

Temples and Tombs of Petra



Jordan: Temples and Tombs of Petra

Version 1.1

by David Raezer and Jennifer Raezer

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Introduction

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Petra's temples and tombs — carved into the sandstone cliffs of Jordan's Negev Desert — are a sight to be seen. They stand witness to the greatness of the Nabataean civilization (Classic Period 312 BCE-106 CE). Just as the Nabataeans' trading network brokered goods between East and West, its architecture bridged styles, yielding a creative mix of Mesopotamian (East) and Greek (West) traditions.

The architecture of Petra

This guidebook begins with a brief overview of Petra's history, focusing on the key factors that led to its rise as an important trading center in the Middle East. It then dives into an exploration of the hybrid Nabataean architectural style, focusing on its Mesopotamian foundations, its Hellenistic features, and finally, some unique Nabataean twists. To explore the architecture, this guidebook employs high-resolution images, often with color highlights, to make it easier to identify each feature.

Detailed site profiles with high-resolution images

For each site in this guidebook, we focus on the most important aspects of its history, layout, distinguishing features, and relief decoration. Our goal is to provide you with a framework for understanding the site and what makes it special. This Approach Guide provides detailed profiles of **13 of Petra's most important temple and tomb sites** (clearly identified on the included map):

- **Treasury** (Khasneh)
- **Tombs of the Outer Siq**: Street of Facades, Tomb 825, and Tomb 86
- **Tombs of Wadi Farasa**: Broken Pediment Tomb, Renaissance Tomb, and Garden Triclinium
- **Royal Tombs**: Urn Tomb, Corinthian Tomb, Silk Tomb, Palace Tomb, and Sextius Florentinus Tomb
- **Monastery** (Deir)

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We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Petra's stellar temples and tombs

and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Raezer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Raezer".

David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides

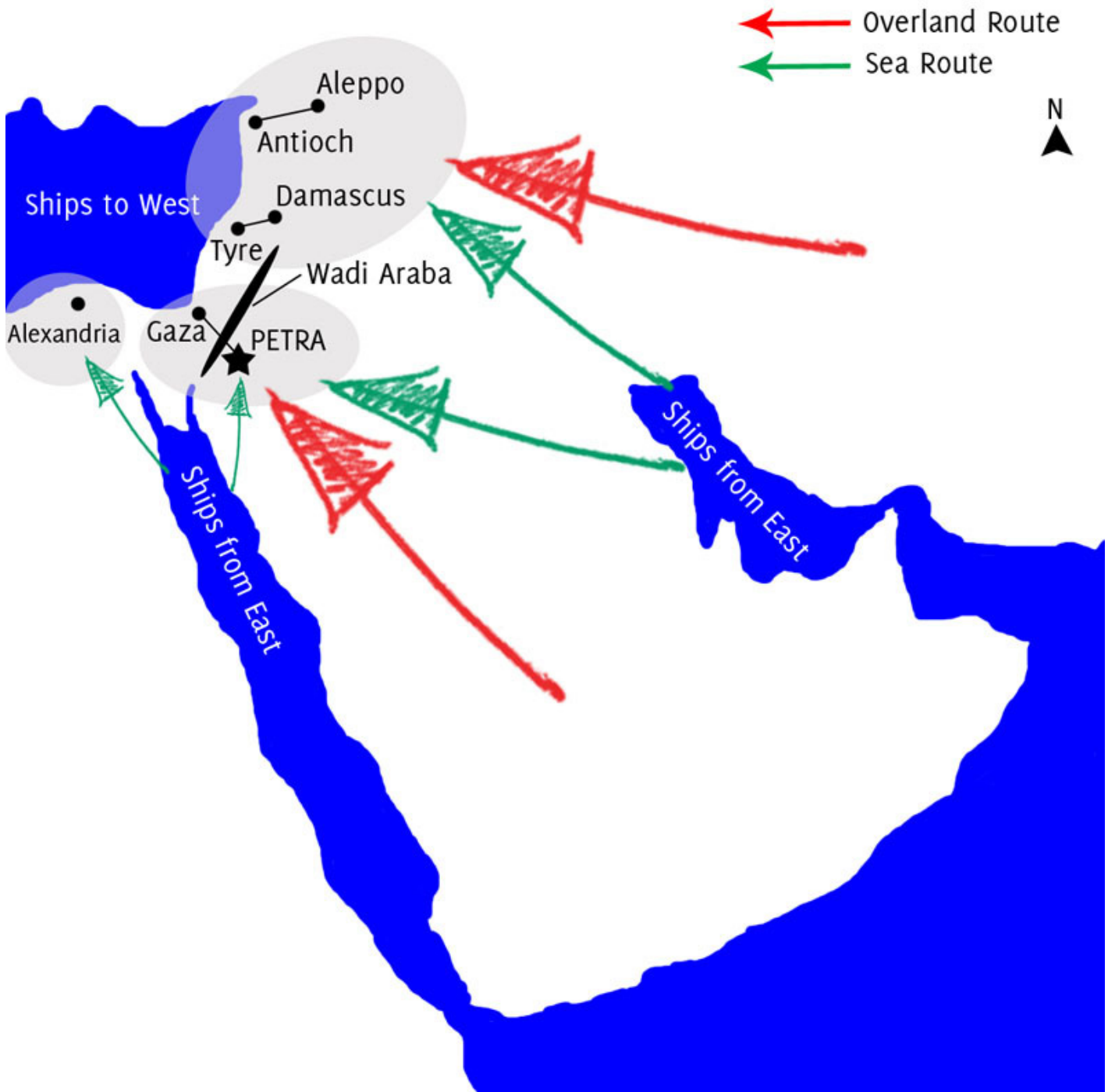


Fig. 1. The movement of trade goods from East to West.

Alternative entrepôts to Petra

Fig. 1 also shows the trade routes associated with two alternative entrepôts to Petra:

- **Alexandria.** Alexandria — the capital of the powerful Greek Ptolemaic Empire (more on this Empire in the section entitled “Nabataean Architectural Influences - Hellenistic”) — was the hub of a sea-based route in which goods were deposited along Egypt’s Red Sea coast and then carried down the Nile River to Alexandria, where they connected with Western vessels.

Nabataean Architectural Influences - Hellenistic

Hellenistic Influences Grow As Empire Expands

Upon the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, his Macedonian Empire was divided into three discrete Empires, each named after its initial leader: Ptolemaic (in Egypt; named after Ptolemy I Soter); Seleucid (in Syria, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Iran, and Pakistan; named after Seleucus I the Nicator); and Antigonid (in northeast Turkey, Macedonia, and Thrace; named after Antigonus I).

These Greek successor empires — especially the Ptolemaic Empire based in Alexandria, Egypt — exerted great influence on the architecture of Petra, especially during its Classic Period, when the city's international stature rose as a leading player in East-West trade.

At the time of greatest contact, **Alexandria was pioneering a baroque style that deviated from the earlier forms of Classical Greek architecture.** This baroque style championed using more dynamic forms for capitals, pediments, and entablatures. **Petra borrowed many of these baroque forms — we will explore the most important of them below.**

In an interesting twist of history, the baroque architecture constructed in Alexandria has been largely destroyed; however, its legacy survives in Petra, protected over thousands of years by the greater strength of the rock-cut medium and the city's remote location. Further, it is these same baroque features that were rediscovered by Roman architects in the 17th century (especially Borromini and Bernini) who went on to forge what we have come to define as the “Baroque” period.

While Greek features are prominent in structures built throughout Petra's Classic Period, they are in their purest form at the Treasury (Khasneh), the construction of which marked the start of the Classic Period. However, strict adherence to these pure Hellenistic forms waned in later Classic Period structures, setting the stage for a wholly new, Nabataean style to emerge. This Nabataean style — a successful fusion of Mesopotamian and Greek traditions — is best exemplified in the Monastery (Deir).

Hellenistic Architectural Features in Petra

Hellenistic architectural features visible in Petra include:

Classical orders

The Nabataeans adopted the Greeks' Classical Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders — these orders include standardized combinations of columns or pilasters (consisting of base, shaft, and capital) that support entablatures (consisting of architrave, frieze, and cornice).

That said, Nabataean architects did not rigidly adhere to Classical Greek prototypes. Perhaps inspired by Ptolemaic Alexandria's baroque experimentation, they imbued Petra's orders with their own aesthetic.

- **Capitals were often stylized**, with particular features accentuated or modified. See [Fig. 5](#) of a stylized Corinthian capital from Petra. In this example, the acanthus leaves have been replaced by swirling vine-line decoration and the volutes are more prominent. For purposes of comparison, a standard, Classical style Corinthian capital is pictured in the black and white inset.
- **Orders were often mixed**, meaning that column orders were not paired with the Classically prescribed entablatures.



Fig. 5. Stylized Corinthian capital, Corinthian Tomb, Petra.

Open facades with projecting and recessed bays

In stark contrast to the closed, flat facades of Mesopotamian structures, Greek facades are characterized by their openness; later, baroque styles exaggerated the effect of depth by employing projecting and recessed bays. As a result, Greek facades create a sensation of movement by cultivating a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. See [Fig. 6](#).



[Fig. 6](#). Treasury, Petra. Highlights added.

Tombs of Wadi Farasa

Author Tip: *While the tombs along Wadi Farasa are high quality and worth seeing, they are of lower priority than the Treasury, the Monastery, and the Royal Tombs. The climb to the tombs is slightly shorter than that required for the Monastery; it should take 30 to 40 minutes.*

Broken Pediment Tomb

Dated to 40-70 CE, the Broken Pediment Tomb displays powerful simplicity. The baroque style broken pediment (see yellow highlights in [Fig. 19](#)) was likely borrowed from the Ptolemaic Greek Empire based in Alexandria, Egypt.

The break in the pediment (along with the great height of the entranceway) affords the structure strong vertical lines that manifest themselves in a **pronounced upward momentum**. This deviates from the typical Nabataean emphasis on the horizontal.

In a classic Nabataean fusion, this Hellenistic feature sits atop Nabataean horn-shaped capitals (see red highlights).



Fig. 19. Broken Pediment Tomb, Wadi Farasa, Petra. Highlights added.

Renaissance Tomb

This Tomb, roughly dated to the same period as the Tomb of Sextius Florentinus (130 CE) in the Royal Tombs, is impressive for its successful balancing of Hellenistic and Nabataean features.

Hellenistic features

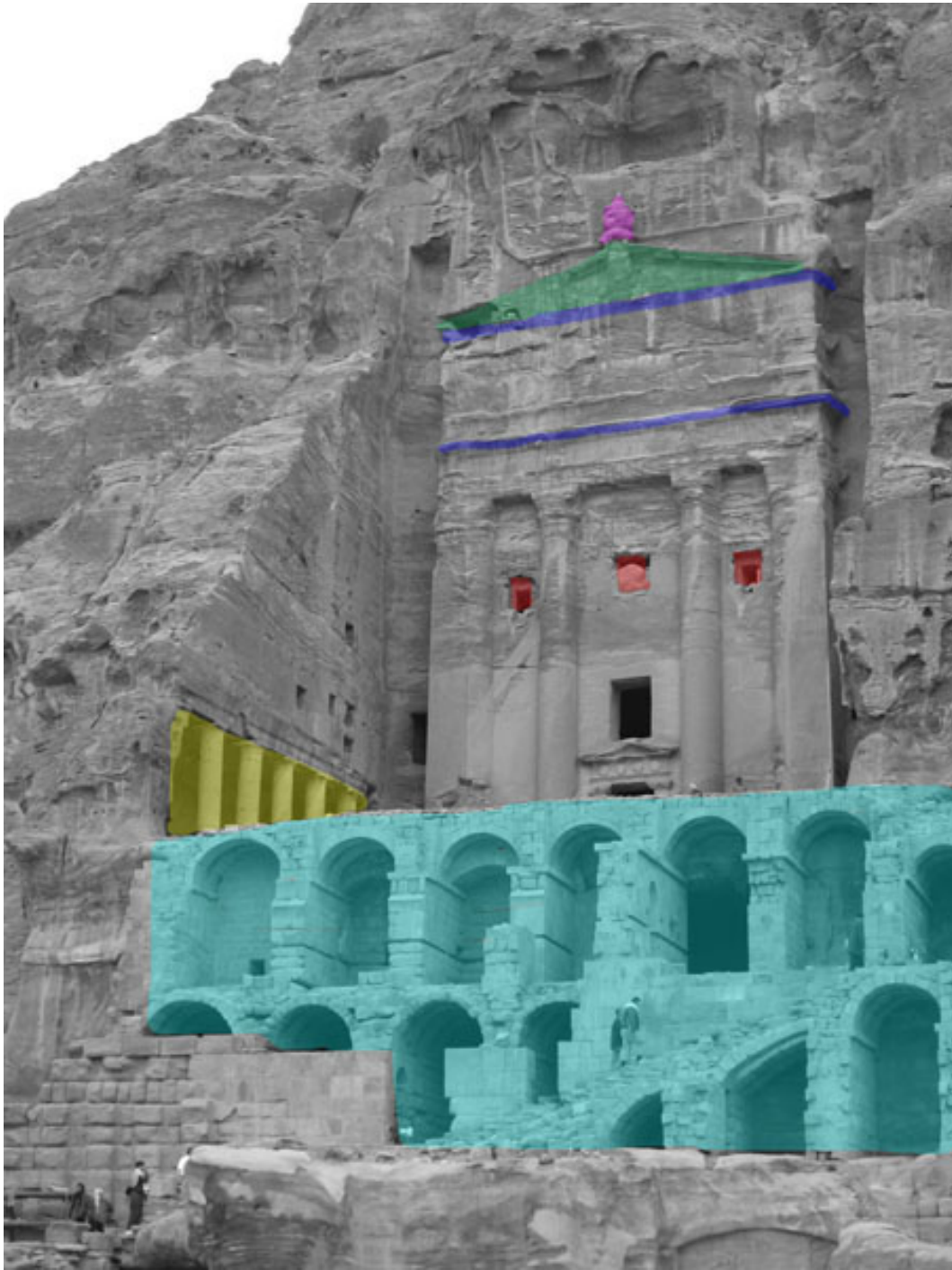


Fig. 23. Urn Tomb, Royal Tombs, Petra.

The facade

- Colossal pilasters. Four colossal pilasters (two semicircular in the center and two quarter wedge flanking) grace the front of the Tomb. They are topped by worn, Nabataean horn-shaped capitals. The pilasters' long vertical lines — extending over the entire elevation — create an overall feeling of upward momentum.
- Mesopotamian influences. The facade elevation was likely influenced by the earlier, Mesopotamian-inspired temples of the Outer Siq (Tombs 68 and 825) that employed a double

Monastery (Deir)

Quick Profile

- Likely built under King Malichus II (40-70 CE).
- Function: Temple (not tomb). The single chamber interior likely held an image of the deity to which the temple was dedicated. The large courtyard in front of the temple — forming an amphitheater of sorts — allowed the temple to support large-scale ceremonies.
- The Monastery is the most challenging monument to reach in Petra; it requires a 45-60 minute ascent up generally well-maintained and signposted path.

Author Tip: *The Monastery gets our recommendation for a sunset visit, as the facade takes on a range of inviting colors as the sun descends. Although many guidebooks assert that the park closes at sundown (which would seem to preclude a sunset visit to the Monastery), we found that we were able to stay in the park as late as we wanted (maybe this is just an enforcement issue). However, we suggest that you bring a flashlight for the walk back from the Monastery, as you must navigate a prolonged descent in the dark that could prove more challenging with no light. Simply stay up at the Monastery past sunset and walk back through Petra in the dark of the night. The city exudes a great energy after nightfall and you (and the Bedouins) will most likely be the only ones there.*



Fig. 32. Monastery, Petra.

A New Blended Style

The Monastery is a pioneering structure that marks the apex of Nabataean architecture. **The pure influences — Mesopotamian and Hellenistic — have given way to a new, hybrid style that is uniquely Nabataean.**

In order to best review this site, a comparison with the first structure of the Classic Period, the Treasury (Khasneh), is helpful:

Wider facade affords balance

At the Monastery, architects expanded the facade by one bay on either side of the original Treasury plan; this affords the facade a tremendous presence (47 meters wide by 40 meters high). This expansion — coupled with a balanced linear arrangement (columns versus cornices) — creates a **perfect balance between vertical and horizontal elements.**

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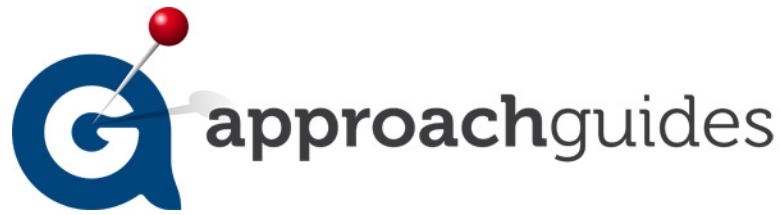
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Los Angeles Times