

Bury my heart at Jabal Haroun: Reflections and memories of the Finnish excavations in Petra, Jordan

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Abstract

Between 1998 and 2013, a team from the University of Helsinki conducted large-scale excavations and survey at Jabal Haroun ('Mountain of Aaron') in the outskirts of the ancient city of Petra, Jordan. *The Finnish Jabal Haroun Project* (FJHP), which remains probably the largest ever Finnish archaeological undertaking outside Finland's borders, unearthed the remains of an Early Byzantine (late 5th century CE) monastic complex. The site, which features among other things a large basilica, a chapel, a baptismal font and a pilgrim hostel, can be securely identified as the 'House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron' mentioned in the 6th century CE Petra Papyri and later historical accounts. The excavations unveiled the rich and complex history of the site, considered sacred by the three religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. At least equally significant, however, is the fact that the project – arranged in the exceptionally demanding conditions of an arid mountaintop – forged an extraordinary sense of community and gave scores of Finnish archaeologists a taste of Near Eastern archaeology. The lengthy field seasons, guided by strict daily routine and ascetic life, largely cut off from any information outlets, provided an opportunity for deep self-reflection and an experience that may in some ways have resembled that of the Byzantine monks. This paper presents some personal memories of working as a trench supervisor on the mountain, contains a lot of pictures, and reflects on the legacy of the project in still-continuing Finnish research on the archaeology of the Ancient Near East.

Keywords: Near East, Petra, Jordan, fieldwork, Jabal Haroun, Byzantine, Nabataean

From papyri to fieldwork

The ancient caravan city of Petra in Jordan has to be one of the most iconic archaeological sites of all time. Voted in 2007 as one of the 'New Seven Wonders' of the world, Petra is best known for the awe-inspiring facades of funerary monuments carved straight out of the local bright red sandstone, and the great natural beauty of the narrow gorges and steep mountains surrounding the ruins. It emerged as the capital of the Nabataean Arab kingdom sometime around 400 BCE, flourished from caravan trade and became a regional powerhouse, until it was taken over by the Romans in 106 CE (e.g.,

Mouton & Schmid 2013). A few affluent centuries still followed, until shifting trade routes and a series of catastrophic earthquakes caused a decline and eventual abandonment sometime in the Byzantine or Early Islamic period. Because Petra lies at the Dead Sea Rift between the African and Arabian plates, it has historically witnessed a large number of seismic activities that have shaped its fortunes. After the earthquake of 551 CE, Petra disappeared from historical sources, and was long presumed to have been obliterated by the event. The city was subsequently 'lost' to the Western world (although obviously not to the local inhabitants, who continued to occupy and recycle the ruins) for almost a

thousand years, until it was rediscovered by the Swiss explorer Johann Burckhardt in 1812. Archaeological research in Petra commenced in the beginning of the 20th century and has continued ever since. The site is today inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list and is without doubt Jordan's most important tourist attraction.

In 1993, a major American excavation project investigating the remains of a large Byzantine church in downtown Petra (PCP or *Petra Church Project*, see Fiema *et al.* 2001) uncovered a cache of some 140 carbonized papyrus rolls stored in a side-room of the church. The papyri are written in Greek and date from mid-to-late sixth century CE. The PCP project lacked expertise required to open and decipher the extremely fragile papyri, and contacted Jaakko Frösén, a Professor of Greek philology at the University of Helsinki. Frösén rose to the challenge and assembled a Finnish team of papyrologists that – together with another team from the University of Michigan – proceeded to research and publish the Petra papyri in five imposing volumes (Frösén *et al.* 2002; Arjava *et al.* 2007; Arjava *et al.* 2011; Koenen *et al.* 2013; Arjava *et al.* 2018). One significant discovery revealed by the papyri was that unlike earlier assumed, Petra was not abandoned after the earthquake of 551 CE but continued as a vibrant urban centre for at least a century and possibly longer, until it eventually became 'ruralized' in the Umayyad period.

Intriguingly, one of the papyri mentions 'the House of our Lord the Saint High-Priest Aaron',

or a monastery dedicated to Prophet Aaron outside of the city limits. This was tentatively identified with a group of ruins located on the high plateau of the Jabal an-Nabi Haroun ('Mountain of Prophet Aaron'), in the outskirts of the archaeological park of Petra – a site historically identified in Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions as the burial place of the Prophet Aaron (Haroun) and thus a holy place. To test this hypothesis, Frösén acquired funding at first from the Emil Aaltonen foundation and later the Academy of Finland for a multidisciplinary project to excavate the ruins and conduct survey in its surroundings. The project received the name *Finnish Jabal Haroun Project* or FJHP. In the course of his papyrological research, Frösén had come in close contact with the director of the *Petra Church Project*, the Polish-American archaeologist Zbigniew Fiema, and hired him as the chief archaeologist of the Jabal Haroun excavations. The survey team was led by Professor Mika Lavento from the Department of Archaeology in Helsinki, and the cartographers by Professor Henrik Haggrén from the Helsinki University of Technology (today part of Aalto University).

The project began with a limited field season of documenting the visible structures in 1997, followed by the first actual excavations and survey next summer. It turned out to be very long-lived: following the promising start, the project received twice in a row (2000–2005 and 2006–2011) the prestigious and well-funded status of an Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence. There were

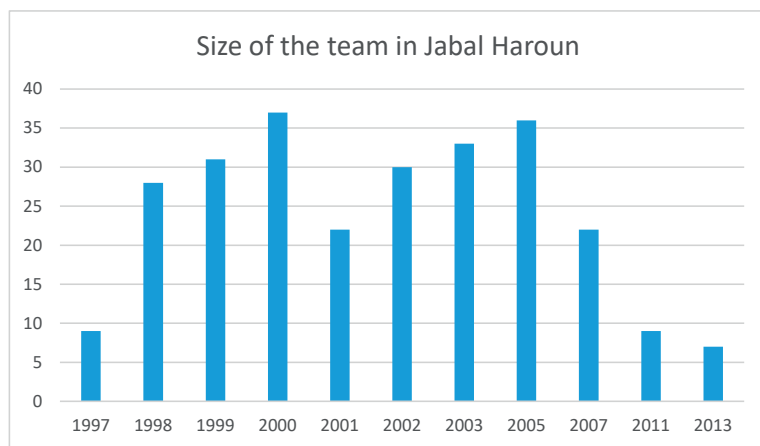
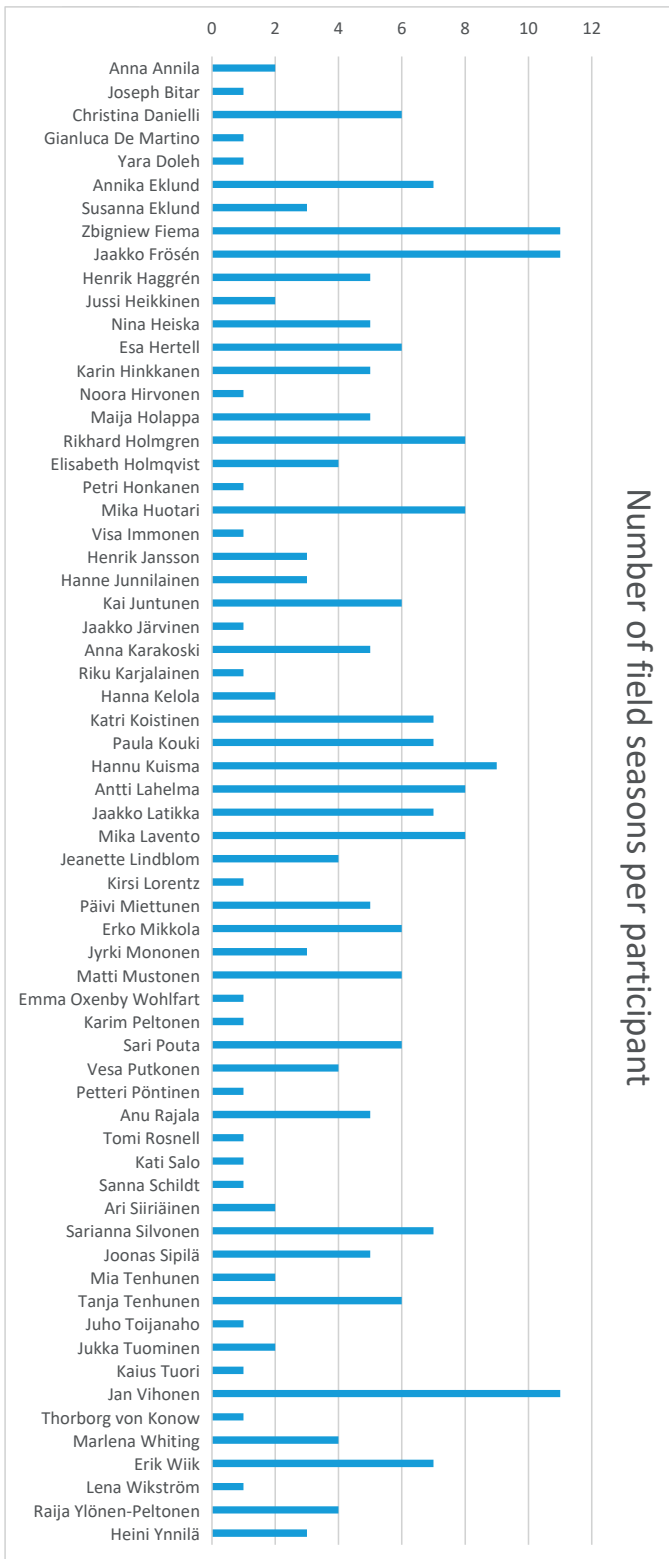


Figure 1. FJHP field seasons and the size of the team in each season. Table courtesy of Maija Holappa.



Number of field seasons per participant

Figure 2. List of all participants in the FJHP fieldwork and the number of field seasons they were present. Table courtesy of Maija Holappa.

altogether eleven fieldwork seasons between 1997 and 2013, each of them ca. 6–7 weeks long, with a total of 64 people participating (Figures 1 & 2). Nineteen people took part in just one field season and three people participated in all of them; the average number of seasons was four. Most of the participants were from the University of Helsinki or the Helsinki University of Technology, but a few students from the University of Turku also took part, and the project also hired an Italian conservator (Christina Danielli) and a Swedish field archaeologist (Rikhard Holmgren). Several conservators from the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences (Helsinki) also regularly took part. All in all, FJHP is likely the largest ever Finnish archaeological project arranged outside Finland's borders, and certainly the biggest ever Finnish contribution to Near Eastern archaeology (Figure 3).

In this contribution, the scientific accomplishments of the project are briefly presented, but because that research has already

been reported on numerous occasions – including the three massive volumes that form the final publications of the project (Fiema & Frösén 2008; Kouki & Lavento 2013; Fiema *et al.* 2016; for a summary, see, e.g., Fiema 2018) – recounting them in much detail seems like a pointless exercise. Instead, I will focus on some personal reflections and reminiscences of working as a trench supervisor at Jabal Haroun for altogether eight field seasons. Such human aspects of doing archaeological research – the hardships, logistics, social life and all other ‘irregularities’ – are typically ignored in scientific literature, presumably because it is perceived as a distraction from the ‘pure’ science. This is a very peculiar way of thinking but one that was certainly evident in the FJHP, where human beings are almost entirely absent (in both text and images) in the ca. 1500 pages of the final publications, almost as if the site excavated itself. In at least one case (Vol. II, Ch. 2, fig. 37), a person shown in the original photo was indeed



Figure 3. Group photo of (a part of the) FJHP team taken during an excursion in 2002 to the monastery of St. Lot on the Dead Sea. From left to right: Antti Lahelma, Jaakko Latikka, Sari Pouta, Henrik Haggrén, Hannu Kuisma, Susanna Eklund, Maija Holappa, Anna Karakoski, Elisabeth Holmqvist, Päivi Miettunen, Nina Heiska, Mika Lavento, Anu Rajala. Photo courtesy of Susanna Eklund.

electronically erased from the published version. But archaeology is a messy discipline, both literally and figuratively speaking, where the production of knowledge is intimately related to how and why the daily life of archaeology works out. The conditions in the field and the internal dynamics of the research group, thrown into situations that can be very challenging (and Jabal Haroun is by far the most challenging site I have been involved with), cannot be separated from the story we are weaving. In transparent and self-aware research, such factors should not be brushed under the carpet but recorded for posterity so that their effects can be truthfully assessed.

Perhaps still more importantly, because fieldwork lies at the very core of archaeology as a profession, archaeologists should take a keen interest in how it shapes both our discipline and our identities as archaeologists. As Norum *et al.* (2021: 351) write, ‘fieldwork is not merely a means of gathering data and of producing knowledge (and publications); it is also a personal adventure and a source of ‘heroic’ stories, becoming even something of a vocational rite de passage.’ There has been a growing interest in an ethnography of archaeological practice (e.g., Edgeworth 2006), and Herva (2021) has recently pointed out that fieldwork can be seen as a mode of inhabiting the world and viewing it in a particular way. He even goes as far to argue that it entails a spiritual or meditative dimension, which involves altering one’s mind and cultivating a new awareness of specific phenomena and the interconnectedness of things.

While this contribution doesn’t claim to dissect the Jabal Haroun fieldwork from an ethnographic (and even less so from a metaphysical) perspective, but remains on a fairly superficial and light-hearted level, I hope it can at least give some idea of why exploring the practice of fieldwork might be important. As a richly illustrated essay that puts people in spotlight it also hopefully serves a purpose in chronicling some of the human aspects of life on Jabal Haroun, even if it cannot hope to be comprehensive or impartial. For many of the FJHP participants, the experience of working in ascetic conditions, confined on an isolated mountaintop for weeks or even months was certainly life-changing. At the end of the day,

experiences like this are why many of us choose to do archaeology, in spite of the low wages, uncertain job situation and sometimes appalling work conditions. Many of the ‘mountain trolls’ of FJHP continue to keep in touch on a regular basis. We have compared the experience to being a conscript in the army or spoken of our team’s presence on the holy mountain as a kind of monastic community outside time, where the concerns of normal daily life were completely erased for some time and a different kind of routine took over. It provided an opportunity for deep self-reflection, both of one’s own life and some of the givens of Western culture, which were challenged and put into perspective in a close encounter with Bedouin culture. It also set the course for many careers and created friendships and love affairs (including several marriages) that have endured well beyond the ending of the project.

To the field!

Sometime during the fall or winter of 1997, I spotted a printed call for student members to the project on the noticeboard of the Department of Archaeology, then still located in the Meritullinkatu premises in Kruununhaka. Here I have to make a confession: I had really not much interest in Near Eastern archaeology *per se*, my main motivation for applying was simply to get a free ticket to excavations in an exotic location. In other words, just a basic desire for adventure, with no intention of commitment, and an application written in haste and based on a whim. My application clearly wasn’t a very good one, because although the project selected a large number of students, I was left on a reserve spot – but then somebody cancelled, and I got in. It seems bizarre that because of that whim, made without much thinking, I would spend a large part of my career working with Near Eastern archaeology. But this kind of weird serendipity seems to guide the careers of many archaeologists.

Before going to field, the student members received some basic training in Arabic customs and language, which in hindsight seems like a very thoughtful and clever gesture, and prepared us for the inevitable culture shocks of

working in the Near East. Although Jordan is a relatively liberal Arab country and our hosts at the Bedouin village of Umm Sayhoun, accustomed to Western tourists and their habits, were liberal even by Jordanian standards, our excavation nonetheless took place on a holy mountain that required special sensitivity in behaviour. However, nothing had prepared us for the sheer difference of doing archaeology in the Near East as compared to Finland. Because historical archaeology was still comparatively rare in Finland, most excavations at the time consisted of slow and meticulous scraping of very thin cultural deposits in five-centimetre thick layers and 1 x 1 metre squares, using just a trowel and a dustpan. Jabal Haroun was nothing of the kind. Here, the stratigraphic method of excavations was used, the trenches were several metres deep, littered with huge masonry blocks ('stone tumble'), dug with pickaxes, hoes and gufas (rubber 'buckets' made of recycled car tyres), and recorded on feature and matrix forms (Figure 4). On top of that, most of the actual digging and hard labour was done by local workmen, whose work we were supposed to just monitor – an uncomfortable and alien situation to students trained at Finnish excavations. We were shocked to find that almost nothing we had learned in the course of our studies so far seemed to be of much use.

In terms of results, the first field season in 1998 was at best a meagre success – the trenches were small and did not yield a huge amount of information, and the site turned out to be less well preserved than one had hoped for – but there were important discoveries as well. In particular, an inscribed piece of marble with the Greek letters 'ΑΡΩΝ' (Aron), found in an area that turned out to be a small chapel in the central part of the complex, confirmed that the main hypothesis had been correct: the ruins were indeed those of the 'House of Aaron.' The piece occupies today a prominent place in the Byzantine section of the fancy new Petra Museum at the entrance of the archaeological park (Figure 5).

Main findings of the project

In subsequent field seasons, we acquired more confidence, the team grew bigger and the trenches larger, allowing us to identify different sections with different functions, as well as distinct phases in how the site had evolved. The extremely complex history of the site presented an enormous challenge in the post-excavation stage, part because traditional chronological indicators like pottery and coins did not yield very satisfactory results. These issues arose from the strata being



Figure 4. Erko Mikkola (left), Päivi Miettunen (second from left) and a group of workmen in the process of excavating a thick layer of stone tumble (2005 field season). Photo: Antti Lahelma.

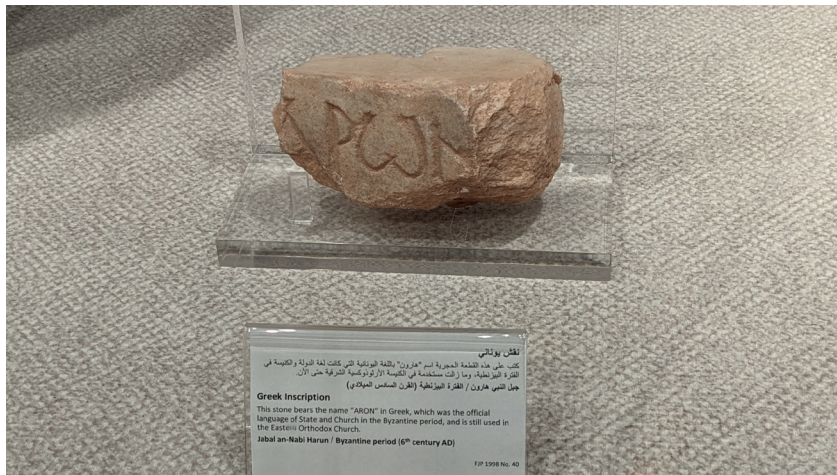


Figure 5. The 'Aron' inscription displayed in Petra Museum in 2022. Photo: Antti Lahelma.

mixed by various rebuilding and recycling activities, and while radiocarbon dates provided some relief, the dating and sequence of some phases was based on rather tenuous evidence. Altogether 14 phases of construction and (mostly) earthquake-related destruction, ranging from 1st century BCE to final abandonment sometime in the 9th or 10th century CE, could be identified. The site thus has a thousand-year long history of occupation, destruction, rebuilding, recycling and so on – spanning the Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad and Abbasid periods. The architecture, phasing, methodology and various artefact finds are described in great detail in Volumes I and II of the FJHP final publication (Fiema & Frösén 2008; Fiema *et al.* 2016). However, although in publications the history of the site can be presented as a neat sequence of phases that are nicely argued and flow seamlessly from beginning to end, the reality in the field could be best characterized as confusing and 'messy'.

Among the significant features identified in the building complex are a large (22,6 x 13,6 m) triapsidal basilica dating to the late 5th century CE, the already mentioned chapel and its baptismal font located right next to the church, a large pilgrim hostel to the north of the ecclesiastic structures, two cisterns, and an enigmatic 'Western Building' that differs in both orientation and building technique from the rest of the structures (Figure 6). Both the basilican church and the chapel had been originally

richly decorated with marble and some mosaics, but due to the earthquakes, several stages of complete redesigning and rebuilding, as well as the ubiquitous recycling activities, these were in general quite poorly preserved. The Western Building was interpreted as the remains of an earlier, pre-Christian Nabataean sanctuary dated to the 1st century BCE and possibly originally dedicated to a goddess (perhaps al-Uzza or Isis; see the discussions in Lahelma & Fiema 2006; Fiema 2016). Both the Nabataean temple and the Christian monastery were centred around a natural cavity that served as a cistern and may have been the focus of religious activities on the high plateau in both pre-Christian and Byzantine periods. In the Roman period the temple was destroyed by the great earthquake of 363 CE, and the remaining structures were later incorporated to the Byzantine monastic complex. Intriguingly, some aspects of the pre-Christian cult also seem to have been incorporated into the Christian cult of St. Aaron who, according to Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions, lies buried on the top of the mountain. The site seems to have been a 'high place' and focus of pilgrimage already in the Nabataean period, remained so in the Byzantine period (as indicated by the pilgrim hostel) and Islamic period, as evidenced, e.g., by the Muslim shrine or *weli* on top of the mountain, and continues to be one even today. It thus has a continuous history of religious observance spanning more than 2000 years.

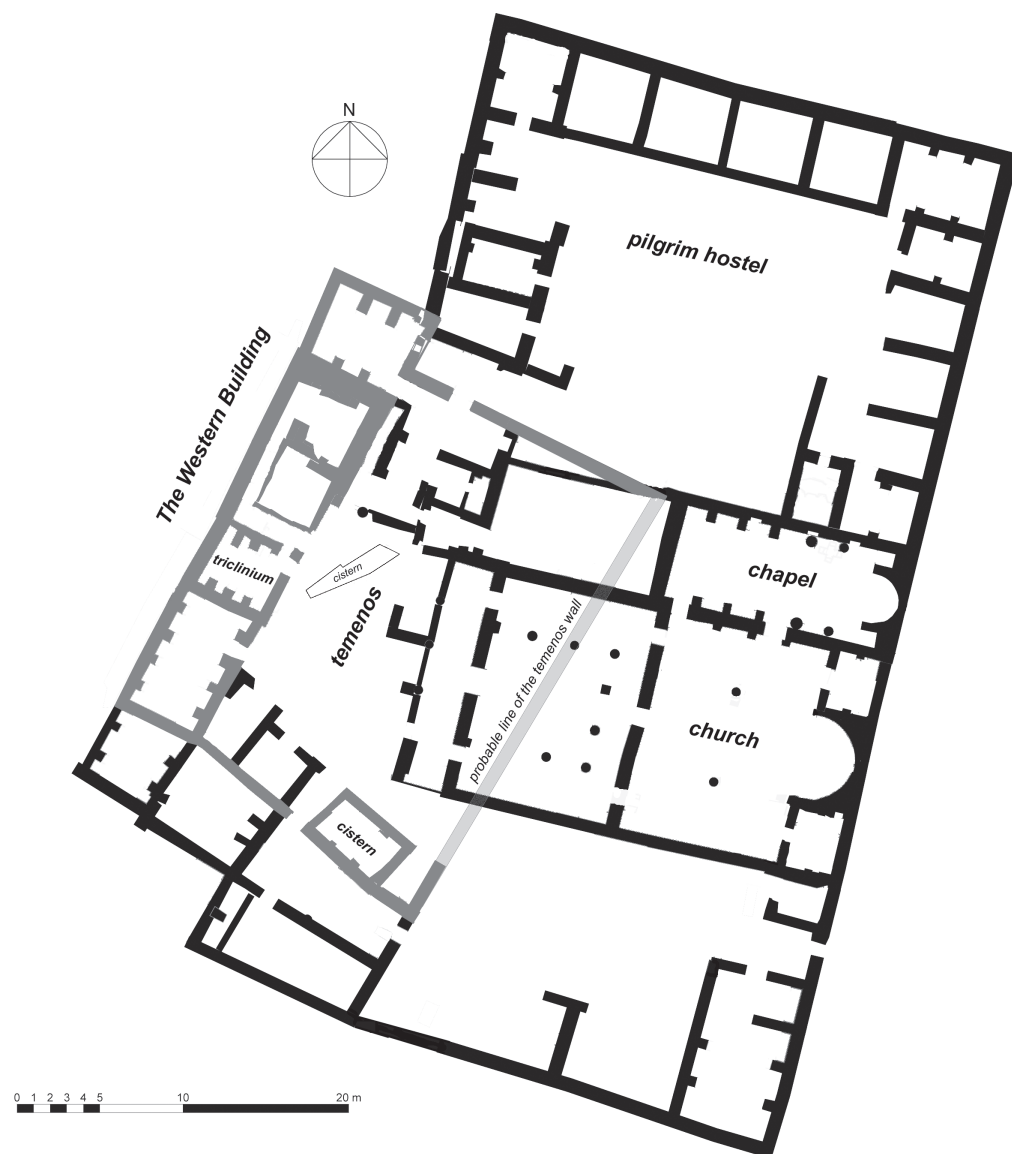


Figure 6. A simplified plan of the FJHP site, showing the Byzantine church, chapel and pilgrim hostel in black, and the probable outline of Nabataean temple shown in grey. Most installations and some dividing walls have been removed for increased clarity. Map drawn by Antti Lahelma, based on the top plan of the site created by Vesa Putkonen and Katri Koistinen.

Besides the excavations, the project conducted also six seasons of intensive off-site survey on the slopes and immediate surroundings of Jabal Haroun, its full results being described in Vol. III of the final publication (Kouki & Lavento 2013). Combining methodologies from geology, archaeological field survey and cartographic documenta-

tion, the FJHP survey studied human land use and landscape change in the long term. The aim was to reconstruct the whole history of human occupation in the Jabal Haroun area from the Palaeolithic to the Late Islamic period. The FJHP was among the first projects in Jordan to carry out such an intensive archaeological survey of a small

geographical area. In addition to collecting finds by line walking tracts, artefact scatters and structures were mapped by total station and documented on description forms as well as photographed. The total area of the intensive survey covered ca. 4,8 km² and altogether 188 archaeological sites were documented. The archaeological remains spanned the time of more than a quarter million years, from the Lower Palaeolithic to the 20th century, with Middle Palaeolithic and Nabataean-Roman periods being those most prominently represented in the area. The main groups of sites included extensive systems of terrace walls, dams and other structures related to runoff agriculture and water management; remains of domestic, cultic and defensive buildings; various production and storage facilities; roads and paths; rock art; ritual and burial sites; and artefact scatters and camp sites.

The Jabal Haroun camp

It is difficult to exaggerate how forbidding and difficult Jabal Haroun was as a setting for archaeological fieldwork, in spite of being located within the major tourist attraction of the Petra archaeological park. The mountain lies just ca. 5 km south-west of 'downtown' Petra, but when FJHP began there wasn't even a road leading to its foot. The residents of Umm Sayhoun did build an extremely bumpy road in the course of our project, with the hope that the site would be turned into a profitable tourist destination after the excavations, but even after that there still remained a demanding climb to the high plateau (ca. 1250

m above sea level) where the site is located. All equipment, food and water used by the team thus had to be brought to the mountaintop along a steep, narrow path, using donkeys and camels.

Lodgings for the team were arranged in a large, traditional Bedouin tent, which was divided into a men's and women's section (Figure 7). The Bedouin tent is an ingenious structure, developed in the course of millennia into perfection. Made of loosely knit coarse goat hair, it is spacious, hot air rises right through it, so it doesn't get stifling even in the desert heat, and yet it is sturdy enough to be stable in strong wind. The only downside is that when it gets moist, like at dawn with the morning dew, it smells like a drenched goat. At first, we slept like the locals on foam mattresses laid on the ground, but when it was discovered in the first field season that scorpions liked to crawl under the mattresses during the night, the project purchased foldable French Army bunk beds for everyone. They were quite uncomfortable but safe from the creepy crawlies. Although there were few mosquitoes on the mountain, most people used a mosquito net over the bed as a protection from the flies that multiplied exponentially as the field season progressed.

In addition to the tent, the Jabal Haroun camp consisted of a dining area with plastic tables and chairs, covered by a fiberglass structure and tarpaulins, showers and toilets made from the same materials, an office tent (Figure 8), and a kitchen built by our Bedouin hosts from recycled Byzantine ashlar that had been excavated from the site (Figure 9). The latter replaced an initial kitchen structure made of a fiberglass frame



Figure 7. A view from inside the Bedouin tent, with Jaakko Latikka getting up from siesta. Photo: Antti Lahelma.



Figure 8. A view from the office tent in field season 2002. From left to right: Hannu Kuisma, Sari Pouta, Jan Vihonen, Christina Danielli, Jaakko Latikka. Photo: Susanna Eklund.



Figure 9. A panorama view of the camp. The kitchen and the police station are on the right, the Bedouin tent and dining area in the middle, and showers and toilets on the left (2007 field season). The excavation site can be slightly glimpsed in the upper right corner. Photo: Antti Lahelma.

and tarpaulins, which turned out to be impractical, unsafe (vulnerable to animals and fire from the gas stove) and unhygienic. Much to our surprise, a second masonry-built house was then built next to the kitchen a year later, when a couple of policemen were stationed on top of the mountain, presumably to protect the site and perhaps also to monitor our activities. But aside from the fact that the bored officers painted graffiti on Nabataean water channels and other ancient structures, our co-existence with the Jordanian police was mostly unproblematic and peaceful.

Because all water had to be carried up, its use had to be strictly regulated. Bottled water was used for drinking, but because working in the field was obviously very sweaty and dusty, and because the first field season taught us the importance of good hygiene when working as a large group in a hot climate, there had to be also an opportunity to occasionally wash and shower. This was at first accomplished with a simple bucket and ladle, later on by an ingenious camp shower that brought a touch of luxury in the otherwise harsh conditions. Toilets were dry toilets, which had to be emptied frequent-

ly or else the waste would soon begin to swarm with white maggots of houseflies, which (together with scorpions and snakes) were another major annoyance best kept at bay. Emptying the stinky toilet pails – and the ‘life’ they contained – in the scorching afternoon heat was easily one of the least appealing aspects of camp life on Jabal Haroun.

Like water, electricity was in short supply, and had to be produced on site using solar panels (in later field seasons they were complemented by a generator). It was reserved strictly for project use, as the batteries of the total stations, cameras, laptops used for CAD, and GPS-devices and walkie-talkies used by the survey-team had to be charged every day. One laptop was, however, reserved for all the project members for writing personal emails. There was a long queue to the email computer, and a batch of messages was sent each day by climbing to a nearby peak where the mobile signal was better than down in the camp (Figure 10). Apart from this shared email connection, the means of receiving any news from the outside world were very limited while staying up on the mountain. This made it sometimes exceedingly difficult to know what was happening ‘back home’, a situation that was particularly stressing during and after the September 11 terrorist strikes in 2001 when we happened to be still on field at Jabal Haroun.

Flashbacks of daily life

While writing this contribution, it was somewhat mind-blowing to find that the old public web-pages of the project dating to the late 1990s are still accessible, and that a section titled ‘Portraits from the Mountain’ featured a message from myself, written as an archaeology student almost exactly 25 years ago (Henkilökuvia vuorelta 1998). The site specifies in a somewhat proud tone that these texts were indeed written on top of Jabal Haroun – using the above mentioned email computer – and sent straight to the website administrator operating in Finland. In the message, dated 30th of August 1998, I explained (in Finnish but here translated into English) my daily routine as follows:

‘Like the other students of the excavation team, I have worked as a trench-assistant; collected finds, assisted in the documentation of various layers and structures and tried to monitor the work of local workmen (communication issues are plenty, but little by little one appears to develop a certain basic vocabulary with which to express one’s will, more or less). Because the excavations are nearing their end, work duties are not quite what they would normally be. Today practically the entire day was spent measuring one of the already excavated ar-



Figure 10. Jaakko Latikka and Katri Koistinen sending email from the mountain with the classic Nokia 2110 mobile phone (1999 field season). Photo: Antti Lahelma.

eas or 'Trench A'. Like the day before, we calculated the X, Y and Z coordinates of various structures (such as walls) in the trench, with an accuracy of one centimetre. Luckily, though, we don't have to do this using measuring tapes, but the measurements are made using a total station. The total station is an expensive gadget, which sends out a laser beam that enables us to measure the points faster and more accurately than by traditional means. Measuring these points may not be a very exciting job, but if our team of engineers does its work properly, the end result should be great. This data will name-ly make it possible to build a highly accurate 3D model, first of the trenches and finally of the entire monastic complex. This model can then be admired from various angles, one can move around inside it, various things can be demonstrated and tried out in practice, etc. Because after these final measurements there won't be any more work left at my own trench, I will join for the next few days Mika Lavento's super-fit archaeologists in the 'survival-team' and conduct survey on the mountain slopes.'

The message doesn't convey the utter exhaustion (both mental and physical) that I felt at this point, but it does convey one significant aspect that characterized the project in its early stages: an eagerness to explore new digital methods of documentation or what was then called 'virtual

archaeology'. The use of total station and CAD software in field documentation was one such novelty, digital cameras were another, and an entire team of cartographers and architects joined us in the field (Figure 11). To what extent this data was ever actually used to 'demonstrate and try out various things' in practice is another matter, but at least the level of archaeological documentation was state-of-the-art for the day. Unfortunately, this cutting-edge aspect of the project failed to make much impact on the discipline, because by the time the first volume of the final publication came out ten years later, the methods were already somewhat outdated. In general, the decision to publish the results in three traditional and extremely bulky volumes – visually impressive but very impractical – was a rather ill-advised choice, because it hindered the quick and wide dissemination of the results of the project.

As already noted, the experience of fieldwork on Jabal Haroun had some of the hallmarks of monastic life (or what I imagine it to be like, obviously not having any direct experience of it). For one thing, there was a strict daily routine to which everyone adhered. Because of the hot climate (over 30 °C on most days and sometimes nearing 40 °C) in August when our field seasons took place, breakfast was at 6:00 am and work began 6:30. This was followed by a tea break



Figure 11. Anna Annila operating the total station at the site, Rikhard Holmgren is holding the prism in the background (2007 field season). Photo: Antti Lahelma.

(8:30–8:45), second breakfast (!) at 10:00–10:30, and work at the site ended by 13:30. Lunch at 14:00 was followed by a siesta (15:00–17:00) during the hottest hours of the day. Work continued in the evening (17:00–19:00) by washing pottery, doing paper- and computer work, and so on, until dinner was served at 19:00 (Figure 12). Repeating this routine on a silent and desolate mountaintop for weeks in a row, disconnected from friends and families at home, fostered a strange sense of timelessness and camaraderie that is difficult to explain to those who weren't there. I suppose the fact that we were on a holy mountain, excavating the ruins of a 1600-year-old Christian monastery, may have in some subliminal way also guided our thoughts and behaviour.

Some of my fondest memories from the mountain relate to the calm evening hours, when all the hectic work was done, the sun was setting and the heat of the day was turning into a slight chill, and people gathered in the dining area to chitchat, drink the impossibly sweet Bedouin tea, write their diaries, read novels or play backgammon (Figures 13 & 14). In the soft evening light, with wide vistas over the mountainous landscape and the Wadi Arabah valley, it was easy to see why Byzantine monks had selected this spot to withdraw from the mundane world. Not all was bliss in the evenings, because a strong wind sometimes arose with the cooling weather, and our paperwork, dinner plates and sometimes even tents were in a danger of flying to 'al-Wadi'. Because we were in



Figure 12. Cooks Nasser and Mahmoud preparing a barbecue feast for lunch during the 2002 field season. Photo: Susanna Eklund.



Figure 13. Maija Holappa and Noora Hirvonen playing backgammon with a game board improvised from a plastic table and Byzantine tesserae (2007 field season). Photo: Antti Lahelma.



Figure 14. People reading and relaxing in the evening, field season 2002. From left to right: Maija Holappa, Christina Danielli, Elisabeth Holmqvist, Marlena Whiting, Heini Ynnilä, Mika Huotari, Paula Kouki, Hannu Kuisma, Tanja Tenhunen. Photo: Susanna Eklund.

the desert, the wind was of course accompanied by flying sand, which added a crunchy element to whatever was being served for dinner. But with the setting sun the wind would eventually die and all would be peaceful again. On moonless nights, when complete darkness and silence engulfed the mountain, we would sometimes gather on the nearby precipice to admire the Milky Way and the constellations, which shone incredibly brightly in the dry desert sky.

Memorable characters in the field are far too numerous to be comprehensively listed or described, but they included of course the leaders of the project, Jaakko ('The Boss') Frösén and Zbigniew ('Zbig') Fiema. Frösén mostly mused silently in the background, smoking the sweet-smelling shishah in the evenings, and let Fiema run the show. This is not to say that he just hung around, of course, as behind the scenes he was constantly pulling strings, arranging things, dealing with Jordanian authorities, our Bedouin hosts, the media, other foreign teams, and so on. His fatherly and calming presence made new project members feel welcome, even if sometimes he would startle them by bellowing classical arias in the Nabataean tombs. The mercurial and authoritarian chief archaeologist Fiema, whom the

Bedouin workmen dubbed as the 'storm cloud', stormed around the site from one trench to another, wearing mirror sunglasses and camouflage pants. Fiema had fled communist Poland to the West, received a PhD from the University of Utah in 1991, and through his work in Petra now found himself leading a large project where almost everyone else spoke Finnish. This position must have put him under considerable pressure, which he occasionally unleashed on both workmen and project members. But although some feared his fits of temper, everyone admired his organizational skills, sharp intelligence, and sense of humour.

Fiema's temper was skilfully toned down by the cheeky but laid-back 'desert doctor' Hannu Kuisma, who joined the team in 1999. Kuisma was a medical doctor slash amateur archaeologist who worked at a children's clinic in Helsinki but spent his vacations on archaeological digs. In Jordan, he had a huge role in keeping the team both physically healthy and in good spirits. His mere presence and large stash of medicines (including the mysterious 'happy pills') and snake venom antidotes reassured that even if something bad happened, help was readily available (incredibly, nothing very serious ever did happen).

One of the tricks he used with Fiema involved a steady dispensing of Snickers chocolate bars, but his most important innovation was to introduce large quantities of liquid soap and hand disinfectant (*käsidesi*) to be liberally used on every occasion, particularly before lunch or dinner and after visiting the bathrooms. This had a dramatic effect on the health of the team. In hindsight, it doesn't seem like rocket science, but hand disinfectant understandably did not occupy a prominent place in the minds of a team strictly focused on archaeology and bringing home good data. However, attitudes changed after the first field season, which had seen a constant struggle with tourist diarrhoea or what we dubbed as the 'yalla yalla disease.' This even resulted in a temporary halting of the excavations, when practically the entire

team got severely ill and had to be taken on donkeyback to be treated by local 'doctor generalists' down in Umm Sayhoun. The doctors were Iraqi refugees who had fled Saddam Hussein's regime, and they diagnosed everyone with either Giardiasis or amoebas, and administered an 'Egyptian cocktail' of drugs that exterminated all stomach bacteria.

'Yalla yalla' (Arabic for 'hurry, hurry!') did not disappear with the introduction of *käsidesi* but was kept at a tolerable level in the following field seasons. Our main chef Erik Wiik, who was a septuagenarian already when FJHP began but never once suffered from 'yalla yalla' or any other ailment, also played a role in keeping the team healthy and happy. Even though he was soft-spoken, there was an air of calm charisma around



Figure 15. People gallery. Upper row: Rikhard Holmgren drawing; Hannu Kuisma, the camp doctor (with Erko Mikkola in the background); Ishmael Dakhilallah, one of the Bedouin foremen; Joonas Sipilä assuming the pose of Augustus of Prima Porta at the Great Temple of Petra. Lower row: conservators Anna Karakoski and Christina Danielli studying a puzzle of marble fragments; Jaakko Frösén handing out cash to the workmen on payday; Erik Wiik, the main chef; Jan Vihonen, the camp manager, and Mohammed Dakhilallah, one of the foremen. Photos: Antti Lahelma and Susanna Eklund.

him. His role in actual cooking was limited, but he designed the menus and supervised the kitchen staff, making sure that allergies were observed, and basic hygiene adhered to. Erik hailed from Finnish Lapland and had a very colourful background, having worked among other things as a sailor (where he had learned to cook for a large group in simple conditions) and a photographer of adult-oriented materials, and was, like Hannu, an acquaintance of Frösén and an amateur Egyptologist. It is hard to overestimate the importance of good, healthy food – and thus Erik’s role – in the context of a difficult fieldwork project like FJHP (Figure 15).

If Erik and Hannu took care of the team, the chief conservator Christina Danielli made a valiant effort to look after the ruins and brought a touch of Italian chic to our mountain life. It always seemed like a losing battle, because due to the dismal quality of the building materials (largely soft sandstone and mud mortar) and Byzantine workmanship, the site was a conservator’s nightmare. Yet Christina faced the peeling plasters and crumbling walls as a challenge, with an air of intellectual curiosity rather than despair. Together with Erik and Hannu, she conspired to produce limoncello from Jordanian lemons and Hannu’s medicinal *spiritus fortis* using a family recipe. Outside the field seasons, ‘Kirsti’ (her given Finnish name) invited project members to pick olives

at her villa in Italy. Despite the communication issues, warm relations emerged also between our team and many of the workmen, whose nicknames (Old Awwad, Kitchen-Ali, Abu Diesel, Young Ahmed, and so on) bring good memories. And no account of Jabal Haroun would be complete without mentioning Rikhard Holmgren, the only Swede on board – a wildly imaginative archaeologist, a highly talented draughtsman, an adventurer and an overall lovable crazy person, whose uniquely brilliant humour brightened every day on the mountain.

Although daily routine and modest behaviour was strictly observed on top of the mountain, not all days of the week were monastic in character. Friday was a day off in Jordan, and thus Thursday was the last working day of the week, at the end of which we would race down the mountain slope to the cars that took us to our dig house at Umm Sayhoun (Figure 16). Riding on the bumpy roads of Petra on the back of a Toyota pickup, sometimes holding on to the railings for dear life, was a slightly risky but definitely fun part of the FJHP experience (Figure 17). When we got down to the house, different rules of conduct applied, cold Amstel beer was waiting in the fridge, and Thursday night fever set in. Hard work under the desert sun was compensated by partying hard, and dancing to ‘Finnhits’ (cheesy 1970s Finnish schlagers) powered by cheap Jordanian



Figure 16. Ready to drive down to Umm Sayhoun for the weekend (1998 field season). From left to right: Sarianna Silvenen, Mika Lavento, Erko Mikkola, Annika Eklund, Henrik Jansson. Photo: Antti Lahelma.



Figure 17. Susanna Eklund riding on the back of a pickup truck in Petra. Photo: Antti Lahelma.

gin continued into the wee hours. It should be pointed out here that although Jordan is a Muslim country, alcohol is sold openly and its use is not greatly frowned upon (as long as it causes no public disturbance), as the country also has a significant Christian minority. Fridays were reserved for rest, or perhaps an excursion to nearby archaeological sites, or indulging in a small luxury such as an ice cream at the five-star Mövenpick Hotel or the outdoor swimming pool at the Petra Palace hotel. Even so, the inevitable climb back to Jabal Haroun on Friday evenings was sometimes pretty taxing.

The aftermath

In August 2022, I had the opportunity to visit Petra once again in the context of a different project, and took a detour from the main tourist sites to climb up to Jabal Haroun for the first time in fifteen years. As can be expected, a strong sense of nostalgia accompanied the visit. From meeting by chance some of our former workmen in Petra, I

learned that several others – men that were my age or younger – had already passed away. The bumpy road still leads to the foot of the mountain, but few people travel it because, in the end, the plans to turn the site into a significant tourist attraction didn't work out. The FJHP campsite is now of course empty, with just the traces of our Bedouin tent's stone lining still visible on the ground, but the stone-built kitchen and police station are still standing. Incredibly, most of our fieldwork equipment, fiberglass frames for the showers, wooden toilet seats, and so on, are still neatly stored inside the kitchen, waiting for one more field season that will probably never come. The police station is already abandoned and falling into decay, and eventually – when the next big earthquake hits the region – both buildings will collapse into a pile of stone tumble and debris similar to the FJHP excavation site.

It is intriguing to think that over these fifteen years, the traces of our presence at Jabal Haroun – such as the stone lining of the tent – have to some extent already become a part of the archaeology of the site. What will future archaeologists make of, for example, the numerous pits with organic residue, covered with a layer of flat sandstone slabs that dot the area to the south of the campsite? I leave a hint: they lie close to where our toilets were located. Or, more seriously speaking, what will they make of the vast scatter of multiperiod pottery fragments and lithics at the foot of the steep precipice to the west of the ruins? I'll offer another hint: instead of burying discarded pottery sherds from the excavations and the survey in a single pit, as might have been pertinent, they were thrown from the edge of the precipice into 'al-Wadi' throughout all the eleven field seasons.

Next to the campsite, the FJHP excavation site at first seems to look like it always did, a low flat mound of sand and stones rising above the plateau, even if the metal sign that identifies the site is now lying on the ground and so rusty that it is barely legible, and the iron fence surrounding the site is punctured in several places. However, having entered the site through one of the punctured holes, a sense of sorrow took over the nostalgia. Because most of the complex is built of local soft sandstone, it is very vulnerable to the



Figure 18. Conservators Mia Tenhunen and Anna Karakoski stabilizing plaster on the altar box of the Jabal Haroun chapel. Field season 2022. Photo: Susanna Eklund.

elements. When the project was running, conservation efforts were sincere (Figure 18) and a huge amount of painstaking work was spent on securing the fragile structures (e.g., Danielli 2002; Eklund 2008), but a more permanent solution would have required building a sturdy shelter similar to that which protects the Petra Church. This was envisioned by the project's architect Vesa Putkonen (2016), but alas, funds for such structures did not exist in the project, and applications sent out to potential funders later on yielded no result. Although some of the trenches have been backfilled to prevent rain damage and looting, the most important structures such as the church and the chapel have been left open to the elements. In 2022, they were already in a rather sorry state of decay (Figure 19).

Although unintentional, the final phase of the FJHP resembles a story all too familiar in Near Eastern archaeology: the foreign team publishes its results, packs its stuff and leaves home, and the local community is left with just a site that crumbles to pieces.¹ Near Eastern archaeology has often been accused of rising out of colo-

nialist practices and to some extent maintaining such structures even today (e.g., Porter 2010). With this in mind, and even if this is of course arguing with the benefit of hindsight ('community archaeology' was hardly a buzzword 25 years ago, at least in Near Eastern archaeology), it is striking how limited the role of Jordanians in FJHP research was in any other capacity than workmen. We ate manshaf (a Jordanian festive dish) with our Bedouin hosts many times and became good friends with them, but aside from the obligatory (and often obviously uninterested) inspectors provided by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, only a handful of Jordanian scholars or archaeology students accompanied us in the field or collaborated in any significant respect. I recall one trained archaeologist (Fawzi Zayadine), one Jordanian student of archaeology (Yara Doleh), a geologist (Majdi Barjous) who worked with the survey team, two epigraphers (Hani Falahat and Mohammed Nasarat), and a plaster specialist (Khaled al-Bashaireh) who wrote a short contribution to Vol. II of the final publication.

1 To be fair, they also received the most important or 'registered' finds, a couple of which are now in display in Petra Museum. On the other hand, pottery and lithics from the FJHP excavations and survey were taken to Helsinki for further study and are now stored in the collections of the Finnish Heritage Agency on a long-term loan from the Jordanian Department of Antiquities.



Figure 19. A view of the Jabal Haroun chapel taken in August 2022. Wooden shelters built to protect the most vulnerable parts were broken and the structures themselves badly eroded. The plywood cover protecting the altar box had been thrown aside but is here restored back in place. Bushes have also taken root inside the building. Photo: Antti Lahelma.

Similarly, although our results were presented in conferences and seminars abroad, or perhaps in the capital Amman, there was no such dissemination for the local communities in Umm Sayhoun or Wadi Musa. There was a major public outreach initiative accompanying the project, with a large exhibition accompanied by a lavishly illustrated popular book (Mikkola 2002), but the exhibition took place only in Helsinki and the book was published in Finnish and Swedish, not in Arabic. The Bedouin workmen and foremen (such as the brothers Haroun, Ishmael and Mohammad Dakhilallah) were instrumental to our work, but although many were highly experienced and quite interested in archaeology, they are barely mentioned in our reports and publications. The fact that this was (and to a large extent is) standard practice in Near Eastern archaeology is not a terribly good excuse. By contrast, the collaboration with other Western teams working in Petra – in particular the Swiss project at ez-Zantur – was lively and in many ways essential to our work, with several Swiss specialists participating in researching and publishing our find materials. And finally, the massive amount of data gathered

in the project has never been made openly available, and its long-term storage remains unclear. It should be the responsibility of any foreign team working in Jordan to enable the free use of its data by Jordanian scholars with an interest in the matter. Yet, the FJHP field documentation is spread out in various personal archives, much of it consisting of hand-written notebooks and sheets that have not been digitized, and neither these nor the photographs, analysis reports or total station measurements are available for research. The same is probably true of most archaeological projects, regardless of whether they work in the Near East or in Finland, but in a project with the longevity and scale of the FJHP the issue clearly should have been given more thought.

The FJHP was obviously in many ways an enormously successful project, where against all odds a massive archaeological site in an impossible location was excavated almost completely and published in a grand manner. Despite being carried out by a fairly inexperienced team from a small northern country, it made a lasting contribution to the study of one of the most famous archaeological sites of all time. The scale of this

accomplishment is astounding, and any small flaws in the way it was carried out cannot cast significant shadows on it. The fact that the site is today endangered and neglected is heart-breaking, but it does not result from indifference. It is simply far easier to raise funding for a ‘sexy’ excavation project than an ‘unexciting’ conservation effort. FJHP was also very successful in creating a sense of community among its members, even if it was somewhat less successful in its stated aim of training a new generation of Finnish Near Eastern archaeologists. A handful of members did produce MA or PhD theses on topics related to FJHP (e.g., Mikkola 1999; Silvonen 2003; Eklund 2008; Kouki 2008; Sipilä 2009; Holmqvist 2010; Whiting 2013; Miettunen 2013), but the number is quite small given the amount of people who participated in the field. This is understandable, because in spite of its long-standing and generous funding, the project offered few paid opportunities for PhD students or post-docs and did not have a proper exit plan. It is equally understandable that paid positions were few, because fieldwork is very expensive, especially if you need to fly dozens of people from Finland to Jordan. A choice had to be made between large-scale fieldwork and offering jobs for researchers, and FJHP opted for the former.

Even so, and together with the work of Minna Silver in Syria (see Silver, this volume) and the *Kinneret Regional Project* co-organized by the University of Helsinki’s Faculty of Theology in Israel, FJHP managed to plant seeds for a Finnish tradition of Near Eastern archaeology. These seeds fruited with the emergence of a new Centre of Excellence called *Ancient Near Eastern Empires* (ANEE) funded by the Academy of Finland between 2018 and 2025. The new CoE, directed by Professor Saana Svärd and myself, has just finished its first two seasons of archaeological fieldwork in Jordan as I write and is working on publishing the results (the first two papers are out: Lorenzon *et al.* 2023; Lahelma *et al.* 2023). It is very different in nature, focusing on a different time-period (1st millennium BCE), a different part of the country (the hilly, forested and more settled landscape near Irbid in Northern Jordan), and its archaeological component is more modest than that of FJHP. But it seems evident that

one of the reasons why it was funded was that the project could draw on the extensive research networks and expertise in the field acquired during the FJHP project. This sequence of Centres of Excellence, which also includes Professor Martti Nissinen’s *Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions* (CSTT) in the Faculty of Theology, is quite exceptional in Finnish academia and gives good grounds to argue for a more permanent status for Near Eastern archaeology at the University of Helsinki.

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