

The Hermitage. A Mediaeval rupestrian settlement on the mountains of Petra

L'Hermitage. Un insediamento rupestre medievale sulle montagne di Petra

Andrea Vanni Desideri¹, Silvia Leporatti¹, Julia Maczuga²

ABSTRACT

The paper concisely reports some of the principal results of a research still in progress by the “Mediaeval Petra” Archaeological Mission of the University of Florence (Italy) on the major Christian hermitic complex, located on the mountains of Petra around hundred meters below the ed-Deir to which it was connected. The settlement, traditionally known as the “Hermitage”, takes largely advantage of rock-cut Nabataean cavities and is revealing an unexpected complexity in terms of functions, topography and chronology. The research, focused on the less known and apparently weak hermitic phenomenon in the suburb of Petra, demonstrates the resilience of such simple installations surviving until Late Islamic time the decline of the major Christian urban foundations, as well as the consistence of archaeological data, contributing to a more comprehensive and articulated appraisal of the topography of Christian Petra.

RIASSUNTO

Il contributo descrive in modo conciso alcuni dei risultati delle ricerche in corso, condotte dalla Missione Archeologica “Mediaeval Petra” dell’Università di Firenze, in uno dei maggiori e articolati complessi eremitici cristiani sulla sommità dei rilievi montuosi a nord-ovest di Petra, a valle del Deir. Il complesso, che sfrutta largamente cavità scavate nella roccia in età Nabatea per usi funerari, culturali e produttivi, contrariamente a quanto fin qui noto sotto il toponimo convenzionale di “Hermitage”, si rivela invece di ampia complessità, articolazione funzionale e estensione topografica e cronologica. La ricerca, incentrata sul fenomeno meno noto e apparentemente debole ma diffuso delle installazioni eremitiche nel suburbio della città antica che tuttavia riuscirono a sopravvivere al declino delle grandi chiese urbane fino ad età tardo-islamica, sta rivelando la varietà e la consistenza dei documenti archeologici e le loro coordinate cronologiche, funzionali e tipologiche, contribuendo a una conoscenza più completa dell’articolata topografia della Petra cristiana.

THE SITE AND ITS RECENT HISTORY

According to the most recent surveys conducted by the Mediaeval Petra archaeological mission of the University of Florence in the suburb of Petra, the major concentration of hermitic settlements in the area is the one located along the way climbing to ed-Deir (fig. 1 and 2, n. 1) (Schick, 2001, p. 3; Vanni Desideri, Leporatti, 2020, *Iidem* 2022). Even if such Christian presence apparently lasted until Late Islamic time (Piccirillo, 1992), largely surviving the abandon of the major ecclesiastical

buildings of the town, the first reports on Greek monks in the area of the Deir are provided by Albert of Aachen and Foucher de Chartres (quoted by Runciman, 1993, p. 343, n. 1, pp. 364–5, n. 1). Several centuries later, despite Gianmartino Arconati Visconti words, who reported that “Burckhardt quando scoprì e visitò Petra poté leggere ancora l’iscrizione che si trovava sull’intavolamento della porta” (Arconati Visconti, 1875, p. 355), the first European to climb up to ed-Deir was the Marquis de Laborde on 1828, who, according to his diary, was also the first one to report its popular

Corresponding author: Andrea Vanni Desideri
andrea.vannidesideri@unifi.it.

¹ Università di Firenze, Dipartimento SAGAS.

² University of Bonn, University of Ghent.