

HOPEFM – MYSTERIES UNEARTHED

PETRA

For over a thousand years people heard tales of a strange city, a lost empire that had dominated the "Kings Highway" and commanded the rich caravan routes. It was a Swiss man, Johann Burckhardt who rediscovered Petra in 1812, after entering the area disguised as an Arab.

There is only one real entrance into the city lodged in the centre of Mount Seir, a magnificent gorge nearly two miles long and nearly 1000 feet deep. This "Siq" (cleft) as it is called, made the city impregnable, for a company of soldiers could hold off an army many times larger in number.

The city was founded by the Horitee (or Hurrians) see Genesis 14:6, but Esau, Jacob's brother settled in the area and his descendants, the Edomites, replaced the Horites, see Genesis 32:3; Deuteronomy 2:12 and Joshua 24:4. The Edomites settled in ancient Petra on the rock Umm el-Bayyarah in the heart of Petra. This plateau is referred to in many Bible texts such as Jeremiah 49:16 & Obadiah 3,4, which say that they nested like eagles in the clefts of the rock.

Above the rose-red city lay many 'high places.' Not just mountain tops, but mountain tops that had altars, places of worship. The principal god of Petra was Dushara — the sun god, who became the Apollo and Jupiter of Greece and Rome.

The best known high place is Zibb Atouf, the peak that dominates the theatre. It is an hour's walk up rock cut steps where you pass the "Maidens Temple" to the high place. A rectangular area cut out of the rock with a square stone used for the altar. Just a short distance away up a few steps is to be found the blood basin where the heart of the victim (sometimes human) was placed, and the blood mixed with water from the sacred tank, drained from the basin through a channel away from the temple area: thus, the sun god was appeased.

The area came under the control of the Nabataeans in the fourth century BC, who through trade of incense, myrrh and other most precious aromatic herbs, amassed such wealth that their power extended from Saudi Arabia to Damascus in Syria.

Petra's golden age was probably from the mid-second century BC to AD106 when Rabel II died, reaching its height during the reign of Aretas IV Philodemus (9BC to 40AD), who not wishing to be outdone by Herod's great building achievements constructed Khazneh Firaoun, the Isle temple at the entrance of Petra and also Qasr Firaoun in the heart of Petra, a temple of vast proportions that was not cut out of the mountain as were most of the 1,000 or so buildings (palaces, tombs and temples) in Petra. In 106AD the Romans annexed the Nabataean territory so they lost their independence, but Petra's reputation remained undimmed.

Trajan had a highway built from Syria to the Red Sea that passed through Petra, thus guaranteeing Petra's connection with the trade caravans, but only for a limited period, for a new trade route was opened in the north through Palmyra, and starved Petra of her wealth.

Christianity did take root in the city in the fourth century AD and we know that it was a seat of a bishopric. By 629AD it was controlled by the Muslims, and then the Franks (a German tribe) occupied Petra during the Crusades, holding it until 1189. Soon after the city was abandoned and fell into ruin.

Human sacrifice - man's attempt to earn his own salvation - was also practised by the heathen of Tyre and Phoenicia with their offerings to their sun god Molech. Mothers would bring their new-born babies placing them on the red-hot arms of this bronze god with a fire in its belly. The Amonites sacrificed their children to Milcom. Like the Petraeans, they all came under condemning prophecies found in the Bible, all of them now fulfilled. Even Israel suffered, for at one time she also practised these abominations as recorded in 2nd Kings 17, when King Ahaz sacrificed his son to Baal.

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