

## The Nabataean Temple at Qasrawet

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The Nabataean site at Qasrawet (North Sinai) has been excavated by the IFAO at the beginning of this century, and again, illegally, during the Israeli occupation of the area. In both cases, the excavations were incomplete and the existing publications very preliminary. As I could see during a short visit in 1998, the ruins were already covered with sand, allowing only a cursory inspection.

Among the visible ruins, the temple is most conspicuous. There are four gabled facades turned inward, forming a square. The architectural form of the building was never clearly understood. Some monuments in Jordan, such as temples in Wadi Rumm, Khirbet ed-Dharih, and the so-called temple of the Winged Lions in Petra, can be usefully compared to Qasrawet. In this light, I intend to propose that this temple also had a central courtyard open to the sky. In my opinion, the temple of Qasrawet deserves to be systematically excavated.

Some 50 km east from al-Qantara, among the moving sand dunes beyond the new al-Salam Canal, are the seldom-visited ruins of a Roman Period settlement including two temples and a monumental enclosure. The site was first investigated in the beginning of the twentieth century by Jean Clédat,<sup>1</sup> who spelled the name as Qasr-Gheit. Clédat saw correctly that it must have been a Nabataean station on a secondary caravan route from Arabia to Egypt.

Clédat cleared the interior of the smaller of the two temples from sand; it is a rectangular building divided by an interior colonnade and includes a cult niche at the far end. The architectural decoration of this temple is Egyptian in style. Just in front of this monument another one, bigger and more remarkable, could not be excavated on that occasion. In the 1970s both temples were cleared again by E. Netzer but not published except for some cursory notes.<sup>2</sup> They are now filled once more with sand allowing only the tops of walls to be seen.

The main temple is usually described as two buildings encased one within the other. The outer walls form a square 19 m to a side, while in the middle there is another square structure, 7.40 m wide, resting on columns and pillars, the four angle pillars with half-columns and pilasters

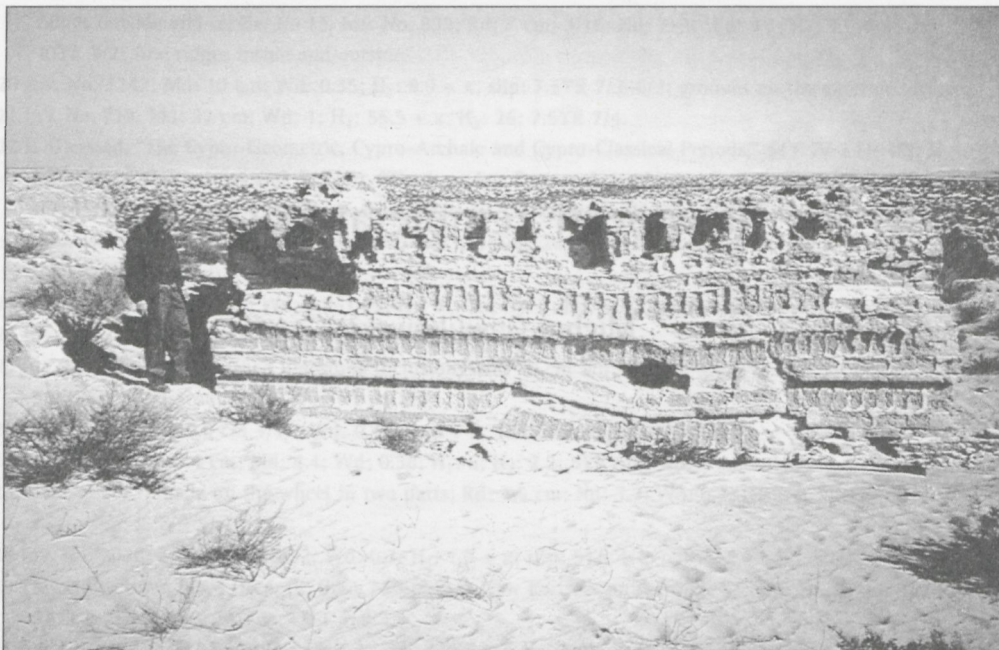


Fig. 1: The temple of Qasrawet, seen from the south.

attached. The entablature presents on each side a gabled broken pediment turned inwards, which is a very exceptional feature in ancient architecture in general. The stone walls were reinforced with massive wooden beams, having left horizontal grooves above the capitals. According to earlier and recent excavators, the square temple was covered with a flat terrace roof resting on beams of which some remains were found in the fill.

The square plan with an inner building open on all sides strongly suggests that the main point of interest was to be found in the middle, enhanced by the magnificent architectural frame and surrounded by a circumambulation (*tawwaf*). As several other Nabataean shrines are also square, it could be supposed that we have put a finger here on an ancient Arab religious tradition of pilgrimage, attached in this case to a desert sanctuary frequented by caravans coming from the depths of Arabia.

For several reasons, such conclusions seem too hasty to me. While there is no doubt about the Arab character of the Nabataeans, and no reason to quarrel with their supposed inclination to circular processions, it is hard to imagine such rituals taking place under a roof. Moreover, the architectural form of the building, with the central square reserved and set aside, can be envisaged with difficulty as equal in height to the surrounding covered space of the outer square.

Two possible schemes can be considered. The central colonnaded square could have been covered in the middle of an open enclosure, or it could form a light well in the middle of a large roofed *cella*. Both solutions seem satisfactory from the architectural point of view, and both are certainly feasible. The choice between them should be not arbitrary, however, but depend on comparison with other similar monuments in the Nabataean realm.

Indeed, closely similar arrangements have been recently identified in several Nabataean temples in Petra and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Philip Hammond some years ago excavated a shrine in Petra which

he called the "Temple of the Winged Lions," after the griffin figures adorning the column capitals of this monument. The square *cella* included right and left lateral porticoes, and in the middle, a platform surrounded by columns that were not linked to the side walls of the building. It does not seem that the mode of covering was seriously studied by the excavators. As far as we can judge from the sketchy plan available, the platform should rather be open to the sky.

Much better studied is another Nabataean temple now under excavation in Khirbet ed-Dharih in central Jordan.<sup>4</sup> François Villeneuve has already published some preliminary observations and graphic documents, which enable me to show here not only a plan but also a tentative section across the *cella* (slightly modified). As I have recently proposed,<sup>5</sup> the *cella* must have been open, and also open was the square platform at the back, surrounded by columns carrying a heavy and elaborate entablature reaching the full height of the building. Emboldened by a good reception of this idea by the excavator, I am now more ready to see similar arrangements in other places.

One of them is a remote desert sanctuary in Wadi Rumm in southern Jordan.<sup>6</sup> A raised platform there supported a small building which has been seen as a chapel but appears more probably to be an altar. Whatever it might be, this feature stood quite obviously in the open. It was surrounded by columns with curtain walls between them, and later with a row of rooms, but remained at all times accessible from the front by means of some steps. Also this temple is being currently excavated and my conclusions must remain preliminary pending a fuller publication.

It has recently been proposed that the square platforms of these temples might be "thrones" of Nabataean deities.<sup>7</sup> In fact, such a seat (*motab*) is mentioned in the extant inscriptions only twice in relation to Dushara, the main god of the Nabataeans, and the meaning of the word remains far from certain. In this hypothesis, of course, the columns surrounding the platform

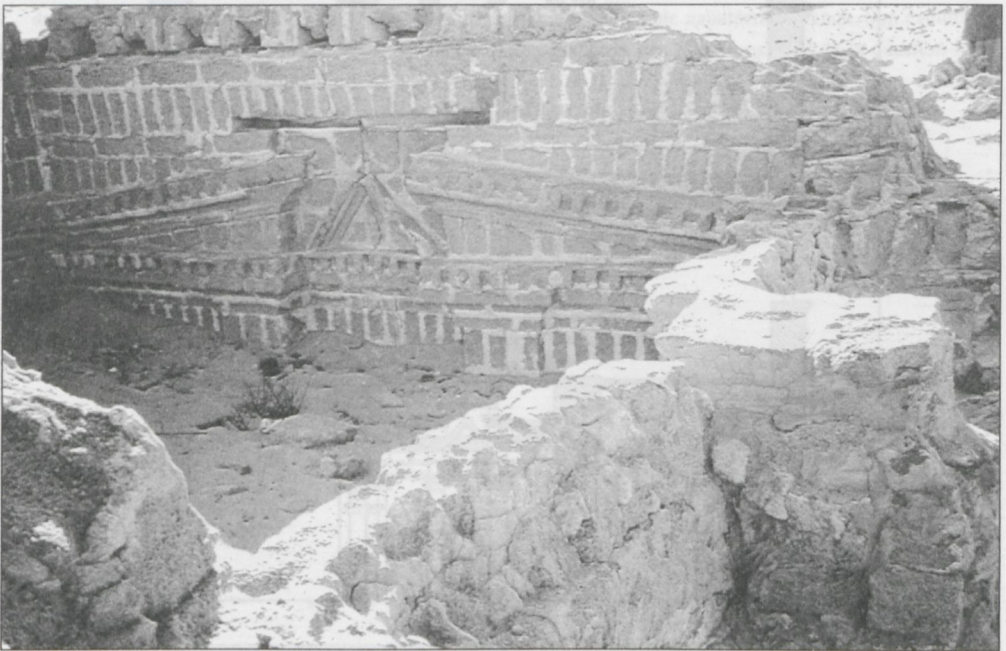


Fig. 2: A glimpse of the inner pediment.

should have supported a dais for the supposed throne. Their relation to the building as a whole would be rather awkward, however, because of the apparently equal height of the inner and outer structures.

It seems more likely that the central space was open to the sky, being a kind of peristyle within the square building. Its floor is, however, usually raised and should have supported altars rather than idols. Temples of this kind would provide a monumental frame for open-air sacrificial places of the ancestral nomad tradition of the Nabataeans and other desert tribes of Northern Arabia.

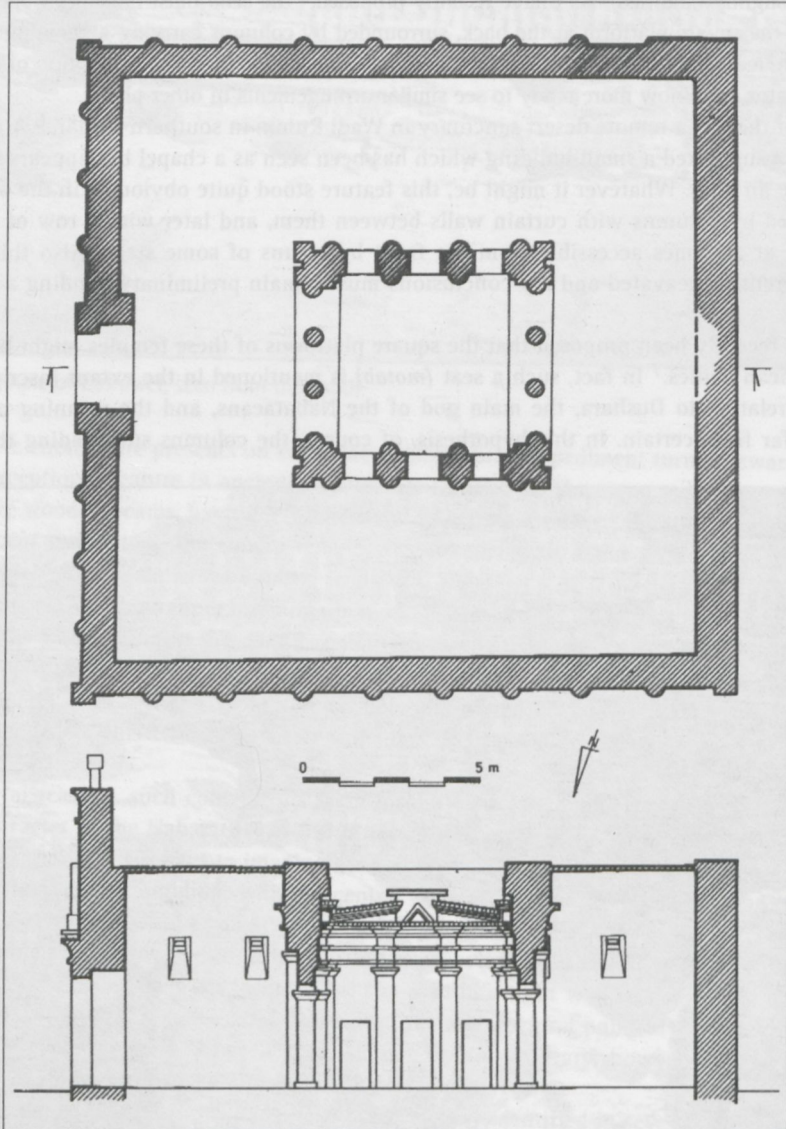


Fig. 3: A restored plan and section of the Temple of Qasrawet.

Qasrawet appears to be the closest parallel to some recently discovered sanctuaries in Jordan, and is certainly the best preserved of all. In fact it is the only ancient Arab temple preserved nearly complete.

Notes:

- 1 J. Clédat, "Fouilles à Qasr-Gheit (mai 1911)" *ASAE* 11 (1911), 145 sq.
- 2 E. D. Oren, "Excavations at Qasrawet in North-Western Sinai, Preliminary Report," *IEJ* 32 (1982), 203 sq.
- 3 Cf. M. Gawlikowski, "Les sanctuaires du Proche-Orient romain dans la recherche récente," *Topoi* 8 (1998), 31-52.
- 4 F. Villeneuve and Z. al-Moheisen, "Fouilles à Khirbet edh-Dharih (Jordanie), 1984-1987," *CRAI* (1988), 458-479; F. Villeneuve, *Liber Annuus* 42 (1993), 356-359; *Liber Annuus* 43 (1994), 486-489; *AJA* 98 (1994), 540-542; *AJA* 99 (1995), 521-522; F. Villeneuve, communication, 7th International Conference on History and Archaeology of Jordan, Copenhagen, 1998.
- 5 M. Gawlikowski, "Motab et hamana. Sur quelques monuments religieux du Levant," Conference "Temples et sanctuaires", Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient, Beyrouth, 1999.
- 6 R. Savignac and G. Horsfield, "Le temple de Ramm," *RB* 44 (1935), 245-278; R. Savignac, "Le dieu nabatéen de Laban et son temple," *RB* 46 (1937), 401-416; D. Kirkbride, "Le temple nabatéen de Ramm. Son évolution architecturale," *RB* 67 (1960), 65-92; L. Tholbecq, "Les sanctuaires des Nabatéens. Etat de la question à la lumière de recherches archéologiques récentes," *Topoi* 7/2 (1997), 1069-1095.
- 7 E. Will, "Du môtab de Dusarès au trône d'Astarte," *Syria* 63 (1986), 343-351.