

Report on
Mission to Evaluate
the State of Conservation of
PETRA
(Jordan)
3–7 September 2000

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1 BACKGROUND TO THE MISSION

This report was requested by the World Heritage Bureau. The objective of the mission was to look at conservation and visitor management issues in Petra.

The coordination for meetings and hotel bookings was provided by Mr Giovanni Boccardi, Programme Specialist for Culture at the UNESCO Office in Amman, and his staff.

2 PROGRAMME

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| 3 September | Drive from Jerusalem to Petra, spending all afternoon on site, without local guides but with Mr. Boccardi |
| 4 September | Meetings with Petra officials: Professor Zeidoun Al-Muheisen (Director General, Petra Regional Planning Council) and Dr Suleiman Farajat (Site Manager, Petra). Full day tour of the site and its surroundings, with Mr Boccardi and Ing. Hussan Hamdouni (Petra Regional Planning Council). |
| 5 September | All day in Amman, meetings with the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, Mr Akel Biltaji, the Director of the Department of Antiquities, the Director General of the Ministry, Dr Pierre Bikai and Patricia Bikai from ACOR (the American Center for Oriental Research), who excavate in Petra, and with Mr Boccardi from UNESCO. |
| 6-7 September | Return to the site, meeting tourist agents and local vendors, touring different facilities, visiting "Little Petra," and driving back to Jerusalem. |

3 INTRODUCTION

The information obtained during this mission and used for the report comes from different discussions, from site observation, and from reading several reports.

It is important to state at the beginning of this report that, according to information provided to us, it is quite possible that Petra is at a transitional period, just before some important decisions are taken. These decisions have to do with a project being carried out with the help of the US National Park Service, aiming at the creation of a management plan, including a new organizational structure for the Petra Archaeological Park, a new management policy, etc. As a step towards the preparation of recommendations for such a plan, a five-day workshop took place in Petra and Amman on 27-31 July, organized by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the US National Park Service, with funds from the World Bank. It is hoped that a final report will soon be submitted to the Minister. Since implementation of the recommendations will require high ministerial decisions, it remains to be seen what those recommendation will be and whether they will be officially adopted and implemented.

One important piece of background information for this report is the fact that Petra attracts about half a million visitors per year, five times more than ten years ago.

This report can, of course, refer only to the existing situation.

4 TECHNICAL ISSUES

The main problem at the present time is that Petra does not have a management plan, or at least not one that has been accepted and is being implemented.

As result of this situation, most decisions are made on an *ad-hoc* basis, sometimes opportunistically and certainly not as a result of a long- or short-term plan. This situation applies to both conservation and visitor management issues.

4.1 Conservation issues

- Petra lacks proper documentation, which would serve as a starting point for any conservation planning or monitoring.
- There is no condition assessment reporting and therefore no means of preparing any action plan or priority plans for immediate interventions if needed. On the other hand, there is clear evidence of rapid decay, including collapse and danger of collapse.
- Since comprehensive documentation, condition assessment, and conservation plans are non-existent, there are also no plans for any preventive measures. A decision was recently taken to prevent visitors from entering the Treasury (*Khazneh*), temporary fencing was put up to keep visitors from destroying a clay pipe, and limiting access into the theatre is being considered. These are all positive measures but all have been applied opportunistically and not as the result of any plan.
- Recent excavations (by Brown University, ACOR, a Swiss expedition, and UNESCO), do not follow a development plan for the site, nor are they followed up by maintenance plans (at site level) or site staff professional capacity. On the other hand, the excavators are aware of conservation issues and maintenance needs and provide funds and plans for their excavated areas. This does not apply in the case of excavations in the area of the Qasr Al Bint *temenos*, sponsored by the UNESCO Amman Office, which does not have the funds to complete the work, and so this area remains fenced off.
- There is no conservation architect, nor any other kind of architect, on the staff of the Petra Regional Planning Council or the site itself. There are no trained conservators on the staff at the highest levels of expertise required for a site of the importance, magnitude, and conservation complexity as Petra.
- The only conservation research on site is that conducted by a German group. It is a stone conservation project studying materials for repair and completion of decayed stone. At the present time preventive measures, such as the diversion of rainwater away from the facades (mainly water coming down from the summits of the hills), does not appear to be part of this project. This comment is not intended as a criticism of this stone conservation project, which includes the establishment of a conservation centre, but rather to highlight some problems relating to priorities and the fact that very little attention is paid to preventive conservation measures.
- There are no warning or direction signs telling the visitor where not to go and indicating areas that might be damaged if walked upon. In a very few places there are clear paths for visitors, created for conservation purposes. Even where such paths exist, however, there is no sign requesting visitors to avoid using other paths or not to walk on very fragile surfaces (such as the Great Temple, for example). At the Al Deir there is now a special policeman who tells visitors not to climb to the top of the monument, but there is no sign with this message and the guard speaks only Arabic.

- Whilst the site is kept clean, it would appear that cleaning is the only permanent maintenance activity in Petra.
- No regular monitoring is carried out and, as mentioned above, such monitoring would be impossible since there is no proper documentation.

4.2 Visitor management

- Petra has a visitor centre and museum. The museum is undeniably too small for the wealth of Petra; it should certainly be updated from the point of view of modern museology, as well as from the curatorial aspect. A study of the recent artefacts in the tiny museum laboratory, as well as those in the stores and laboratories at ACOR in Amman illustrates what can and should be done. The visitor to the site obtains now only a small fragment of what the site has to offer, and learns nothing about a very important component of the Nabatean culture – daily life and its portable objects. From a purely "business" point of view it also represents a missed opportunity, since with a good museum visitors would spend more time in Petra and therefore in the hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops.
- There are no adequate interpretation signs, although some experimental signage exists, investigating the best design and materials. A decision regarding a full signage policy and plan will, it is hoped, be made soon and implemented. In this case the policy is as important as the design, since there are at least thirty individual monuments: if each of them were to have its own signage the site might look like a forest of signs.
- There are not enough points for shade, rest, and drinking points of adequate quality along the visitor trails. There is, however, an adequate number of garbage baskets that are properly maintained.
- Some monuments to which many visitors climb, such as the Urn Tomb, are unsafe and need hand rails or other safety measure.
- Most of the site is not accessible to the handicapped or to visitors with physical limitations.
- Several different sources reported that a plan that will include alternative visitor trails is in preparation. Like many other sites, Petra has a few "musts" for every visitor which no alternative trail will leave out and it is unlikely that any plan will be able to relieve the pressure on those.
- Visitors can obtain good information leaflets and site maps at the visitor centre and other distribution points.

4.3 Management and funding

- Although the site with its half a million visitors per year is a "money spinner," only 25% of the income from entrance fees go to the PRPC (Petra Regional Planning Council), out of which nothing goes back to the site, its conservation, and its management.
- Nothing of the 44 million US\$ loan from The World Bank to Jordan is going to the site proper, but rather to infrastructure and issues outside the site. This is not to imply that the other issues are less important, but it should never be overlooked that the site itself is the reason for all of it and has real need of plans and implementation. Lack of money cannot be seen as the problem in this case. It seems rather to be an issue of awareness and of understanding the needs and problems of the site, the priorities, and possibly a decision-making process issue.
- What seems to be a major problem in Petra is the fact that the only indicator for measuring its success is the number of visitors. Using such an indicator Petra is, and will continue to be, considered to be a success story, whether or not resources are allocated for conservation and better visitor management.
- If indicators for state of conservation will be funds allocated or number of trained staff working in conservation in Petra, then we are looking at the moment at a failure story.

- The chain of command and responsibilities regarding decision-making processes is unclear. Ostensibly the PRPC is in charge of all planning and development issues and receives 25% of the entrance fees, but in reality it handles only the areas outside the site itself. At the same time, the site manager, who is formally Deputy Director of the PRPC, does not receive the budget, staff, or equipment for conservation and maintenance work and his authority is very limited.
- A shuttle service has been recommended many times in the past to take visitors from the end of the trail back to the parking area (entrance), but this has never been implemented. Such a shuttle would save visitors 1–1½ hours of walking back and would also reduce by half the number of people using the path, thus contributing to the conservation of the site.

5 Recommendations

1. A high-level decision is needed to prepare a management plan for Petra.
2. A thorough survey, documentation and condition assessment should be prepared independently.
3. Following the condition assessment, an action plan with priorities must be prepared and implemented.
4. A professional team responsible for conservation issues should be set up. The core of this team must consist of trained and experienced professionals. The less experienced staff should be given training opportunities, whether in Jordan or elsewhere.
5. Issues concerning administrative structure, improvement of visitor management, budgets, etc should be part of the management plan.

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