 (1885) 19-24.

7 W. B. Ogden, “Four days in Petra,” *J. Am. Geog. Soc. New York* 20.2 (1888) 150-51.