

A photograph of an ornate stone archway in Petra, featuring intricate carvings and a dark opening.

LIFE IN A CAVE IN PETRA WITH THE BDOUL

1981–1986

Judith S. McKenzie



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MANAR AL-ATHAR, University of Oxford

MANAR AL-ATHAR MONOGRAPH 6

Series Editor
Judith S. McKenzie

Volume Editor
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www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk

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Front cover photograph: Judith McKenzie in front of the south doorway of the Khasneh, 1981/2 (A. Phippen).

Back cover photograph: Judith McKenzie with Umm Khaled, 1981/2 (A. Phippen).

A record of cataloging-in-publication data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9954946-6-4 (hardcover)

eISBN: 978-0-9954946-9-5 (PDF)

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

CONTENTS

<i>List of Maps and Figures</i>	ix
FOREWORD	xvii
PREFACE	xix
<i>How I Came to Live in a Cave in Petra</i>	xx
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxi
<i>Maps</i>	xxii
1. THE BDOUL IN PETRA IN THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES	1
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Johann Ludwig Burckhardt</i>	2
<i>Irby, Mangles, Laborde, and Linant de Bellefonds</i>	3
<i>Mid-Nineteenth-Century Travellers</i>	3
<i>Photography</i>	5
<i>Late Nineteenth-Century Travellers</i>	6
<i>Early Twentieth Century</i>	7
<i>Living Memories</i>	8
<i>Origin of the Bdoul and their Name</i>	11
<i>Wadi Musa (Eldji)</i>	11
<i>Summary</i>	13
2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PETRA FOR TOURISM, 1925–1981	15
<i>Cook's Camp</i>	15
<i>First Excavations</i>	17
<i>The Bdoul</i>	17
<i>Restoration and Archaeological Work from the 1950s</i>	18
<i>Background to the Construction of Umm Sayhoun</i>	20
3. 1981–1982	21
<i>The Trip to Petra</i>	21
<i>Entering Petra</i>	22
<i>Arrival at Our Cave</i>	28
<i>Muhammad Murshed Khadija</i>	31
<i>Starting Work at the Qasr el-Bint</i>	33
<i>A Wedding Procession</i>	34
<i>The Night Sky after Dinner</i>	34
<i>Measuring the Khasneh</i>	38
<i>Dakhilallah's Shop</i>	44
<i>Dakhilallah, a Modern Nabataean Stonemason</i>	48
<i>Mufleh</i>	48
<i>Umm el-Biyara</i>	50
<i>Tomb of the Broken Pediment in Wadi Farasa</i>	51
<i>Marguerite and Mohammad Abdallah</i>	53
<i>Measuring Tomb 813 with Norma</i>	56
<i>The Kodak Film Stand in a Tent</i>	59
<i>Wadi Musa and Back to Amman</i>	60
<i>The British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History</i>	64

<i>Shopping in Amman</i>	64
<i>Return to Petra</i>	65
<i>How the Tombs Were Made</i>	66
<i>The Deir</i>	68
<i>Dakhilallah's Wife, Umm Khaled (Rakhiya)</i>	72
<i>Turkmaniyah Tomb</i>	77
<i>Turkmaniyah Tomb Again</i>	79
<i>Tuffleh and her In-Laws</i>	84
<i>Hamdah's New Baby, Atidal</i>	86
<i>Playing Skippy the Kangaroo</i>	93
<i>Playing Dolls at Moghar an-Nasara</i>	96
<i>Dinner at Abu Shaher's Cave</i>	98
<i>Family Life at Abu Shaher's Home</i>	102
<i>Fatima's House</i>	103
<i>Wadi Siyyagh</i>	103
<i>Trip to Beidha with Abu Shaher</i>	104
<i>Siq el-Barid and the Painted House</i>	106
<i>Bedouin Tents at Beidha</i>	108
<i>Dinner at Abu Nawas's Cave</i>	110
<i>Trip to Wadi Sabra with Abu Nawas</i>	113
<i>Awwad and his Bedouin Supermarket</i>	117
<i>Leaving Petra</i>	120
 4. 1984	 121
<i>Arrival in Amman after Two Years</i>	121
<i>To Petra</i>	122
<i>The Petra Forum Hotel in Wadi Musa</i>	123
<i>Arrival in Petra</i>	124
<i>Dinner at Abu Shaher's Place to Repair his Photographs</i>	125
<i>Exploring a Back Entrance to Petra along Wadi Mudhlim</i>	129
<i>Dakhilallah's Daughter, Fatima</i>	131
<i>Two Wives in One Cave</i>	132
<i>Wadi Farasa</i>	132
<i>Tuffleh's In-Laws and their Tent near the Palace Tomb</i>	137
<i>Girls' Education</i>	141
<i>BBC Recordings for Queen Elizabeth II's Visit – Mohammad and Abdallah</i>	141
<i>Abu Nawas's Home</i>	141
<i>Trip to Wadi Sabra, Again</i>	142
<i>Trip to Jabal Haroun with Abu Shaher</i>	145
<i>Dinner Again at Abu Shaher's Cave</i>	148
 5. 1986	 151
<i>Field Trip to Record the Tomb Interiors</i>	151
<i>Arrival in Petra on a Snowy Day</i>	152
<i>Dinner with Mufleh</i>	153
<i>The Urn Tomb – A Tomb Converted to a Church</i>	154
<i>The Facade That Fell Down in the Night in 1847</i>	157
<i>Dakhilallah and Haroun</i>	159
<i>First and Last Light on the Lion Triclinium and the Deir</i>	159
<i>The High Place</i>	160
<i>Hamdah at Moghar an-Nasara</i>	162
<i>Measuring the Palace Tomb</i>	164
<i>A Trip to Wadi Rumm</i>	167
<i>Ahmad from Wadi Musa</i>	170

<i>Back to the British Institute to Recover</i>	176
<i>A New Assistant</i>	176
<i>The Tomb of the Roman Soldier</i>	176
<i>Dinner at Mufleh's Cave, Again</i>	178
<i>Dinner at Abu Shaher's New House</i>	182
<i>The Game of Tāb</i>	187
<i>Climbing Umm el-Biyara without Ahmad</i>	189
<i>Torla Evans</i>	189
<i>Marguerite and Mohammad, and the Changes of al-Wahdat</i>	189
 6. USE OF SPACE IN PETRA AND UMM SAYHOUN	 193
<i>Use of Space in the Caves at Petra</i>	193
Main Cave	193
Kitchen Cave	193
Animal Pens and Stables	193
Outside Living Area	194
Use of Tents	194
<i>Use of Space in Umm Sayhoun</i>	194
Umm Sayhoun Houses	194
Adapting to the Umm Sayhoun Houses	194
Outdoor Living Space	195
Indoor Living Space	195
Seasonal Factors Affecting the Use of the Houses	195
Accommodating the Bdoul Animals	196
Long-Term Consequences of the Umm Sayhoun House Design	196
 7. EPILOGUE: 2003	 197
<i>Shaher er-Rababeh's Home Town, Kufr Rakib</i>	197
<i>Shaher er-Rababeh's Home in Amman</i>	200
<i>Changes in Wadi Musa</i>	200
<i>Resurfacing the Siq</i>	203
<i>Meeting Dakhilallah Again</i>	206
<i>Petra Reveals More of its History</i>	210
<i>The Bdoul in Wadi Farasa</i>	214
<i>Dinner at Dakhilallah's New Home</i>	215
<i>Meeting Tuffleh Again</i>	216
<i>Souvenir and Pepsi Stand at the Nymphaeum</i>	220
<i>Visit to Abu Shaher</i>	220
 8. POSTSCRIPT — DEVELOPMENTS IN PETRA AND WEATHERING — OVER THIRTY YEARS LATER (2018)	 223
<i>A Rose-Red City Half as Old as Time</i>	223
<i>From the Rock as if by Magic Grown</i>	233
Catastrophic Damage along Formation Jointing	236
Damage to Lower Parts of Facades Due to Water Wicking Up	236
Other Damage — Wind-Blown Sand and Case Hardening	237
Direct Rain Damage	239
Internal Moisture from the Mountain Bedrock Above	239
Human Breath	239
<i>Conclusion</i>	239
 <i>Glossary of Arabic Terms</i>	 241
<i>Bibliography</i>	243
<i>Indexes</i>	249

MAPS AND FIGURES

Map 1.	The Mediterranean and Near East.	
Map 2.	The Mediterranean: Italy, Greece, and the western coast of Asia Minor (Turkey).	
Map 3.	The eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea area.	
Map 4.	Nabataean area, first century BC to first century AD.	
Map 5.	Area around Petra.	
Map 6.	Petra, plan of city centre.	
Fig. 1.	Khasneh, oleander with pink flowers in front, 1898–1946.	3
Fig. 2.	Abu Zatoun al-Faqara of the Bdoul, Sheikh of Wadi Musa [Petra], 1840.	4
Fig. 3.	Bdoul man, with cloak, 1843.	4
Fig. 4.	Bdoul man, rear view, without cloak to show long hair.	5
Fig. 5.	Theatre, photographed by John Shaw Smith in 1852.	6
Fig. 6.	Palace Tomb, photographed by Frank Mason Good, 1866–67.	6
Fig. 7.	Deir, photographed by Charles Alexander Hornstein in 1895.	7
Fig. 8.	Wadi Musa, with Jabal Haroun on far left, ca. 1898–1946.	7
Fig. 9.	Terraces of Wadi Musa (Eldji), looking west, with tents on far right, ca. 1900–1920.	8
Fig. 10.	Wadi Musa, looking west, ca. 1940–1946.	8
Fig. 11.	Camels in Wadi Musa, looking west towards Jabal Haroun, ca. 1940–1946.	9
Fig. 12.	Wadi Musa (Eldji), 1900–1930.	9
Fig. 13.	A street in Wadi Musa (Eldji), ca. 1896–1911.	10
Fig. 14.	A street in Wadi Musa, with soldiers (no date).	10
Fig. 15.	Liathneh in Wadi Musa, ca. 1896–1911.	10
Fig. 16.	Wadi Musa, with police post, early 1960s.	11
Fig. 17.	A Bdoul man and three women, ca. 1900–1920.	11
Fig. 18.	Bdoul family, ca. 1929.	12
Fig. 19.	Bdoul, 1929.	12
Fig. 20.	Thomas Cook's tent camp near el-Habis, 1927.	15
Fig. 21.	Thomas Cook's camp kitchen in a cave, 1927.	16
Fig. 22.	Thomas Cook's seasonal tent camp, at the foot of el-Habis.	16
Fig. 23.	Thomas Cook's camp with tents, looking south-east from el-Habis, ?1936.	16
Fig. 24.	Nazzal's Camp, dining tent set for dinner, 1940–46.	16
Fig. 25.	Desert Patrol, 1934–35.	16
Fig. 26.	Ma'an, Hejaz railway station, ca. 1908–1920.	17
Fig. 28.	Tourists having dinner in a cave in Petra, 1898–1946.	17
Fig. 27.	Lunch on a taxi ride from Aqaba to Petra, 1934–35.	17
Fig. 29.	Bdoul men and young women making coffee, 1934–35.	18
Fig. 30.	Bdoul sheikh showing plaits under his <i>keffiyeh</i> , 1934–35.	18
Fig. 31.	Bdoul girls, 1934–35.	19
Fig. 32.	Bdoul mother and child in Wadi Deir, ca. 1940–46.	19
Fig. 33.	The Desert Highway, heading north, 1981.	21
Fig. 34.	Wadi Musa, looking west with the hills of Petra in the background, 1982.	22
Fig. 35.	Notice at the entrance gate to Petra, in Wadi Musa, 1981/2.	22
Fig. 36.	Monolithic tombs near the entrance to Petra, 2018.	23
Fig. 37.	Obelisk Tomb and Bab el-Siq Triclinium, 1984.	23
Fig. 38.	The entrance to the Siq which was marked by an arch across it with rock-cut supports, 1986.	24
Fig. 39.	Arch at the entrance of the Siq, before it fell down in 1895.	24
Fig. 40.	The Siq, 1981/2.	25
Fig. 41.	The Khasneh, when it first comes into view from the Siq, 1981/2.	25
Fig. 42.	The Khasneh, viewed from the exit of the Siq, 1981/2.	25
Fig. 43.	The Khasneh, 1981/2.	25

Fig. 44.	Tomb 813, beyond the Outer Siq, 2015.	26
Fig. 45.	Pylon Tombs with one or two rows of Assyrian crowsteps, 2010.	26
Fig. 46.	The Theatre, on the left, when it first comes into view, 2015.	27
Fig. 47.	The “Royal Tombs” along the base of el-Khubthah, 2015.	27
Fig. 48.	The Temenos Gate and the west end of the Colonnaded Street, 2001.	28
Fig. 49.	The caves on the east side of el-Habis, 1981.	29
Fig. 50.	Museum cabinets in our cave, 1981/2.	29
Fig. 51.	Angela on her bed in our cave, 1981/2.	30
Fig. 52.	The water pot near our cave door, 1981.	30
Fig. 53.	View from our cave to Wadi Abu ‘Olleqa, 1981/2.	30
Fig. 54.	View from the el-Habis toilets across to el-Khubthah, 1981/2.	31
Fig. 55.	Muhammed Khadija’s cave, 1981.	32
Fig. 56.	The garden in front of Muhammed Khadija’s cave, left-hand side, 1981.	32
Fig. 57.	The garden in front of Muhammed Khadija’s cave, right-hand side, 1981.	33
Fig. 58.	One of the capitals in fig. 57, 1986.	34
Fig. 59.	The Qasr el-Bint and Nazzal’s Camp from our cave, 1981/2.	35
Fig. 60.	Wedding party, near the Qasr el-Bint, 1981.	35
Fig. 61.	Water tank for the kitchen, 1981/2.	36
Fig. 62.	Delivering water in jerry cans to the tank above the kitchen, 1981/2.	36
Fig. 63.	Angela at breakfast time on our balcony, 1981/2.	37
Fig. 64.	View looking east to el-Khubthah, 1981/2.	37
Fig. 65.	The moon rising over el-Khubthah in the east as the sun sets in the west, 1981/2.	38
Fig. 66.	Sunrise over el-Khubthah, with the Colonnaded Street glowing in the first light, 1981/2.	39
Fig. 67.	The moon setting over el-Habis, 1981/2.	39
Fig. 68.	The Khasneh, 2003.	40
Fig. 69.	The guard of the Khasneh, Abu Ali al-Tweissi, 1982.	41
Fig. 70.	The vendors and camel in front of the Khasneh waiting for tourists, 1981.	41
Fig. 71.	South doorway of the Khasneh vestibule with the theodolite, 1981/2.	42
Fig. 72.	Khasneh, badly damaged sculpture of a Tyche in front of the circular pavilion, 1986.	42
Fig. 73.	Symbol of the Egyptian goddess Isis at the top of the pediment of the Khasneh, 1986.	43
Fig. 74.	Khasneh, vase with painted carinations on entablature of the lower order, 1986.	43
Fig. 75.	Khasneh, southmost floral capital on lower order, 1986.	43
Fig. 76.	Khasneh, plan.	44
Fig. 77.	Khasneh, main chamber, looking south-west, 1986.	45
Fig. 78.	Angela on top of Tomb 64, opposite the Khasneh.	45
Fig. 79.	Returning from work, 1981.	46
Fig. 80.	Dakhilallah and Angela outside his shop, 1981/2.	46
Fig. 81.	Dakhilallah and Mohammad al-Jamadeh inside Dakhilallah’s shop, 1981/2.	47
Fig. 82.	Dakhilallah below the panel with a bust with two arrows, which he carved, 1981.	48
Fig. 83.	Mufleh, 1986.	49
Fig. 84.	View, looking west, with Umm el-Biyara on the left, 1982.	49
Fig. 85.	Zibb Far‘oun, 1982.	50
Fig. 86.	Al-Katuteh, Nabataean city rubbish dump, 1981.	50
Fig. 87.	Looking from ez-Zantur, south-east across to Wadi Farasa, 2003.	52
Fig. 88.	Tomb of the Broken Pediment, 1982.	52
Fig. 89.	Angela having tea in the Tomb of the Broken Pediment, 1981.	53
Fig. 90.	Khasneh, upper order, 2010.	54
Fig. 91.	Pompeii, House of the Labyrinth, wall-painting depicting a circular pavilion in a court, 1984.	55
Fig. 92.	Plan of cave complex of Marguerite and Mohammad Abdallah.	56
Fig. 93.	Looking east to el-Khubthah, 2001.	56
Fig. 94.	Theatre, looking towards el-Khubthah, 1986.	57
Fig. 95.	Tomb 813, before sunset, mid-March 2015.	57
Fig. 96.	Tomb 813, near midday, 1986.	58
Fig. 97.	Tomb 813, interior, with <i>loculi</i> and partly excavated floor, 1986.	58
Fig. 98.	View to the Theatre, Hajj Salameh’s tent and store, 1981.	59

Fig. 99.	Hajj Salameh's souvenir stand, 1981.	60
Fig. 100.	Entrance to Hajj Salameh's store, 1981/2.	60
Fig. 101.	Wadi Musa, main street, 1981/2.	61
Fig. 102.	Wadi Musa, shops with vegetables outside, 1986.	62
Fig. 103.	Wadi Musa, looking towards Petra, with the Petra Forum Hotel in the distance, 1981/2.	62
Fig. 104.	Wadi Musa, stone house with rendered breeze block and concrete extension, 1981/2.	63
Fig. 105.	Wadi Musa, stone houses and olive trees, 1981/2.	63
Fig. 106.	Our equipment and luggage at the foot of the stairs to our cave, 1981/2.	65
Fig. 107.	Sharing our cave with confiscated pottery, 1981/2.	66
Fig. 108.	El-Habis, with remains of rock-cut houses and the Unfinished Tomb, 1986.	67
Fig. 109.	The Unfinished Tomb, 1981/2.	67
Fig. 110.	Remains of stuccoed walls on the side of el-Habis, 1986.	68
Fig. 111.	View from the platform in front of the Urn Tomb, 1981/2.	69
Fig. 112.	Wadi Deir, Jabal M'aysrah West from our cave, looking north-west, 1981/2.	69
Fig. 113.	Wadi Deir, caves on the west side, early in the morning, 1981.	70
Fig. 114.	Path up to the Deir, looking east, 1981/2.	70
Fig. 115.	Re-cut Nabataean steps up to the Deir, 2001.	71
Fig. 116.	Lion Triclinium, from the foot of the gorge, 1981.	71
Fig. 117.	View to el-Khubthah from the path to the Deir, looking east, 1981/2.	71
Fig. 118.	Approach to the Deir when the urn on top becomes visible, 1981/2.	72
Fig. 119.	Deir, with Dakhilallah's main cave on the bottom right, 1984.	72
Fig. 120.	Deir, plan.	73
Fig. 121.	Deir, Doric frieze on the south side of the top order, 1986.	73
Fig. 122.	Deir, the urn on top, 1981/2.	74
Fig. 123.	View from the Deir, with Dakhilallah's refreshment stand on the far left, 1981/2.	74
Fig. 124.	Angela having tea with Mohammad, Umm Khaled, baby Khalil, and Ali, 1981/2.	75
Fig. 125.	Umm Khaled with Mohammad, Ali, and baby Khalil, 1981/2.	75
Fig. 126.	Judith in a <i>mudraga</i> , with <i>misfah</i> and <i>asaba</i> (scarf), with Umm Khaled, 1981/2.	76
Fig. 127.	Judith in her new scarf, with Umm Khaled, baby Khalil, Mohammad, and Ali, 1981/2.	76
Fig. 128.	Bdoul mother and child in Wadi Deir, ca. 1940–46.	77
Fig. 129.	Dakhilallah's sheep in front of the Deir, 1981/2.	77
Fig. 130.	Wadi Abu 'Olleqa (Wadi Turkmaniyah), looking towards the Turkmaniyah Tomb, 1981/2.	78
Fig. 131.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, 1981/2.	78
Fig. 132.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, with tents of Awwad ibn Juma and his son, 1981/2.	79
Fig. 133.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, at the beginning of the day, with Awwad ibn Juma and goats, 1981/2.	80
Fig. 134.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, with donkey, 1981/2.	81
Fig. 135.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, foal waiting while its mother eats, 1981/2.	81
Fig. 136.	Turkmaniyah Tomb, children playing with a jerry-can cart, 1981/2.	82
Fig. 137.	Pottery sherds on the ridge opposite the Turkmaniyah Tomb, 1981/2.	82
Fig. 138.	View from the ridge opposite the Turkmaniyah Tomb to Moghar an-Nasara, 1981/2.	83
Fig. 139.	Looking north-east to Moghar an-Nasara, 1981/2.	83
Fig. 140.	North end of el-Khubthah, with the Tomb of Sextius Florentinus and the Palace Tomb.	84
Fig. 141.	Garden Temple, with a cutting through floor deposit of ash and dung, 1981/2.	84
Fig. 142.	Tomb with <i>loculi</i> , 1898–1946.	85
Fig. 143.	Tuffleh with her in-laws, 1981/2.	85
Fig. 144.	Bdoul woman, ca. 1900–1920.	86
Fig. 145.	Juma Samaheen playing the <i>rababah</i> in his tent, with Khalil watching, 1984.	87
Fig. 146.	Toba playing the flute, 1986.	87
Fig. 147.	Outside Hamdah's cave.	88
Fig. 148.	Corinthian Tomb, 1981/2.	88
Fig. 149.	Tuffleh loading the donkey with chaff, 1981/2.	89
Fig. 150.	Corinthian Tomb, main chamber, with animal feed stored in <i>loculi</i> , 1981/2.	90
Fig. 151.	Tomb of Sextius Florentinus, 1981/2.	90
Fig. 152.	Tomb of Sextius Florentinus, back wall, 1986.	91
Fig. 153.	Juma Samaheen's camel in its stable, 1981/2.	91

Fig. 154.	Testing Juma Samaheen's camel in the late afternoon, 1981/2.	92
Fig. 155.	Palace Tomb, 1986.	92
Fig. 156.	Photographing the Palace Tomb with the telephoto lens, 1981/2.	93
Fig. 157.	Palace Tomb, detail of lowest entablature with painted dentils, 1986.	93
Fig. 158.	North side of the Palace Tomb showing vaulting supporting a bed of timber, 1986.	94
Fig. 159.	Children helping Angela carry our levelling staff and ranging rod, 1981/2.	94
Fig. 160.	Tea in front of Hamdah's cave, 1981/2.	95
Fig. 161.	Examining a book on Australia, 1981/2.	95
Fig. 162.	Playing Skippy the kangaroo outside Hamdah's cave, 1981/2.	96
Fig. 163.	Three girls playing dolls outside the Tomb with the Armour, 1981/2.	96
Fig. 164.	Hamdah going home with her children, with her baby in the <i>muzferr</i> , 1982.	97
Fig. 165.	Umm Gasim (Agacla) carrying her toddler in a <i>muzferr</i> , 1986.	97
Fig. 166.	Three girls playing making <i>shraak</i> (bread) at Moghar an-Nasara, 1981/2.	98
Fig. 167.	Umm Gasim making <i>shraak</i> (bread), 1982.	98
Fig. 168.	Eastern ridge of Jabal M'aysrah, looking towards Abu Shaher's caves, 1983.	99
Fig. 169.	Abu Shaher's main cave and "kitchen cave", 1981/2.	99
Fig. 170.	Abu Shaher, with children outside his caves, 1981/2.	100
Fig. 171.	Abu Shaher's sheep and goat pen cave, 1981/2.	100
Fig. 172.	Abu Shaher's caves, plan.	101
Fig. 173.	Bdoul husband and wife, 1900–1920.	103
Fig. 174.	Wadi Siyyagh, the outlet of the spring, 1981/2.	104
Fig. 175.	Wadi Siyyagh, garden, 1981/2.	104
Fig. 176.	Beidha, ploughed land, 1981/2.	105
Fig. 177.	Cereal growing near Beidha after rain, 1986.	105
Fig. 178.	Facade 846 before the entrance to Siq el-Barid, 1986.	106
Fig. 179.	Siq el-Barid, triclinia (banqueting rooms) with Abu Shaher, 1986.	106
Fig. 180.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid, with painted vault in large recess, 1986.	107
Fig. 181.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid. Detail of ceiling of large recess, 1986.	107
Fig. 182.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid, a cupid on ceiling, 1986.	108
Fig. 183.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid, young Pan on ceiling, 1986.	108
Fig. 184.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid, detail of painting after cleaning, 2018.	109
Fig. 185.	Painted House in Siq el-Barid, young Pan on the ceiling, after cleaning, 2018.	109
Fig. 186.	Abu Nawas's children keeping us company in Wadi Farasa, 1981/2.	110
Fig. 187.	Girl with a flute and her friend in Wadi Farasa, 1981/2.	110
Fig. 188.	Abu Nawas's children and a friend in Wadi Farasa, 1981/2.	111
Fig. 189.	Abu Nawas's caves in Wadi Farasa, 1982.	111
Fig. 190.	Breakfast at Abu Nawas's cave, with <i>shay</i> and <i>shraak</i> made by Umm Gasim, 1982.	112
Fig. 191.	Angela on the donkey with Abu Nawas, heading for Wadi Sabra, 1982.	112
Fig. 192.	View down to Wadi Sabra, 1982.	113
Fig. 193.	Ancient road to Wadi Sabra with a retaining wall, 1982.	114
Fig. 194.	Woman and her camel we passed on the way to Wadi Sabra, 1982.	115
Fig. 195.	Wadi Sabra, with its perennial water supply, 1982.	115
Fig. 196.	Wadi Sabra, small theatre for water ceremonies or entertainment, 1982.	116
Fig. 197.	Abu Nawas and Gasim at Wadi Sabra, 1982.	116
Fig. 198.	Having lunch at Wadi Sabra with Abu Nawas, Gasim, and his donkey, Musa, 1982.	117
Fig. 199.	Judith riding Musa in Wadi Sabra, with Abu Nawas and Gasim, 1982.	118
Fig. 200.	Heading back to Petra from Wadi Sabra, 1982.	118
Fig. 201.	Umm Gasim, 1982.	119
Fig. 202.	Awwad's "Bedouin Supermarket" at the foot of el-Habis, 1981/2.	119
Fig. 203.	Old part of Wadi Musa, with stone houses and store rooms, and olive and fruit trees, 1984.	122
Fig. 204.	Remains of paving in the Siq, 1981/2.	123
Fig. 205.	Dakhilallah and Haroun outside their shop, 1984.	124
Fig. 206.	Dinner at Abu Shaher's, 1984.	125
Fig. 207.	Abu Shaher when he was in the Arab Legion.	126
Fig. 208.	Abu Shaher with Aisha and Abdallah, 1984.	126

Fig. 209.	<i>Mensef</i> at Abu Shaher's, with Pam, Judith, and Shaher, 1984.	127
Fig. 210.	Dinner at Abu Shaher's, 1984.	127
Fig. 211.	Abu Shaher's main cave, kitchen cave, and his son Khalil's cave, 1983.	128
Fig. 212.	Cave of Khalil, Abu Shaher's son, 1983.	128
Fig. 213.	El-Mudhlim tunnel at the entrance to the Siq, 2010.	129
Fig. 214.	Deir, with rock-cut altar in foreground, 1986.	130
Fig. 215.	Umm Khaled, in front of her refreshment stand in the cave opposite to the Deir, 1984.	131
Fig. 216.	Renaissance Tomb in Wadi Farasa, 1981/2.	133
Fig. 217.	Renaissance Tomb, with Salman's tiny goat in the corner, 1984.	133
Fig. 218.	Tomb of the Roman Soldier, 1984.	134
Fig. 219.	Salman with his wire car in front of the Tomb of the Roman Soldier, 1984.	134
Fig. 220.	Tomb of the Broken Pediment, 2003.	135
Fig. 221.	View from the Tomb of the Broken Pediment to the tent erected in front, 1984.	135
Fig. 222.	Umm Gasim, with her baby son, 1984.	135
Fig. 223.	Tomb in Wadi Farasa, 1984.	136
Fig. 224.	Bedouin living in the caves on the left of fig. 223, ca. 1940–1946.	136
Fig. 225.	Sheep in front of the Palace Tomb, 1984.	137
Fig. 226.	Wadi el-Mataha, looking north, with the tombs of Moghar an-Nasara on the top right, 1986.	138
Fig. 227.	Se'ideh with her neighbour, Heyaiyeh, in front of their tent, 1984.	138
Fig. 228.	Hamdah and Atidal, 1984.	138
Fig. 229.	Juma Samaheen and Auda al-Jamadeh on their camels, 1984.	139
Fig. 230.	Corinthian Tomb, with bags of animal feed and 19th-century graffiti, 1984.	139
Fig. 231.	Playing Skippy the kangaroo in front of the Corinthian Tomb, 1984.	140
Fig. 232.	Abdallah playing his <i>rabābah</i> , 1984.	140
Fig. 233.	Abu Nawas, 1984.	142
Fig. 234.	Pam cantering over Stouh an-Nabi Haroun, ploughed for cereal crops, 1984.	142
Fig. 235.	View across Stouh an-Nabi Haroun to Jabal Haroun, 1984.	143
Fig. 236.	View to Jabal Haroun.	143
Fig. 237.	On the ancient road to Wadi Sabra, 1984.	144
Fig. 238.	The shrine of Aaron's Tomb on Jabal Haroun, freshly whitewashed, 1990.	144
Fig. 239.	Abu Shaher and Pam with the guard of Nabi Haroun and his son, 1986.	145
Fig. 240.	Interior of Aaron's shrine, with Aaron's cenotaph on the right, 1990.	146
Fig. 241.	Aaron's shrine, remains of inlaid marble paving of the Byzantine church.	146
Fig. 242.	Aaron's tomb in the crypt of Aaron's shrine, 2015.	147
Fig. 243.	Abu Shaher in a <i>thaub</i> , with Abdallah in his soldier outfit, 1984.	147
Fig. 244.	Abu Shaher and Abdallah, 1984.	148
Fig. 245.	Abdallah, Abu Shaher, Judith, and Aisha, 1984.	148
Fig. 246.	Abdallah, Abu Shaher, Aisha, and Pam, 1984.	149
Fig. 247.	Snow on the mountains above the plain of Beidha, 1985.	152
Fig. 248.	Tomb 813 in the snow, 1986.	152
Fig. 249.	Mufleh, Judith, and Haroun, in front of Haroun's shop, 1986.	153
Fig. 250.	Mufleh's caves, plan.	154
Fig. 251.	"Royal Tombs" at foot of el-Khubthah, with the Urn Tomb on right, 2015.	155
Fig. 252.	Urn Tomb, 1986.	155
Fig. 253.	Back wall of Urn Tomb with apse heads carved for church, 2010.	156
Fig. 254.	Abu Shaher watching Mohammad Abdallah making sand bottles, 1986.	156
Fig. 255.	Mohammad Abdallah making sand bottles, 1986.	157
Fig. 256.	Facade 66 before it fell down in 1847.	157
Fig. 257.	Facade 66, right-hand part of fig. 256, in 1986.	158
Fig. 258.	Abdallah making a <i>rabābah</i> , 1986.	158
Fig. 259.	Haroun, 1986.	159
Fig. 260.	Lion Triclinium, 1982.	160
Fig. 261.	Lion Triclinium with the early morning sun hitting the niche in the back wall, 1986.	160
Fig. 262.	Deir, with the setting sun hitting the niche in the back wall, 1986.	161
Fig. 263.	Circular area in front of the Deir.	161

Fig. 264.	Obelisks (Zibb ‘Atuf) below the High Palace, at the top of Jabal al-Madhbah.	162
Fig. 265.	Cave of Hamdah’s family, 1986.	163
Fig. 266.	View to the site of Umm Sayhoun, beyond Moghar an-Nasara, 1986.	163
Fig. 267.	Hamdah’s cave, Hegr Tomb 652, 1981/2.	164
Fig. 268.	Khalil, Aisha, and Atidal, 1986.	164
Fig. 269.	Hamdah churning, 1986.	165
Fig. 270.	Hamdah using a goatskin supported by a tripod for churning, helped by Atidal, 1986.	165
Fig. 271.	Khalil playing with baby goats, while Hamdah churns, 1986.	166
Fig. 272.	Palace Tomb and Corinthian Tomb.	166
Fig. 273.	Aisha listening to Jane’s Walkman, 1986.	167
Fig. 274.	Approach to Wadi Rumm, with morning haze after a windy night, 1986.	167
Fig. 275.	Wadi Rumm, tents, 1986.	168
Fig. 276.	Wadi Rumm, tent beside houses, 1986.	168
Fig. 277.	Wadi Rumm, police station, 1986.	169
Fig. 278.	Wadi Rumm, Desert Patrol soldier, 1986.	169
Fig. 279.	Wadi Rumm, boy with a wire car with tin cans for wheels, 1986.	170
Fig. 280.	Wadi Rumm, Bedouin moving house with their tents, 1986.	171
Fig. 281.	Bedouin moving house with bedding, women and children, 1986.	171
Fig. 282.	Ahmad Moamaar Nawafleh serving tea in western-style living room in Wadi Musa, 1986.	172
Fig. 283.	Tomb 4, which had been built into the Rest House, and later demolished, 2001.	172
Fig. 284.	Obelisk Tomb and Bab el-Siq Triclinium, 2010.	173
Fig. 285.	Bab el-Siq Triclinium, interior with benches for funerary meals, 1986.	174
Fig. 286.	Obelisk Tomb, interior recess in back wall over a grave, 1986.	174
Fig. 287.	Ashlah Triclinium 21, with benches around the walls on three sides, 2010.	175
Fig. 288.	Ashlah Triclinium 21, graffiti of camels and single-wing propeller airplanes, 1986.	175
Fig. 289.	Kathleen and Abu Shaher having tea in front of the Tomb of the Roman Soldier, 1986.	177
Fig. 290.	Abu Shaher, drinking tea, 1986.	178
Fig. 291.	Tea with Abu Shaher in front of the Tomb of the Roman Soldier, 1986.	178
Fig. 292.	Abu Shaher’s donkey, enjoying the pasture, 1986.	179
Fig. 293.	Traditional wooden saddle on Abu Shaher’s donkey, 1986.	179
Fig. 294.	Donkey at the altar of the Qasr el-Bint, with traditional timber saddle, 1986.	180
Fig. 295.	Triclinium 235, with benches for dining, 2003.	180
Fig. 296.	Tourists reclining on the benches of Triclinium 235, 1986.	181
Fig. 297.	Dinner in the court in front of Mufleh’s cave, 1986.	181
Fig. 298.	Umm Sayhoun, initial 100 housing units in September 1986.	182
Fig. 299.	Umm Sayhoun, plan of original design of two semi-detached housing units.	182
Fig. 300.	Red brick houses at Umm Sayhoun, with additions made by the Bdoul by early 1986.	183
Fig. 301.	Dinner at Abu Shaher’s with <i>maqluba</i> , 1986.	183
Fig. 302.	<i>Maqluba</i> ready for dinner at Abu Shaher’s, 1986.	184
Fig. 303.	Shaher’s room for himself and his wife, with the lion-hanging from the old cave, 1986.	184
Fig. 304.	Shaher’s room, with studio portrait photographs, from the old cave walls, 1986.	185
Fig. 305.	Breakfast tea, with Abu Shaher’s daughter, Miriam, and Umm Shaher, 1986.	185
Fig. 306.	Abu Shaher tending his sheep as the sun rises, 1986.	186
Fig. 307.	Amina tending Abu Shaher’s sheep, 1986.	186
Fig. 308.	Abu Shaher explaining the game of <i>tāb</i> using a board marked in the rock, 1986.	187
Fig. 309.	Haroun and Abu Shaher ready for a game of <i>tāb</i> outside Haroun’s shop, 1986.	188
Fig. 310.	Game of <i>tāb</i> between Haroun and Abu Shaher progresses, watched by Kathleen, 1986.	188
Fig. 311.	Uthmaiya, 1986.	190
Fig. 312.	Trying on Umm Gasim’s <i>mudraga</i> .	191
Fig. 313.	Umm Gasim, 1986.	191
Fig. 314.	Umm Gasim, with two of her children, 1986.	191
Fig. 315.	Abu Nawas, with two of his sons, 1986.	192
Fig. 316.	Village in Jordan Valley, with traditional one-room houses, 1982.	198
Fig. 317.	Bedouin tents beside the road from the Jordan Valley up to Kufr Rakib, 2003.	199
Fig. 318.	Kufr Rakib, 2003.	199

Fig. 319.	Wadi Musa, fruit-shop, 2001.	201
Fig. 320.	Wadi Musa, Cleopetra (<i>sic</i>) Restaurant, 2001.	201
Fig. 321.	Entrance to the Siq, 2001.	202
Fig. 322.	Siq, with concrete paving, 2001.	202
Fig. 323.	Siq, remains of water pipes on the paving, 2001.	203
Fig. 324.	Siq, remains of carved camel and its driver, 2001.	204
Fig. 325.	Exit from the Siq at the current level, which is above the ancient one, 2018.	204
Fig. 326.	Tombs opposite the Khasneh and beside the exit from the Siq, 2003.	205
Fig. 327.	Khasneh in 2003, with grill over tombs below it, which were uncovered earlier in the year.	205
Fig. 328.	Gable Tomb 62D below the Khasneh and on the axis of the Khasneh, 2003.	206
Fig. 329.	Hegr Tomb 62E below the Khasneh, 2003.	206
Fig. 330.	Dakhilallah and friends in front of the Great Temple, 2003.	207
Fig. 331.	Dakhilallah, 2003.	207
Fig. 332.	Restaurant at the foot of el-Habis, north of Dakhilallah's old shop, 2003.	208
Fig. 333.	Inside restaurant in fig. 332, 2003.	208
Fig. 334.	Umm Sayhoun, with houses up to three storeys, beyond Moghar an-Nasara, 2003.	209
Fig. 335.	Qasr el-Bint, looking up Wadi Abu 'Olleqa to Umm Sayhoun, 2003.	209
Fig. 336.	Qasr el-Bint, timber string courses in the Qasr el-Bint, 2003.	210
Fig. 337.	Architectural fragments for the Temple of the Winged Lions, 2001.	210
Fig. 338.	Column base of limestone "with nail clippings", 2003.	211
Fig. 339.	Great Temple, fallen columns with thin drums, 1986.	211
Fig. 340.	Great Temple, viewed from the Temple of the Winged Lions, looking south, 2001.	212
Fig. 341.	Elephant's head Ionic capital from the Great Temple forecourt, 2001.	213
Fig. 342.	Renaissance Tomb, 2003.	213
Fig. 343.	Renaissance Tomb, graves in the cleared floor, 2010.	214
Fig. 344.	Renaissance Tomb, grave with covering slabs still in place, 2003.	215
Fig. 345.	Dakhilallah's house in Umm Sayhoun, with views to Petra, 2003.	216
Fig. 346.	Dakhilallah's house in Umm Sayhoun, with crowsteps on corner tower, 2003.	217
Fig. 347.	Fruit dessert at Dakhilallah's, with Shaher and Ismaen, 2003.	217
Fig. 348.	Dakhilallah and Shaher er-Rababeh, 2003.	218
Fig. 349.	<i>Mensef</i> at Dakhilallah's house in Umm Sayhoun, with Shaher er-Rababeh, 2003.	218
Fig. 350.	Dakhilallah, 2003.	218
Fig. 351.	Dakhilallah and Judith in <i>mudraga</i> , 2003.	219
Fig. 352.	Dakhilallah's wife, Umm Khaled, and daughter Fatima, 2003.	219
Fig. 353.	A house at Umm Sayhoun, with wall-paintings, 2003.	221
Fig. 354.	Umm Sayhoun, tents used for animals replaced with built pens and stables, 2003.	221
Fig. 355.	Shepherd with his flock near the turnoff for Wadi Musa, 2018.	223
Fig. 356.	Wadi Musa, main street, 2018.	224
Fig. 357.	Wadi Musa, main street with flood abatement works and hotels, 2018.	224
Fig. 358.	Petra, looking south-west from the Urn Tomb, 2015.	225
Fig. 359.	Ismaen ibn Dakhilallah, 2018.	225
Fig. 360.	Ismaen ibn Dakhilallah, 2018.	226
Fig. 361.	Tuffleh's son, Khalid, 2018.	226
Fig. 362.	Souvenir and refreshment stand opposite the Deir, 2018.	227
Fig. 363.	Flood abatement works beside the Temenos of the Qasr el-Bint, looking west, 2018.	227
Fig. 364.	Petra, city centre, looking north-east, 2015.	228
Fig. 365.	Ez-Zantur from the High Place looking west, with reconstructed houses, 2015.	228
Fig. 366.	Petra, from Umm el-Biyara looking north-east, 2010.	229
Fig. 367.	Circular area near the Deir, after partial excavation, 2018.	229
Fig. 368.	Aerial view of Petra looking north, with sealed Wadi Turkmaniyah road on the left, 2017.	230
Fig. 369.	Access road from Umm Sayhoun along Wadi Turkmaniyah, looking south-west, 2018.	231
Fig. 370.	Umm Sayhoun from Petra, beyond Moghar an-Nasara, looking north-east, 2018.	231
Fig. 371.	Umm Sayhoun, with the tombs of Moghar an-Nasara in the foreground, 2018.	232
Fig. 372.	View from Umm el-Biyara of spring crops, 2010.	232
Fig. 373.	Pylon tomb facades carved in the cliff face south of Tomb 825, 2015.	233

Fig. 374.	Monolithic tombs at the exit of the Outer Siq: Tomb 70 and Tomb 73, 2018.	234
Fig. 375.	Monolithic Tomb 73, 1984.	234
Fig. 376.	Monolithic Tomb 73 in 2018, after the right-hand half had collapsed.	234
Fig. 377.	Tomb 652, 1984.	235
Fig. 378.	Tomb 652, after the right-hand side of the facade had collapsed, 2018.	235
Fig. 379.	Tomb 62E, 2003.	236
Fig. 380.	Tomb 62E, 2010.	236
Fig. 381.	Palace Tomb, lower south side, 2010.	237
Fig. 382.	Bilingual inscription, opposite the Obelisk Tomb, eroded by rainwater runoff, 2010.	238
Fig. 383.	Urn Tomb interior, with water runoff in back left-hand corner, 2018.	238
Fig. 384.	Tomb of Sextius Florentinus, interior, 2018.	240

FOREWORD

Before her untimely death on 27 May 2019, at the age of 61, Judith McKenzie had largely readied for publication an account of the time she had spent in Jordan in 1981–82, 1984 and 1986 among the Bdoul tribe, then still living in caves within the ancient Nabataean site of Petra. She intended this publication as a record of a way of life that had started to vanish when, in 1985, the Bdoul began their move to the new village of Umm Sayhoun nearby, under the direction of the Jordanian government. Circumstances, however, now dictate that this book must also stand as a memorial to Judith herself.

Judith first travelled to Jordan in 1981 to do fieldwork for the doctoral thesis she was preparing for the Department of Archaeology at the University of Sydney under the direction of J.-P. Descoeudres and A. W. McNicoll. In her fourth year as an undergraduate there, she had studied the problem of how particular architectural features found in Petra came to appear in Second-Style Pompeian wall-painting of the first century BC, before such baroque elements were used in Roman architecture itself. To conclude that the architecture of ancient Alexandria was, in fact, the link between Petra and Pompeii, Judith realized that she had to establish rigorously the dates of the monuments at Petra – an archaeological problem of notorious intractability. She therefore developed a novel surveying method to record the architectural mouldings on buildings, intending to survey moulding-profiles on the monuments of Petra and use their minute stylistic changes to establish a chronological framework. The development of this survey-method alone would have been worth the awarding of a doctoral degree.

The talent for survey she had inherited from her maternal grandfather, James Dalzell Dewar. He had been a surveyor in the Australian army during the First World War, assigned to locate and plot the graves of Australians who had fallen in battle in Europe, so that families could find any remains once the war ended. Like her grandfather nearly 70 years earlier, Judith, armed with a theodolite lent by the University of Sydney, travelled overseas to begin her work. After three seasons at Petra, she submitted her dissertation to the University, one of the earliest to be completed successfully at the Department of Archaeology there. The Faculty awarded her the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in 1987, and in 1990, her book *The Architecture of Petra* appeared, presenting the results of her thesis.

Judith was, by then, a junior research fellow in Archaeology at St Hugh's College, Oxford. She later became Profes-

sor of the Archaeology of Late Antique Egypt and the Holy Land at the same university, where she founded, in 2012, Manar al-Athar, an online photo-archive for research on the Middle East. Her photographs of the buildings at Petra taken during her fieldwork may be viewed on the Manar al-Athar website: <http://www.manar-al-athar.ox.ac.uk/>. The editor of the present volume is grateful to Elizabeth Macaulay, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Ine Jacobs, directors in succession to Judith, for the continued maintenance and curatorship of Judith's archaeological archive in the offices at Oxford.

Judith elaborated on the argument that the art and architecture of ancient Alexandria connected Petra with Second-Style Pompeian wall-painting when she published, in 2007, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt: 300 BC–AD 700*. She continued to write articles on Nabataean archaeology throughout her career, and her last significant contributions to this subject in her lifetime were *The Nabataean Temple at Khirbet et-Tannur* (2013), in two volumes, and a review-article of L. Nehmé et al., *Atlas archéologique et épigraphique de Pétra, fascicule I, De Bāb as-Sīq au Wādī al-Farasah* (McKenzie 2014), in which Judith reconsidered the chronology she had herself proposed decades earlier. Judith also registered additional thoughts on a few Jordanian sites in gazetteer-entries she wrote and edited as part of a book on “architectural conversion” that she was working on at the time of her death (e.g., Jerash; Khirbet edh-Dharih). That book is now being prepared for publication by Ross Burns, Miranda Williams, and the present editor.

Life in a Cave in Petra with the Bdoul: 1981–1986, therefore, is a pendant to Judith's original (in all senses) monograph on Petra. In editing it, Andres Reyes has been responsible for preparing this book for publication. For the plates, Judith, as ever, had left careful instructions for labelling and presentation. She had given fewer instructions for the revision of her text, but all who knew Judith will be aware of her direct style of expression, delivered, despite many years in England, with distinctively Australian vowels, locutions, and frames of reference. To maintain the distinctiveness of Judith's voice, therefore, the text has been emended only when there was an ambiguity to resolve or an inadvertent slip to correct. The bibliography stands as it was in early 2019, with no attempt made to add to it.

I am grateful to Angela Phippen, Judith's first fieldwork assistant, for reading through the text, as Judith had wished, and clarifying accounts of certain events. I would also like to thank Mohamed Kenawi, a former pupil and colleague

of Judith, for looking over the glossary of Arabic terms, the transliterations for which follow generally agreed or familiar spellings (p. 241). In her preface, Judith thanks others who helped her write this book, for the publication of which the Classics Faculty at Oxford University, the Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research, and anonymous donors have kindly provided a subvention.

The maps are also Judith's, all originally prepared for her other publications, with the last three reproduced from *The Architecture of Petra*. There are slight discrepancies between Arabic transliterations in these maps and ones used for this book, but they are unlikely to cause confusion. In any event, Judith, who regarded archaeology as both art and science, would probably maintain that, since the maps from *The Architecture of Petra* had been prepared by hand, any digital revision of them would inevitably result in some loss of accuracy.

It will be tempting to see this book as a longing for a way of life no longer extant, or as wistfulness for a time

of romantic archaeological exploration, or as an elegy for Judith herself, taken at the height of her intellectual powers. Judith would have been dismayed by any of that. She largely eschewed sentimentality and would have remonstrated against perspectives that privileged nostalgia over improvement through the years of infrastructure and amenities in Jordan. Instead, this book is simply a memoir of lifestyles now difficult to imagine and apt to be forgotten if not set down, as well as a call to continue the conservation of one of humanity's great achievements. It is a reminder too of Judith's clear-sightedness and her ferocious intelligence, with its insistence on precision that was relentless "as rain on a tin roof". (A Judith-ism: she expressed surprise that rainfall in England did not sound as it did in Canberra, where she grew up.) Above all, this book records her love and admiration for the many in Jordan who welcomed her warmly and alongside whom it was her privilege to live, in a cave at Petra, forty years ago.

Andres Reyes
Oxford
July 2020

PREFACE

I became aware that my experiences of living in a cave in Petra in Jordan were of interest to a new generation when, in summer 2017, I had a seventeen-year old volunteer, Layla McDermott, working in the Manar al-Athar open-access photo-archive office at Oxford University. She and her younger sisters were fascinated that, over thirty years before, I had lived in a cave without electricity or running water, let alone a phone or a vehicle. I was there during the last few years that the Petra Bedouin, the Bdoul tribe, lived in the caves, prior to moving to their new village of Umm Sayhoun in 1985. Layla's curiosity made me realise that these experiences were of interest to a new generation in the West. At the same time, many of the older adults we had known in Umm Sayhoun, who were the grandparents of the current generation of the Bdoul, had died, and their children had only childhood memories of growing up in Petra. Knowledge of the customs and experiences of the Bdoul when they had lived in the caves in Petra was fading.

The only first-hand detailed written record of life in Petra in the years before the move to the new village was Marguerite van Geldermalsen's autobiography, *Married to a Bedouin*, published in 2006. She had lived there since 1978, when she met and married Mohammad Abdallah Othman. Her account, written as a series of incidents, is very accurate in its details and covers virtually all Bdoul customs. It is thus an excellent and reliable record, of which more notice should be taken by anthropologists in the future. The few scholarly articles stimulated at the time by the move to the new village provide an academic record of some specific aspects of Bdoul life, or specific characteristics of the Bdoul, such as their use of space¹ and tribal names,² as well as observing how the Bdoul lifestyle could elucidate the interpretation of archaeological evidence of transitory occupation,³ and the effects of tourism.⁴ However, none of those studies provides the kind of information about Bdoul life contained in van Geldermalsen's book.

The account published here provides a further record of life in Petra in the early 1980s. Although my research concerned the monuments, because each of my assistants and I spent so much time socialising with the Bdoul, I came to

observe many aspects of Bdoul life in a series of visits over three main field seasons in late 1981/early 1982, early 1984, and early 1986. As women, we had access to the world of young girls and women, which men from outside did not, while we were also sometimes treated as honorary men.

I kept notes about those experiences. The notes were generally written at the end of a week and included the highlights of it, but they were largely an *aide-mémoire* for weekly letters home to our parents. Many details which I remembered were missing from the notes, so this volume is a memoir. In addition, rather than following the strict chronological order of a diary, I have combined experiences into vignettes involving particular individuals and places to avoid confusing the reader by jumping backwards and forwards between people and locations. I have only combined descriptions within a field season, not between them (I have not moved experiences, for example, from 1981/2 to 1984 or 1986). I have, however, often used photographs of later years to adequately illustrate the narrative. I have kept the approximate overall chronology within each field season. I have had to check many details, in particular, names, with Marguerite van Geldermalsen, who has been enormously helpful. My aim has been to be as accurate as possible so that this can be a record of our experiences for the grandchildren of the Bdoul children we knew in Petra in 1981–86, and for their children to come.

In those days, as taking a photograph of someone felt potentially intrusive, we were often hesitant to do so. This is in sharp contrast to the era of camera-phones when photographs are taken of everyone and everything, without necessarily asking. We did not take photographs of many of the incidents described and very few of women whom we did not know well. That custom applied even if we took Polaroid photographs of them for them to keep. Just as at home in Sydney at the time, if having tea with a friend, it would have felt uncomfortable to interrupt it to take a photograph of the event, we did not do so with our Bdoul friends. We consequently took relatively few photographs of people. Almost all of those which I took are published here.

On seeing some of my photographs in late 2018, Marguerite van Geldermalsen observed, "I sometimes forget how really, really basic and hard life was. The people have forgotten too, I think."⁵ With Umm Sayhoun visible on the hill overlooking the centre of Petra, so many large souvenir

1 Bienkowski and Chlebik 1991.

2 Ohannessian-Charpin 1986; Russell 1993.

3 In caves: Bienkowski and Chlebik 1991. In tents: Simms 1988; Banning and Köhler-Rolefson 1986.

4 Shoup 1985.

5 Marguerite van Geldermalsen, pers. comm. 30 September 2018.

stands, numerous public toilet blocks, an asphalt access road, and over half a million tourists a year, it is difficult for people who did not know it then to imagine how simple the lifestyle was, nor how cut-off and isolated from the world Petra felt, frozen in time.

In the 1980s, it was assumed that there was no evidence for the Bdoul being in Petra before World War I. This was used to argue that they had no historic right to live in Petra and to justify that they should be moved from the Petra caves to a newly-built village. However, when I reached London in May 1986 and examined the accounts in the British Library of travellers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became apparent that there was considerable evidence for the Bdoul living in Petra at that time. I have presented some of these descriptions, as well as a brief history of the development of the site for tourism prior to when my account begins, in order to provide further context.

How I Came to Live in a Cave in Petra

Before I went to Sydney University, I had never heard of Petra. This was in the days before Petra had become a World Heritage Site (1985), or the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) had featured the Holy Grail in the Khasneh. I was first introduced to Petra in 1978 as a third-year Archaeology student in lectures on the 'Cities of the Silk Road' (Palmyra, Dura Europos, Jerash, Begram, and Petra) given by Anthony (Tony) McNicoll. He explained how the Khasneh at Petra related to examples of architecture also depicted on Roman wall-painting of the first century BC. Both had broken pediments and circular pavilions before such features were thought to have been built in free-standing architecture (figs. 90–91). In our lectures on Roman wall-painting, Jean-Paul Descoudres made similar points. They each explained that, because one of them was a Near Eastern archaeologist and the other a Classical archaeologist, they did not have the knowledge of the other discipline in order to be able to pursue the mystery of the connection between the wall-paintings and the rock-cut architecture, noticed as early as 1862 by the French architect Jacques Ignace Hittorff.⁶

As their student, I decided to study the problem for my fourth-year honours thesis, which I did without going to Petra. The wall-paintings were well dated, but the monuments at Petra were not, and I developed a hypothesis for dating them. I also explored the possibility that the common source of influence for the new architectural forms in the wall-paintings and at Petra was the architecture of Ptolemaic (Hellenistic) Alexandria, the capital of Egypt founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC.

After completing the fourth year of my Bachelor of Arts Honours degree, Tony McNicoll encouraged me to apply to be Annual Scholar of the British School of Archaeology in

Jerusalem. The British School of Archaeology was the British base for archaeology in Jordan prior to the 1967 Six-Day War. However, after that, the British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History was established to provide a new base for British archaeologists working in Jordan. My application was successful, influencing the course of my life for many years to come. The scholarship provided me with funds for an academic year to do fieldwork and a base at the British Institute in Amman from which to conduct it.⁷ I was also awarded a Commonwealth Postgraduate Research Award to do my PhD on the topic, enrolled at the University of Sydney. The aim of my research was to test the theories I had suggested in my honours-year thesis. To do that, it was necessary to record the architectural details of the main monuments at Petra.

The Director of the Sydney University expedition to Pella in Jordan, Professor Basil Hennessy, had been director of the British School in Jerusalem before the Six-Day War and had worked at Pella for many years after he had become Edwin Cuthbert Hall Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Sydney. Consequently, he had very good relations with the Director General of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Dr Adnan Hadidi, who gave me a letter of permission to work in Petra. Professor Hennessy also provided key logistical support by organising for the Pella foreman Abu Isa (Badri Hasan Maadi) to take us to Petra the first few times we went.

Because I had been bushwalking many times in the Snowy Mountains in Australia (going away for three days or so with friends, taking all our provisions and tents), the idea of living in a cave for two or three weeks at a time (with a week or two in Amman, in between each visit) did not seem as daunting as might be imagined. Extra considerations were involved, such as ascertaining what medical supplies to take and how and when to use them, but organising other supplies was much the same, only on a larger scale.

I had to find an assistant, who had to be female. A fellow student, Angela Phippen, had planned an open-ended overseas trip to the Middle East, Europe, and the UK. The opportunity to live in a cave in Petra and be my assistant fitted well with her plans, and I could not have wished for a better assistant in 1981/82. I subsequently returned to Petra two years later in early 1984 with Pamela Watson and again in early 1986 with, consecutively, Jane Lydon, Kathleen Boswell, and Torla Evans.

After this third field season, I moved to Oxford in 1986 where I completed my book on *The Architecture of Petra*, which included the results of the fieldwork, published in 1990. As I then moved on to work further on *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC – AD 700* (The Pelican History of Art, 2007), which had arisen out of my work in Petra, I did

⁷ See McKenzie 1990: xv–xvii for more information regarding sources of funding for each trip, full acknowledgements, and other background information.

⁶ Hittorff 1862.

not return to Jordan for 15 years, until a brief visit to Petra in 2001, and longer visits, of a few days each, in 2003 and 2010.

By May 2018, when my young colleagues (Miranda Williams, Sean Leatherbury, Maria Lidova, and Steve Welsh) went there, the atmosphere of the site had changed so much that it no longer felt cut off from the world or “half as old as time”. At the same time, they met some of the grown-up children of those whom I had known as children or adults in Petra, which I found most pleasing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Full acknowledgements of those who helped at the time with the field seasons, and sources of funding can be found in *The Architecture of Petra* (1990), xvii. In the preparation of this volume, I offer my thanks to Marguerite van Geldermalsen for answering innumerable questions and in particular for help with the names of the Bdoul. Those who kindly answered other questions or otherwise provided assistance include: Piotr Bienkowski, Ian Carroll, Felicity Cobbing,

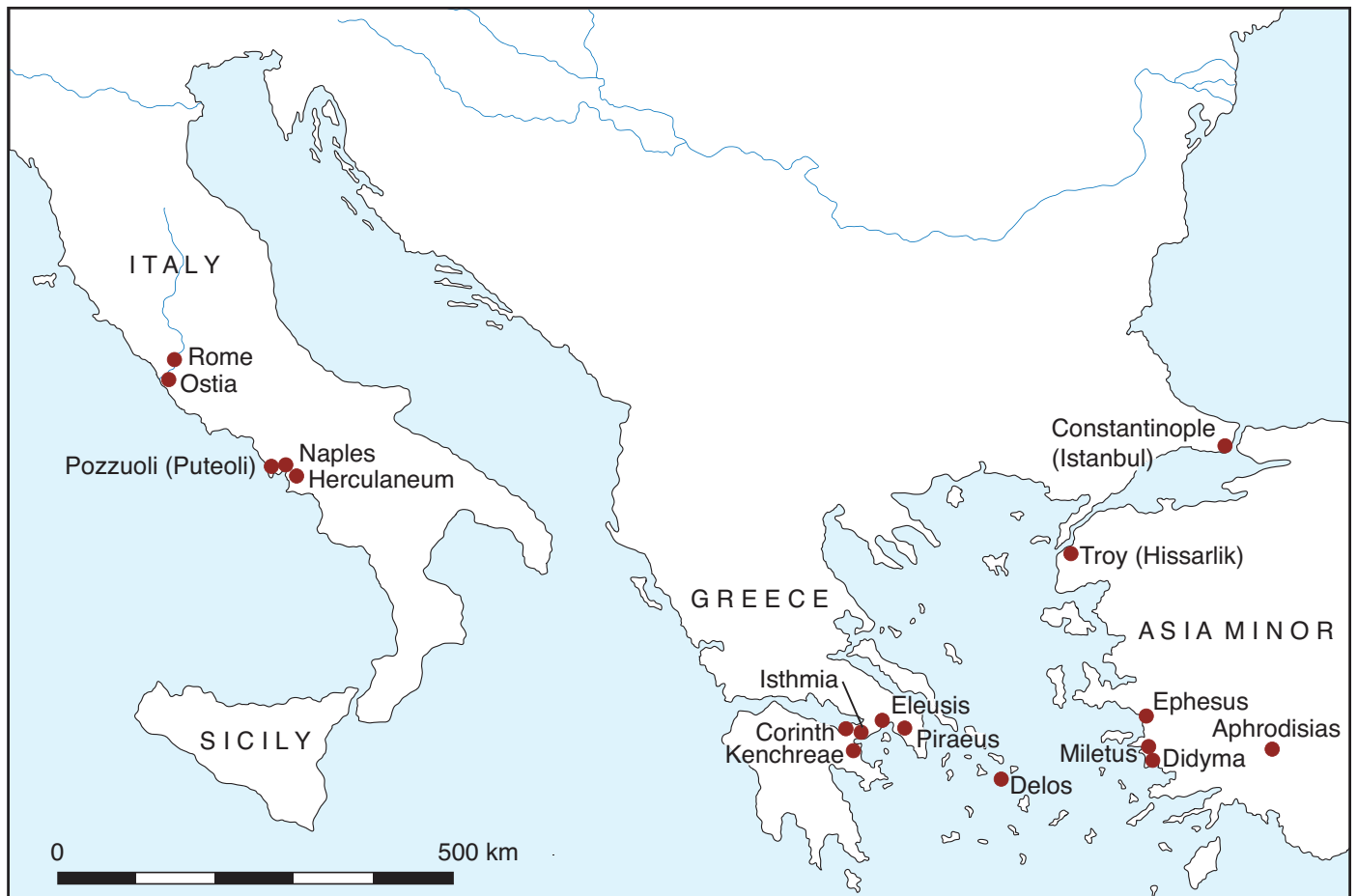
EWA Digital London, Suleiman Farajat I, Bill Finlayson, Muna Hadad, Jessica Holland, Nina Joukowsky, Mohamed Kenawi, Muhammad Murshed Khadija, Aya Khairy, Sean Leatherbury, Alison McQuitty, Michael Mockford, Carol Palmer, Angela Phippen, William Phippen, Asma Rababeh, Simon Rickerby, Zeyad al-Salameen, Micaela Sinibaldi, Rachael Sparks, Amara Thornton, Ernie Wickens, and Miranda Williams.

For help with editing and typing, I would like to thank Miranda Williams and Andres Reyes, as well as Martha Buckley for reading and providing editorial comments on the manuscript.

For use of her photographs, I am especially grateful to Angela Phippen. For use of other photographs, I would like to thank Rebecca Banks (courtesy APAAME), Piotr Bienkowski, Phillip C. Edwards, Torla Evans, Sean Leatherbury, Maria Lidova, Otto Nieminen, Sarah Norodom, the Palestine Exploration Fund, Jane Taylor (for photographs in the American Center of Oriental Research, Amman [ACOR] archive), University College London Institute of Archaeology, Pamela Watson, Steve Welsh, Marlena Whiting, and Miranda Williams. Uncredited photographs are my own.



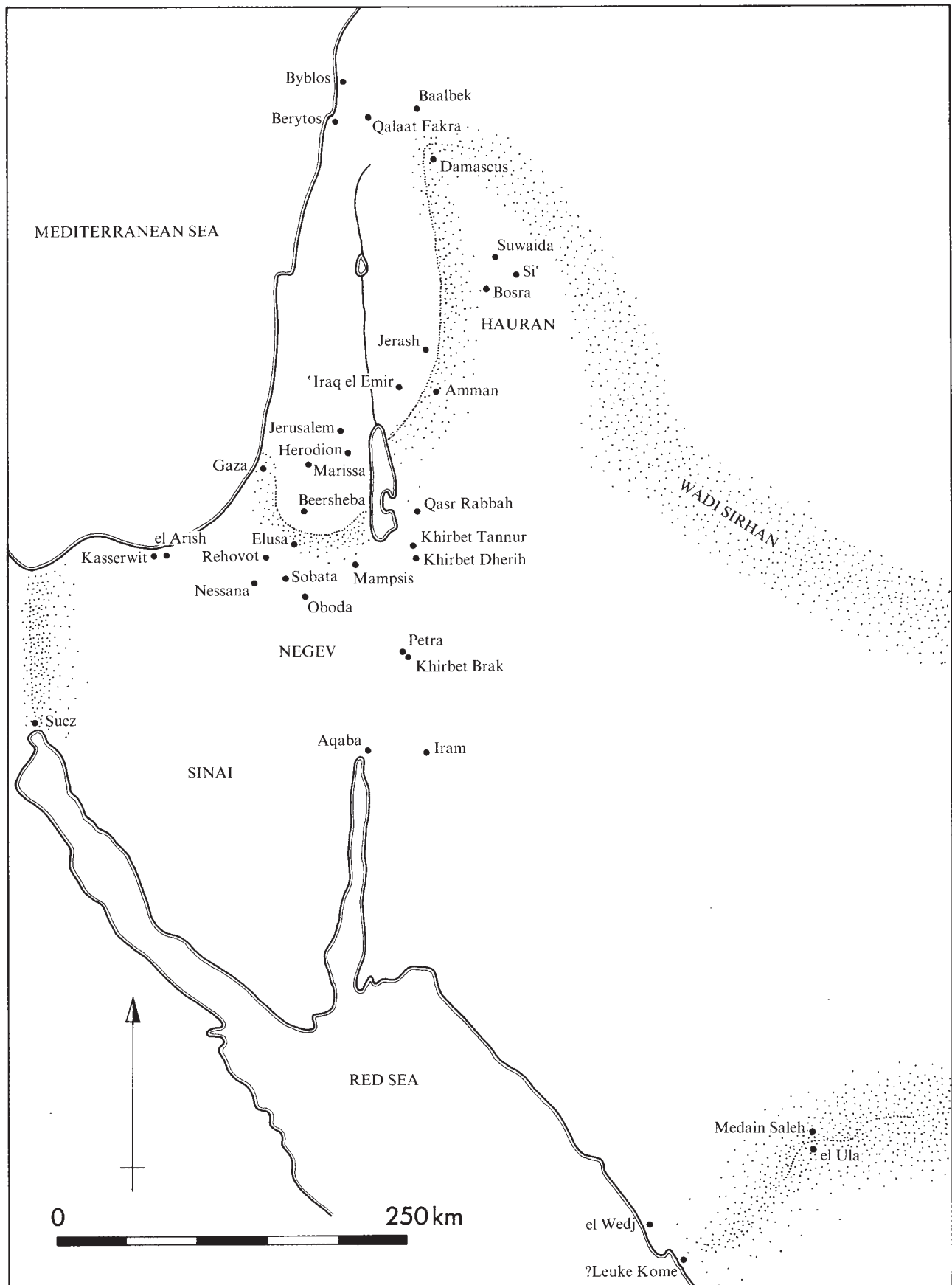
Map 1. The Mediterranean and Near East.



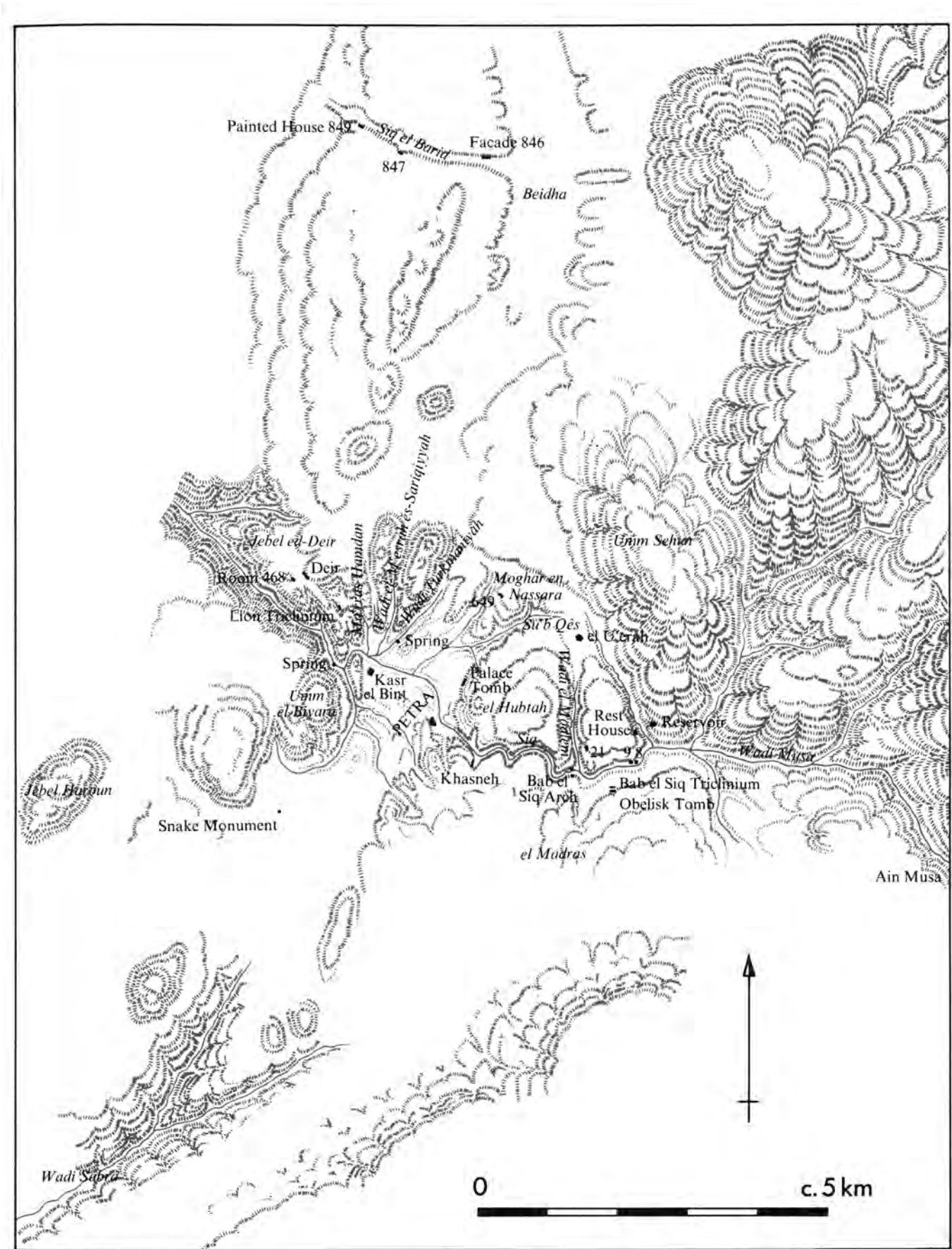
Map 2. The Mediterranean; Italy, Greece, and the western coast of Asia Minor (Turkey).



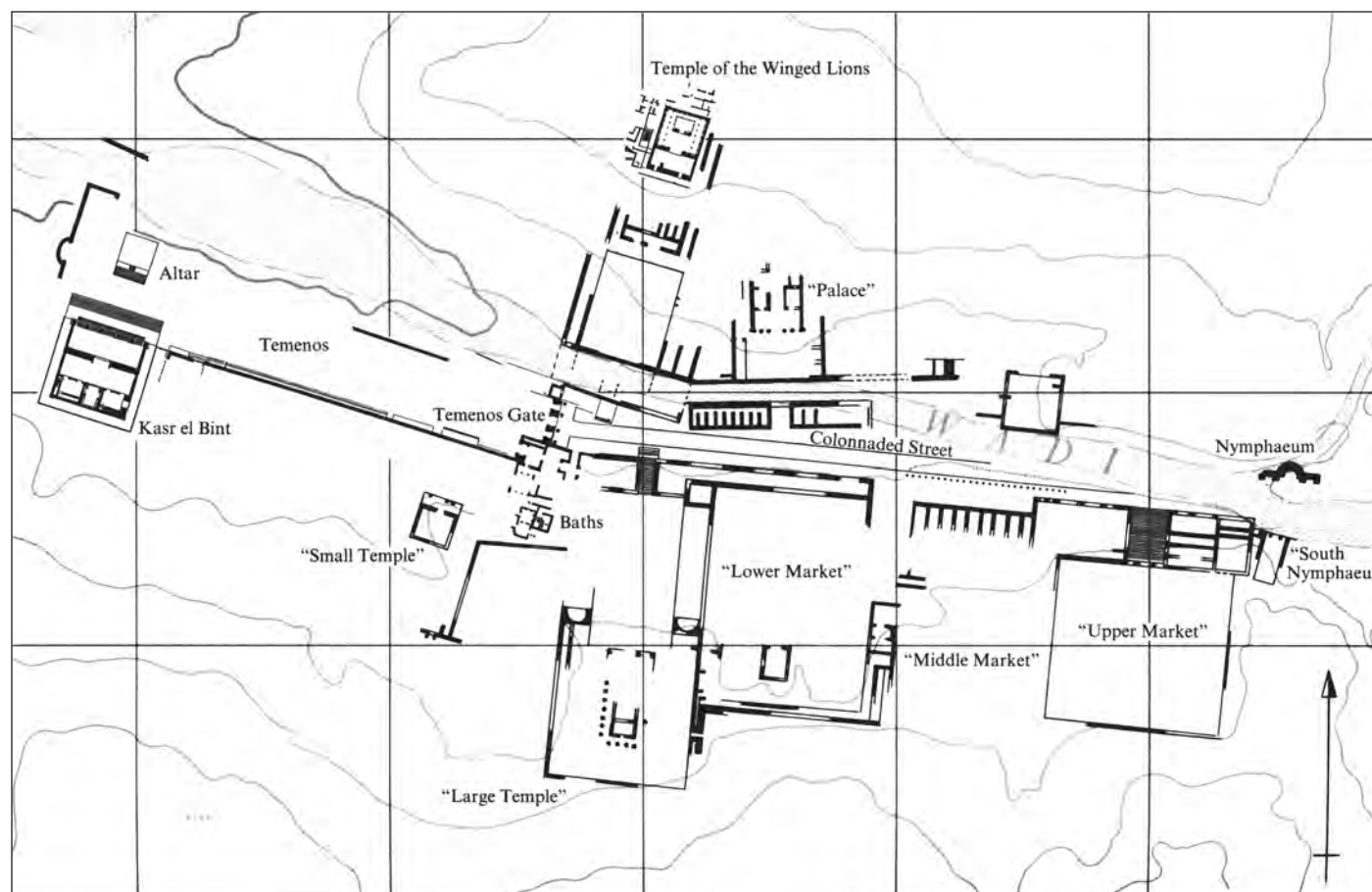
Map 3. The eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea area.



Map 4. Nabataean area, first century BC to first century AD.



Map 5. Area around Petra.



Map 6. Petra, plan of city centre.