

JORDAN – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Jordan is rich in its antiquities and archaeological sites that are spread all over the country. The Department of Antiquities of Jordan is the official body that is legally responsible for the protection of archaeological sites. Quite a number of projects are currently taking place with the aim of conserving and presenting archaeological sites. These projects are being executed by the Department of Antiquities, in certain cases in co-operation with foreign institutions. Most restoration and site presentation work is conducted on sites with above ground structures. Consolidation of archaeological structures found during excavations is conducted only in some cases.

Moreover, a project which aims at establishing a Conservation and Restoration Centre in Petra (CARIP) is underway. This project is funded by the German Government and executed by German Technical Co-operation. Beside actual restoration work, the aim of the project is to train personnel and build up a lasting institution that will not only serve the needs of the monuments of Petra but the antiquities of the whole country.

There is no great danger of fire or natural hazards that can be considered as a threat destroying the cultural heritage of Jordan. However, the lack of continuous proper care and maintenance of some of the sites has resulted in their deterioration. In many cases, excavated archaeological sites are left without proper conservation measures or their reburial, causing them to deteriorate rapidly. The large number of sites requires adequate funding and expertise in order to be well maintained, and to ensure their conservation for generations to come. In many cases, the situation can be remedied with the appropriate maintenance, protection and long term management.

There are individual monuments that require restoration and structural consolidation measures, these being: Qasr Tuba, Qasr al-Hallabat, and Qasr el-Bint and the Palace Tomb in Petra.

Without the provision of adequate funds and expertise the conservation of such cultural heritage places will not be possible.

The excavated Neolithic site of Beida in the southern region of Jordan is an example of excavated sites that have been exposed to weathering due to the lack of proper protection and conservation upon excavation. Moreover, Qweilbeh (Abila), situated in the northern part of the country, is a huge site containing many features of Roman and Byzantine times that require some restoration and site presentation works.

ICOMOS Jordan

Case Study – Petra

Petra, the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom and a Roman city after 106 AD, is situated in a high plateau cut by many deep gorges. The signs of decay on the monuments of Petra, that are cut out from the living rock are numerous and alarming. Today 800 tomb façades are listed, once, more than 2000 façades lined the slopes of the steep mountains. We could estimate that more than 80% of the elaborately chiselled and decorated façades have been lost forever. Since the days when the Nabataeans left Petra for good, all buildings of the town have decayed and the rock monuments were reintegrated into the cycle of nature and left unprotected to the forces of erosion and dilapidation. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that only a few of them, though battered, almost miraculously survive this assault. All this clearly indicates that the major underlying reason for the evident and still ongoing decay of the monuments is neglect, a neglect that continues to the present.



Petra, Palace Tomb, condition of 1998

After Petra was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1985, one would assume that a gradual reversal, from neglect to serious efforts of preserving the site and its beauty, would have taken place. The sad truth, however, is that so far very little has happened to ensure the survival even of the most prominent examples of Nabataean architecture, a truth that is indeed alarming. If it took about fifteen centuries to obliterate more than 80% of the façades, how long will it take until these last preserved samples of Nabataean architecture have disappeared? Decay is an accelerating process: the fact that some monuments survived in a relatively presentable shape for almost two thousand years gives no guarantee that they will survive for an equally long period of time. Consequently, the threat of further loss of fabric and irreplaceable architectural detail is imminent and real (see also p. 221).

To make things worse, the few and surely honourable attempts that have been made to save parts of some of the monuments, eg at al-Khazna and the Palace tomb, were actually failures. They were well-intended efforts in their time, but now we know that they were futile and in fact in the long run may be more harmful to the monuments than if nothing had been done at all. It is above all because of the repeated and excessive use of Portland cement with its entirely different properties that forms an incompatible mix with the sandstone from which the tombs

are carved. This is extremely detrimental to the monuments and for many other reasons cement should have no place in Petra.

The ancient Nabataean city of Petra has always been the prime tourist spot of the country that has – because of its unique architecture, the peculiar way in which the façades were shaped and its outstanding setting and beauty – attracted travellers from all over the world. Due to its great cultural significance for humanity, it has been recognized as a World Heritage Property. Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in November 1994 greatly contributed to an unprecedented increase in the number of tourists visiting Petra.

A boom in hotel construction set in immediately after the peace treaty was signed. Also roads were built and widened and world-wide promotional activities for tourism to Jordan were launched. However, there was not much visible effort to conserve the cultural heritage. A hopeful new attempt for conservation is the German-Jordanian project for the establishment of a Conservation Centre in Petra. Its first project, the restoration of the Tomb of the Fourteen Graves (Tomb 825), has been implemented and special guidelines and procedures for the restoration of the monuments as well as their documentation have been developed.

(Text based on Michael Kühlenthal/Helge Fischer, *Petra*, vol. XXXIV of the series ICOMOS – Journals of the German National Committee, 2000)



Petra, Corinthian Tomb: the detail shows the severe damage.