

Petra

Guide to Jordan's Ancient City



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

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 which thrived from 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. It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Comprehensive look at Petra's art and architecture.** We provide an overview of Petra's art and architecture, isolating trademark features that you will see again and again as you make your way through the old city's highlights. As part of this review, we highlight those features that were likely borrowed from Mesopotamian and Hellenistic prototypes. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we offer a detailed tour of the premier sites. For each, we present information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features, high-resolution images and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Plus, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

Itinerary

In total, this guidebook profiles thirteen of Petra's top sites for art and architecture. To help you prioritize your touring itinerary, we mark the absolute must-see sites with asterisks (*).

- **Outer Siq:** Treasury (Khasneh),* Tombs 68 and 825 and Street of Facades.
- **Wadi Farasa:** Broken Pediment Tomb, Renaissance Tomb, Garden Triclinium* and Roman Soldier Tomb.*
- **Royal Tombs:** Urn Tomb,* Silk Tomb, Corinthian Tomb,* Palace Tomb and Sextius Florentinus Tomb.*

- **Jabal al Deir:** Monastery (Deir).*

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

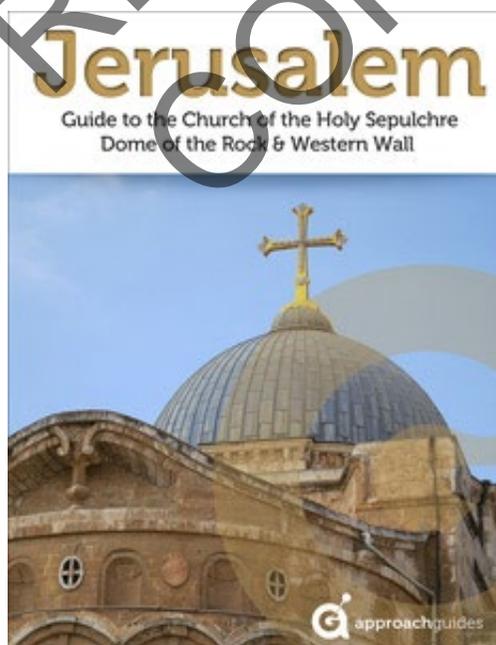
We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Petra's stellar temples and tombs and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer
Founders, Approach Guides
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If you are also planning a visit to Israel, get our [Guide to Jerusalem](#), which offers deep insight into the most important religious structures in the old city: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall.



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Jordan: Temples and Tombs of Petra

Version 1.2

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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—

It seems no work of Man's creative hand,
By labor wrought as wavering fancy planned;
But from the rock as if by magic grown,
Eternal, silent, beautiful, alone!
Not virgin-white like that old Doric shrine,
Where erst Athena held her rites divine;
Not saintly-grey, like many a minster fane,
That crowns the hill and consecrates the plane;
But rose-red as if the blush of dawn
That first beheld them were not yet withdrawn;
The hues of youth upon a brow of woe,
Which Man which deemed old two thousand years ago,
Match me such a marvel save in Eastern clime,
A rose-red city half as old as time.

—

An excerpt from *Petra*,
a poem describing the ancient city, written sight unseen,
by the Anglican minister Dean John William Burgon (1813-1888) in 1845.

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larly relative to what would be expected given their grand facades. Stone-built architecture affords freedom to create large-sized interiors that rock-cut architecture does not.

2. Crowsteps

A crowstep is a pyramidal stepped decoration; it was most likely a reproduction in stone of earlier mud-brick structures of Mesopotamia. Comprising the primary facade decoration of early Petra structures, they appear in two general arrangements:

- **Serial arrangement.** Characteristic of Petra's earliest structures, this arrangement consists of a series of crowsteps — beginning and ending with a half stack — aligned in a horizontal band (yellow highlights in Fig. 1). They rest on a simple unsupported stringcourse (green highlights in Fig. 1).
- **Massive arrangement.** As time went on, the serial arrangement gave way to a massive arrangement: a massive pair of half-stack crowsteps mirror each other on a single horizontal band (yellow highlights in Fig. 2). They typically rest on a cavetto cornice (red highlights in Fig. 2).

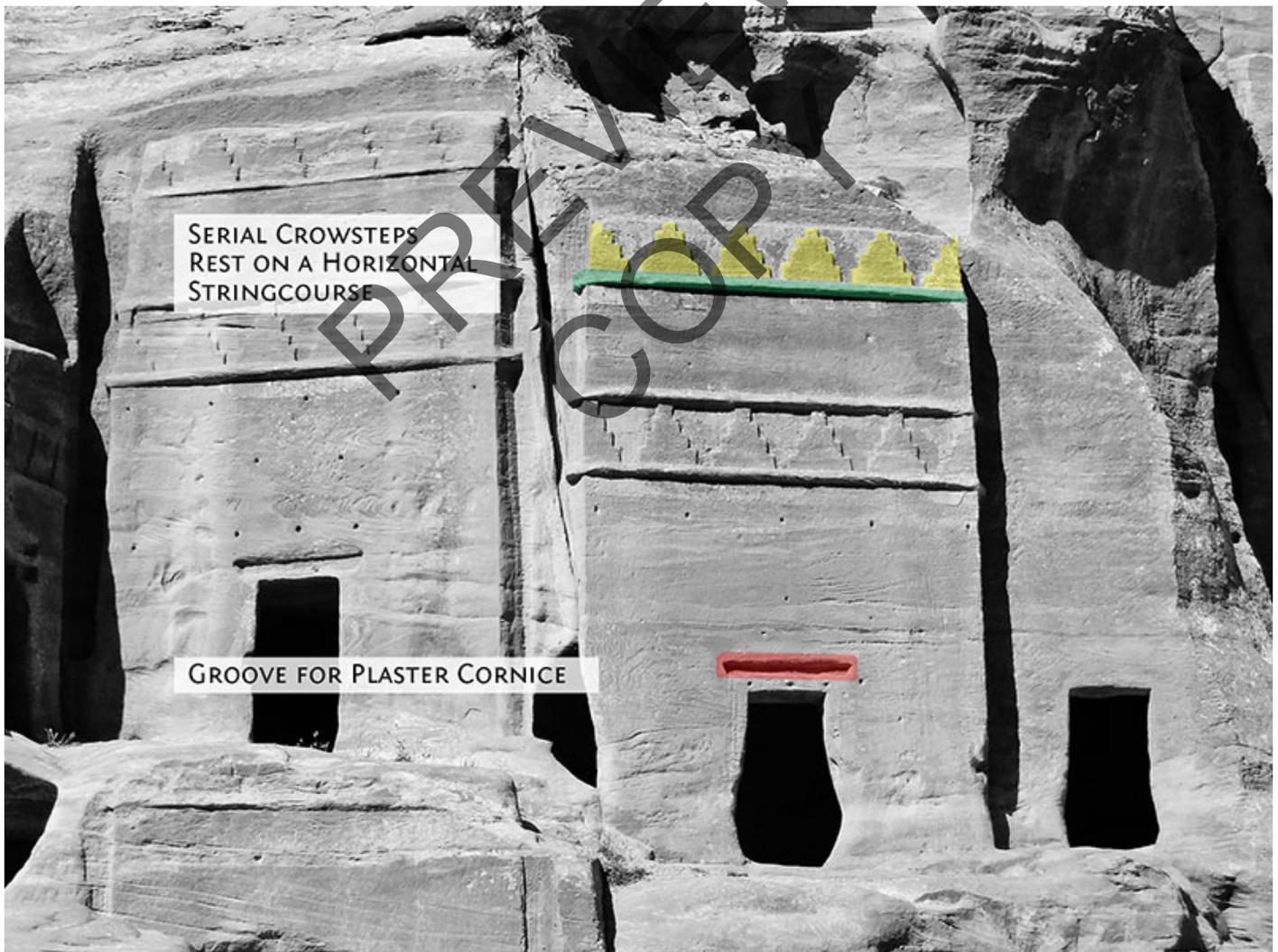


Fig. 1. Earlier style facade with serial crowsteps [Street of Facades, Outer Siq]. Highlights added.

3. Plaster cornices over doorways

Early Nabataean structures employed flat plaster cornices over doorways. Although these cornices are no longer extant, the thin, flat grooves into which they would have been placed are still visible (red highlights in Fig. 1).

4. Simple flat wall surfaces with horizontal bias

The Nabataeans display a clear preference for simple flat wall surfaces with minimal decoration (Fig. 1). To the extent that there was decoration, it was generally confined to raised horizontal lines that organize the negative space of the otherwise plain surfaces.



Hellenistic Influences

Hellenistic Influences Grow As Empire Expands

The most powerful civilization in the world at the time of the Nabataeans' rise to global trading powerhouse, Greece was another major influence on Petra's architecture.

- **The Ptolemaic empire.** Upon the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the lands that constituted the massive Macedonian empire were carved 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 Antigonos I). These Greek successor empires — especially the Ptolemaic empire based in Alexandria — were the next great civilizations to exert influence on Petra's architecture.
- **A dynamic baroque style.** At the time of greatest contact between the Greek and Nabataean civilizations, Alexandria was pioneering a baroque style that deviated from the earlier forms of classical Greek architecture by infusing capitals, pediments and entablatures with greater dynamism and movement. Petra borrowed many of these new baroque forms — we will explore the most important of them below.
- **The legacy.** In an interesting twist of history, the baroque architecture constructed in Alexandria during this period 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 the masters Borromini and Bernini — who went on to forge what we have come to define as the “Baroque” period.
- **Where to see it in Petra.** 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 pure Hellenistic forms waned in later Classic period structures, setting the stage for the emergence of a wholly new Nabataean style.

What to Look For: Hellenistic Features

1. 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) and a pediment (Fig. 4).

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.
- **Orders were often mixed**, meaning that column types were not paired with classically-prescribed entablatures.

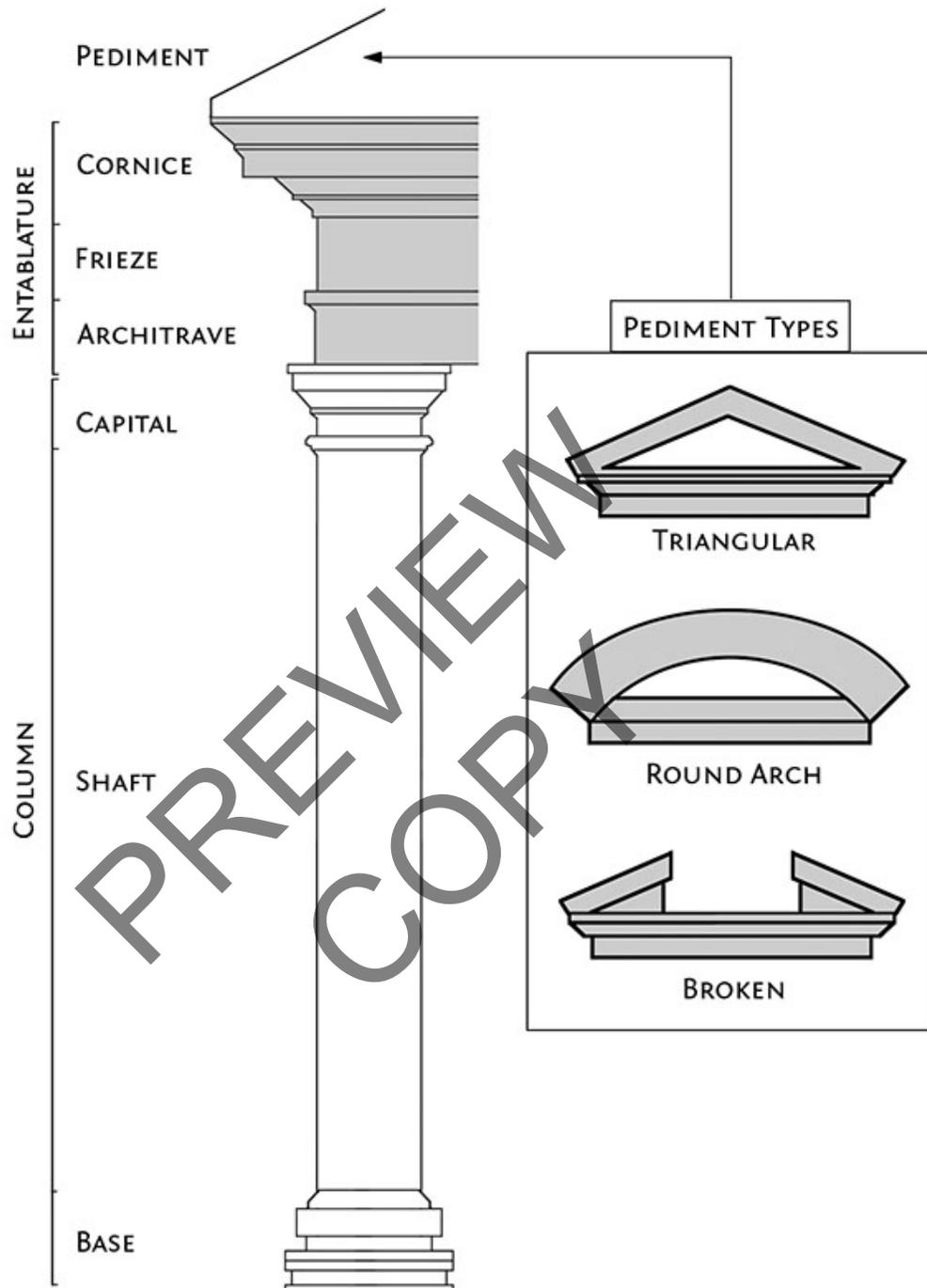


Fig. 4. A classical repertoire: a generic order and three pediment types.

2. Pediments

There are three prevailing Hellenistic pediments used in Petra (Fig. 4).

- **Classical triangular**
- **Baroque round arch**
- **Baroque broken**

3. Open facades with baroque movement

In stark contrast to the closed flat facades of Mesopotamian structures, classical Greek facades are characterized by their openness and relative transparency. Further, Ptolemaic Alexandria's baroque styles exaggerated the impression of depth and movement by employing projecting and recessed bays, rounded forms and broken pediments (Fig. 5). The resulting facades are especially dynamic with changing patterns of light and shadow.

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TOUR ITINERARY AND MAP

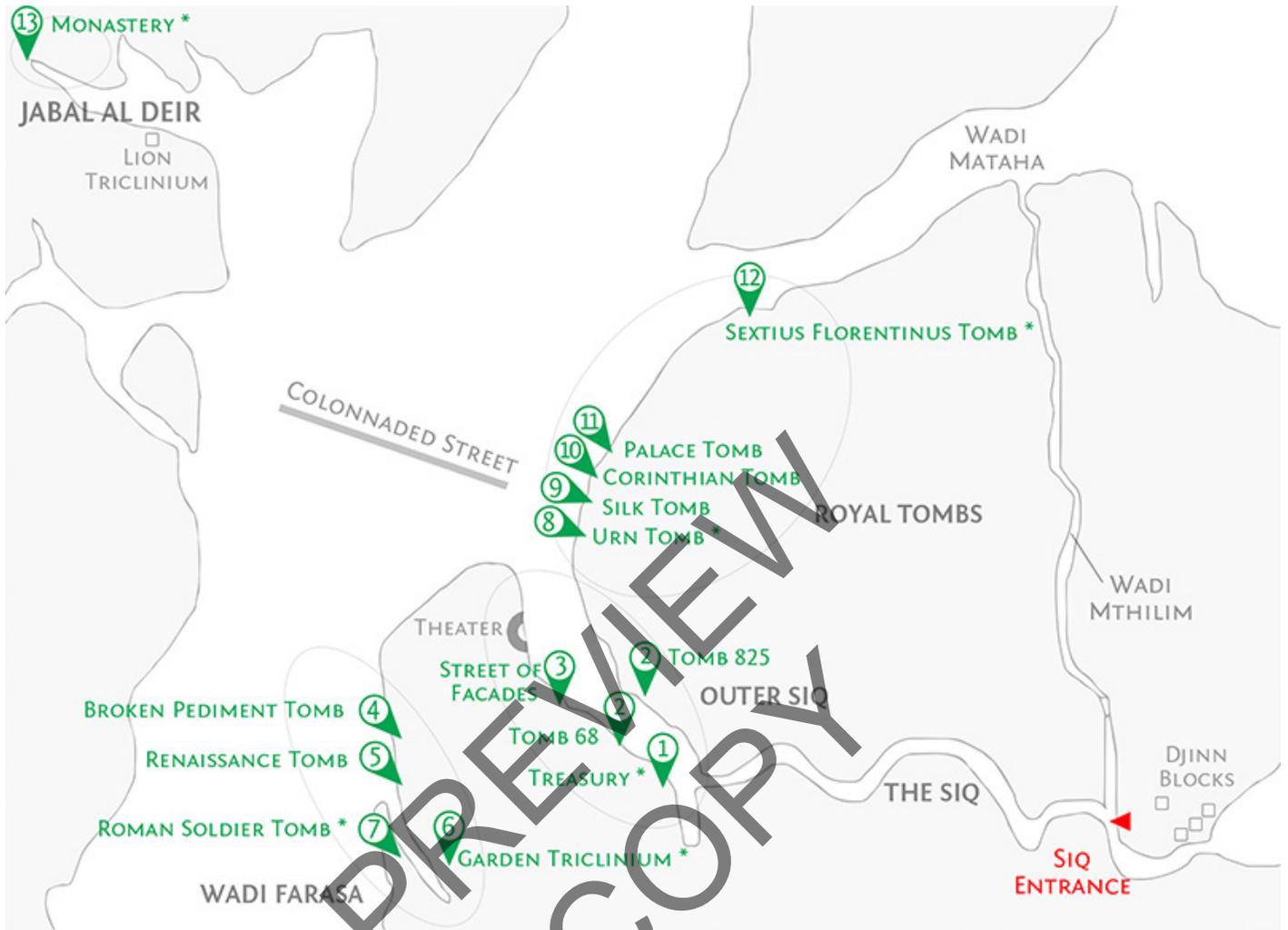


Fig. 12. Map of Petra highlighting tour itinerary.

Our tour profiles thirteen of Petra's most impressive architectural sites (Fig. 12). It is ordered to correspond with the visitor's normal progression through the old city.

Author Tip: Although we believe all of the individual sites profiled in this guidebook represent highlights of Petra's art and architecture, we have marked our absolute favorites with asterisks (*) to help you prioritize your itinerary.

Outer Siq

1. Treasury (Khasneh) *
2. Tombs 68 and 825
3. Street of Facades

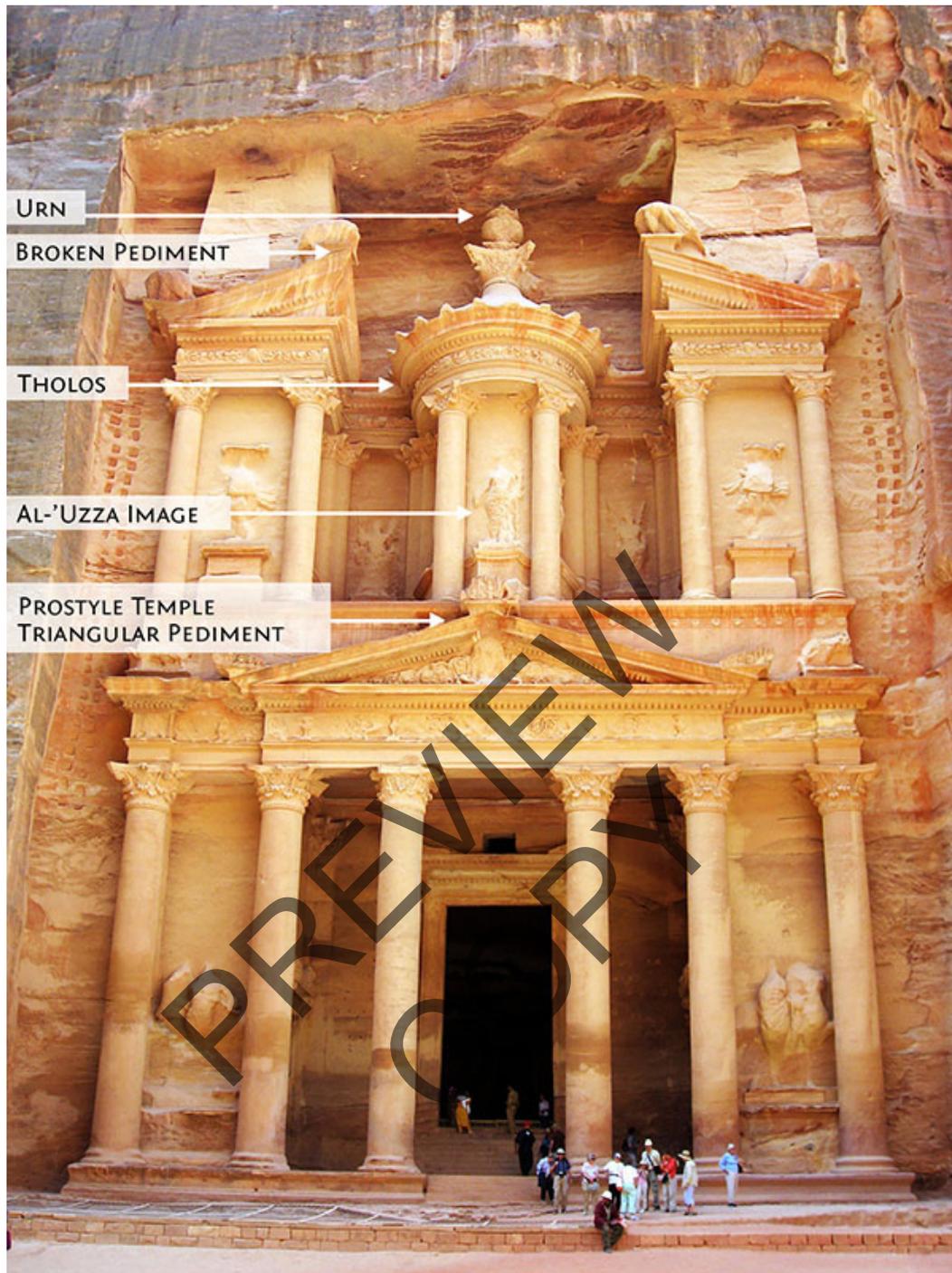


Fig. 14. Hellenistic features, Treasury. Highlights added.

Hellenistic Features Provide Foundation

This is the most Hellenistic of Petra's structures. In fact, it might have been the work of imported Greek architects from Alexandria, the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt.

- **Prostyle temple front.** The ground floor's prostyle temple front — consisting of four free-standing columns that project from the rest of the facade and support a triangular pediment — speaks to strong classical Greek influence (Fig. 14).

2. Tombs 68 and 825

Overview

- **Built:** Although these tombs have not been precisely dated, they are certainly some of the earliest Classic period structures in Petra. While they pre-date the Treasury (84-56 BCE), they were likely excavated after those on the Street of Facades.
- **Function:** Tombs.

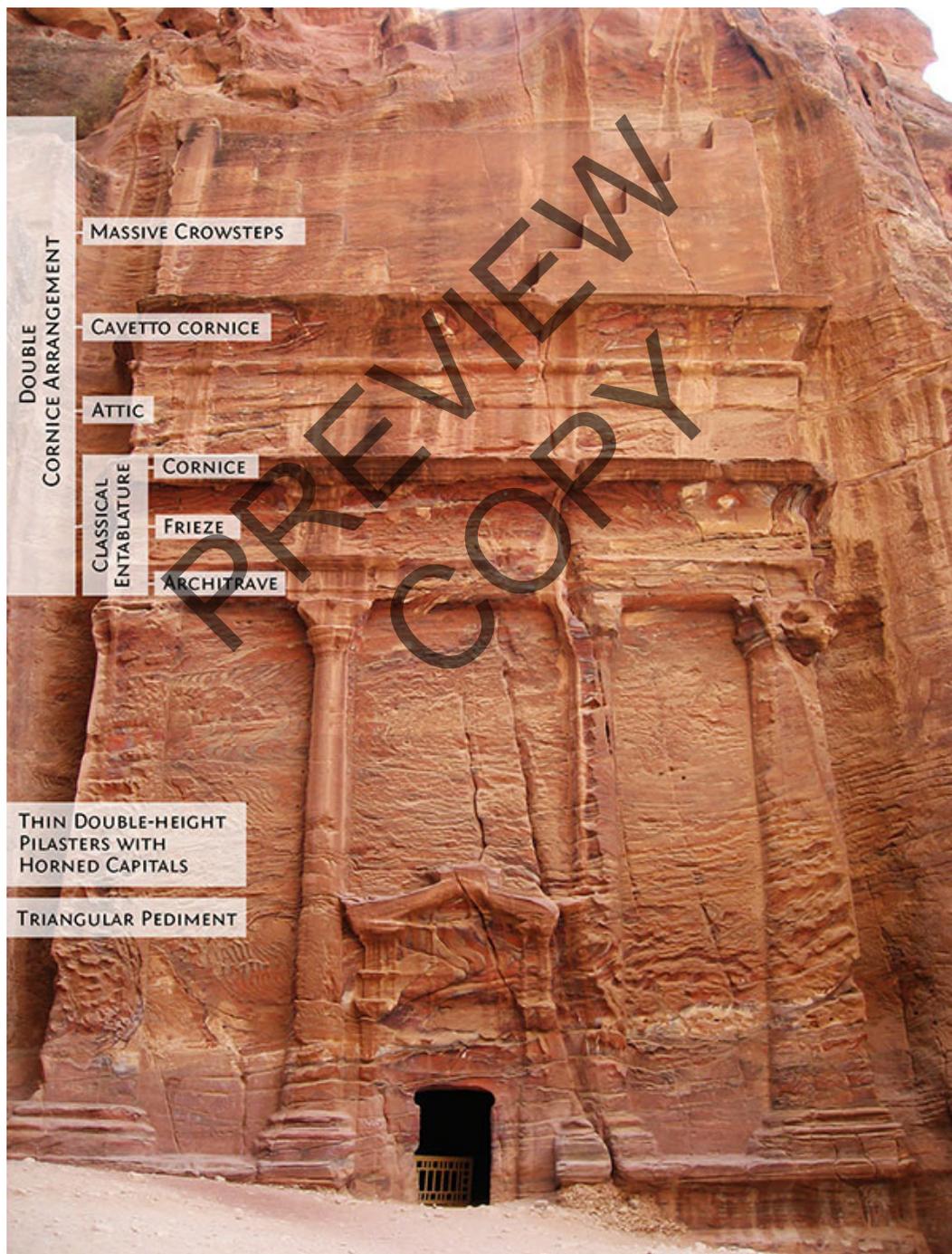


Fig. 17. Tomb 68. Highlights added.

5. Renaissance Tomb

Overview

- **Built:** Likely around the same time as the Sextius Florentinus Tomb (130 CE); this corresponds to the Early Postclassic period when the city was a Roman province.
- **Function:** Tomb.



Fig. 21. Renaissance Tomb. Highlights added.

Royal Tombs

The Royal Tombs are a highlight stop. After the Treasury and Monastery, they are the top sites in Petra. As we have mentioned earlier, they appear to have served as a **testing ground for Nabataean architects** as they sought to create a unique style of their own; their experiments in the Royal Tombs bear fruit in the style's most perfect expression, the Monastery.

The tomb profiles that follow are arranged as you would encounter them when approaching from the center of Petra, that is, from south to north.

Author Tip: *For more adventurous travelers who have already experienced at least one walk along the Siq and seen the Treasury, we recommend following the Wadi Mthilim to the Royal Tombs (see details below).*

- **The Wadi Mthilim route.** To take the Wadi Mthilim route, turn right just before the entrance to the Siq (see **Fig. 12** in the section entitled “Tour Itinerary and Map”). The wadi runs for approximately two kilometers, equating to a 90-minute trek given the unevenness of the walking surface. It gets very narrow at points, requiring those that opt for this path to do a bit of squeezing through rock formations, but the colors are brilliant and simply beautiful. Continue hiking along Wadi Mthilim until it ends, then turn left when it opens up at Wadi Mataha. This route brings you to the northernmost portion of the Royal Tombs (just above the Sextius Florentinus Tomb).

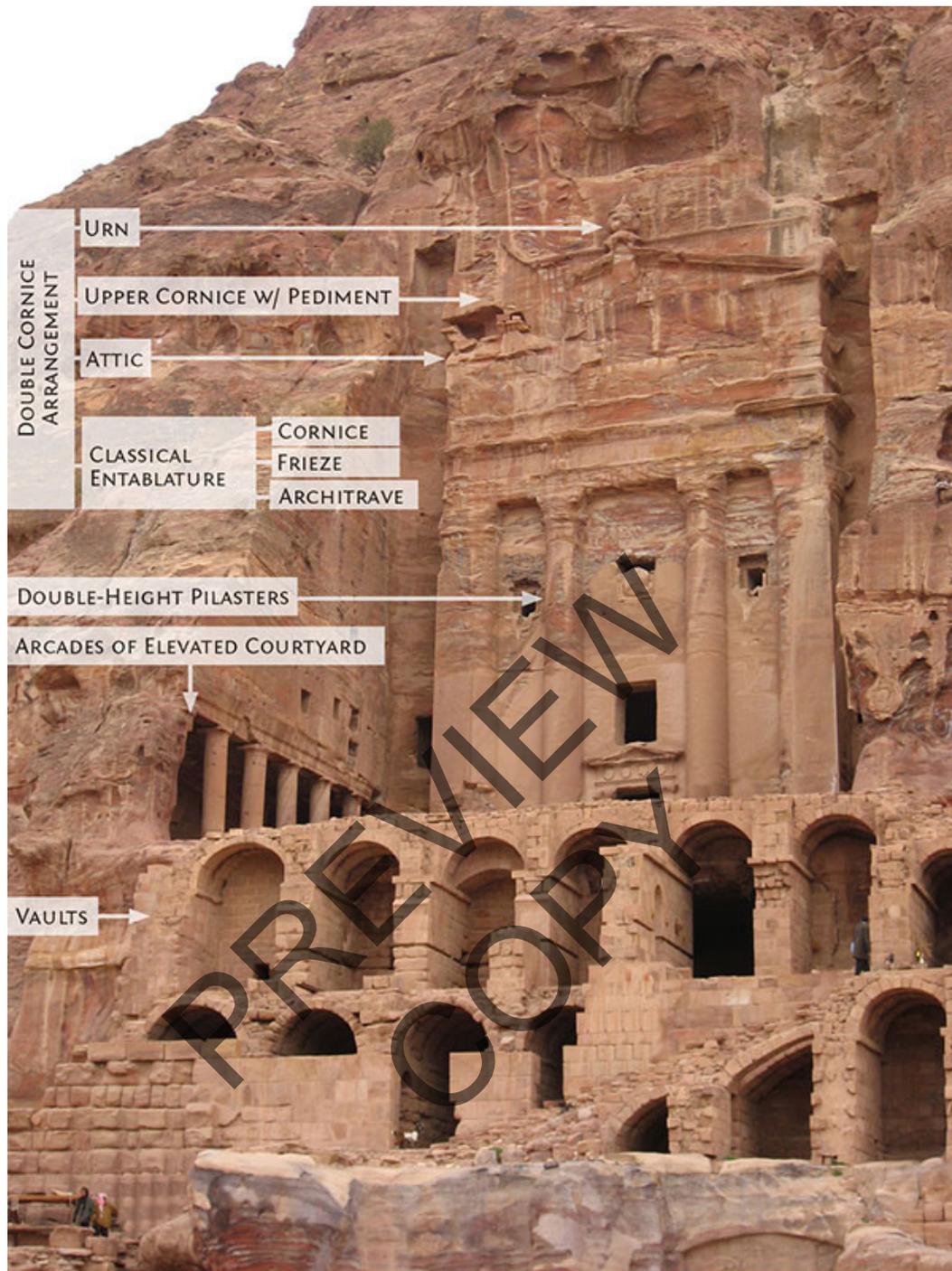


Fig. 26. Full facade, Urn Tomb. Highlights added.

View from Far Back

- **Elevated courtyard.** An elevated courtyard provides a grand entrance into the interior of the tomb (Fig. 26).
- **Round arched vaults as support.** The courtyard is supported by two stacked levels of stone-built round arch vaults (Fig. 26).
- **Colossal pilasters.** Four colossal double-height pilasters — two semicircular in the center

- **Three tombs.** The openings high up on the facade mark the entrance to three shallow tombs (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27). The tombs were likely placed in an elevated position as protection from potential looters. The central opening – likely designed to accommodate the remains of the tomb’s sponsor – is still blocked by a large wedged stone, as probably all three were upon the tomb’s completion.

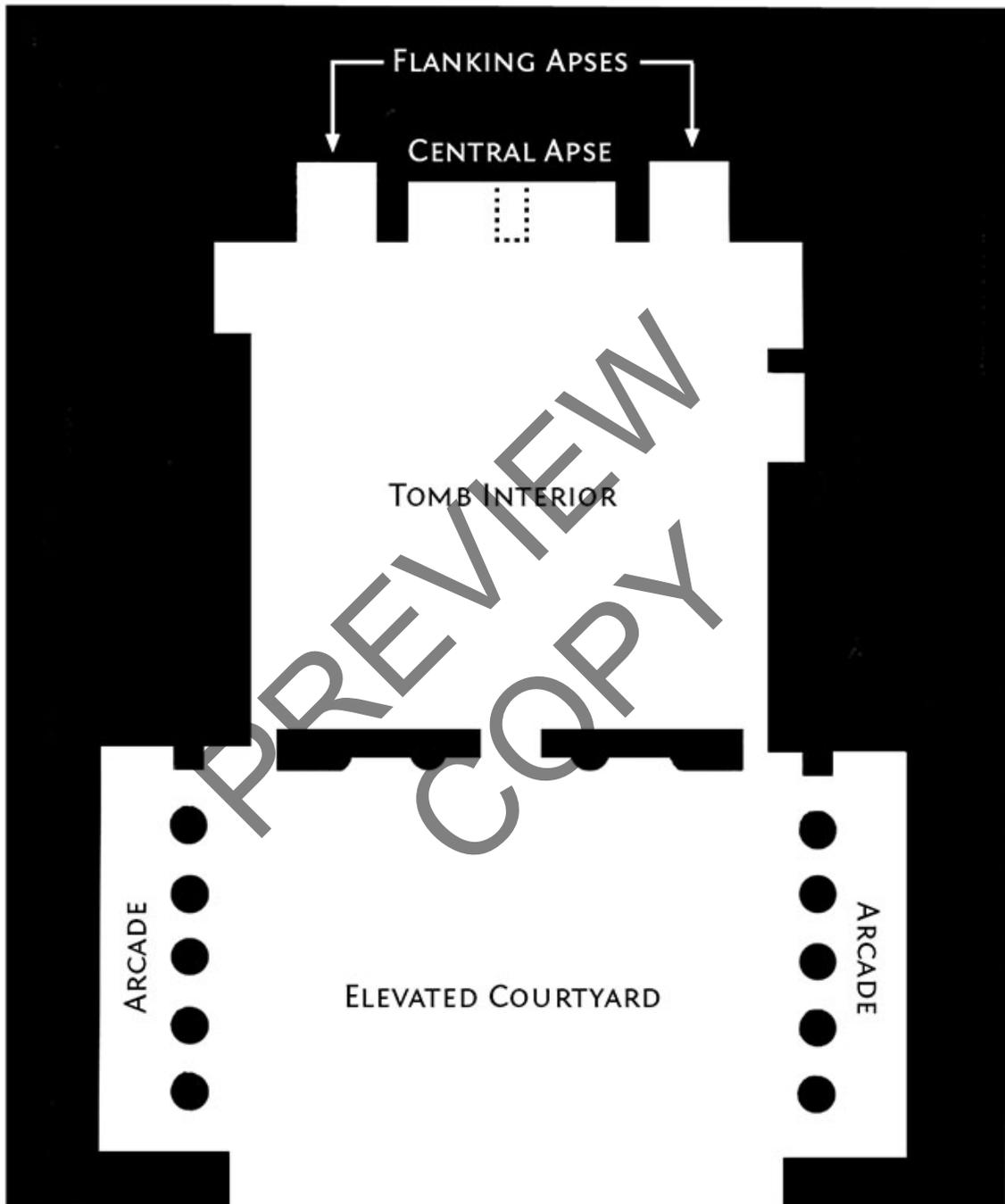


Fig. 28. Layout, Urn Tomb. Highlights added.

The Quintessential Nabataean Temple

The Monastery is a pioneering structure that marks the apex of Nabataean architecture. The Hellenistic influences of the Treasury — the inaugural structure in the Classic period — have been rethought and transformed to yield an entirely new Nabataean aesthetic.

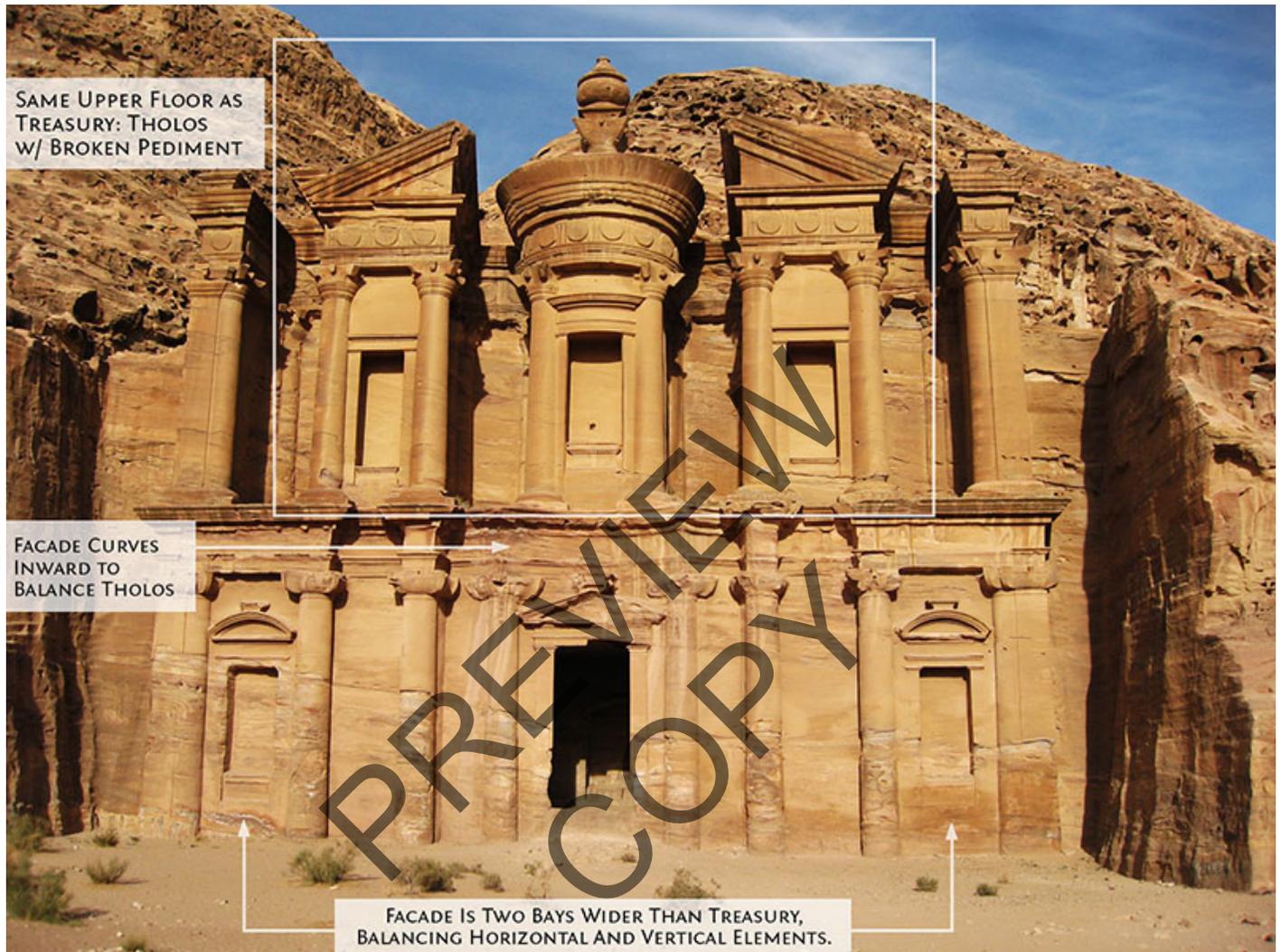


Fig. 40. Arrangement, Monastery. Highlights added.

Arrangement of Facade

Same upper floor as Treasury

- **Greek tholos and broken pediment.** The Monastery maintains the Hellenistic upper floor arrangement — a tholos flanked by a broken pediment — pioneered at the Treasury (Fig. 40). As at the Treasury, the tholos is topped by a massive urn.

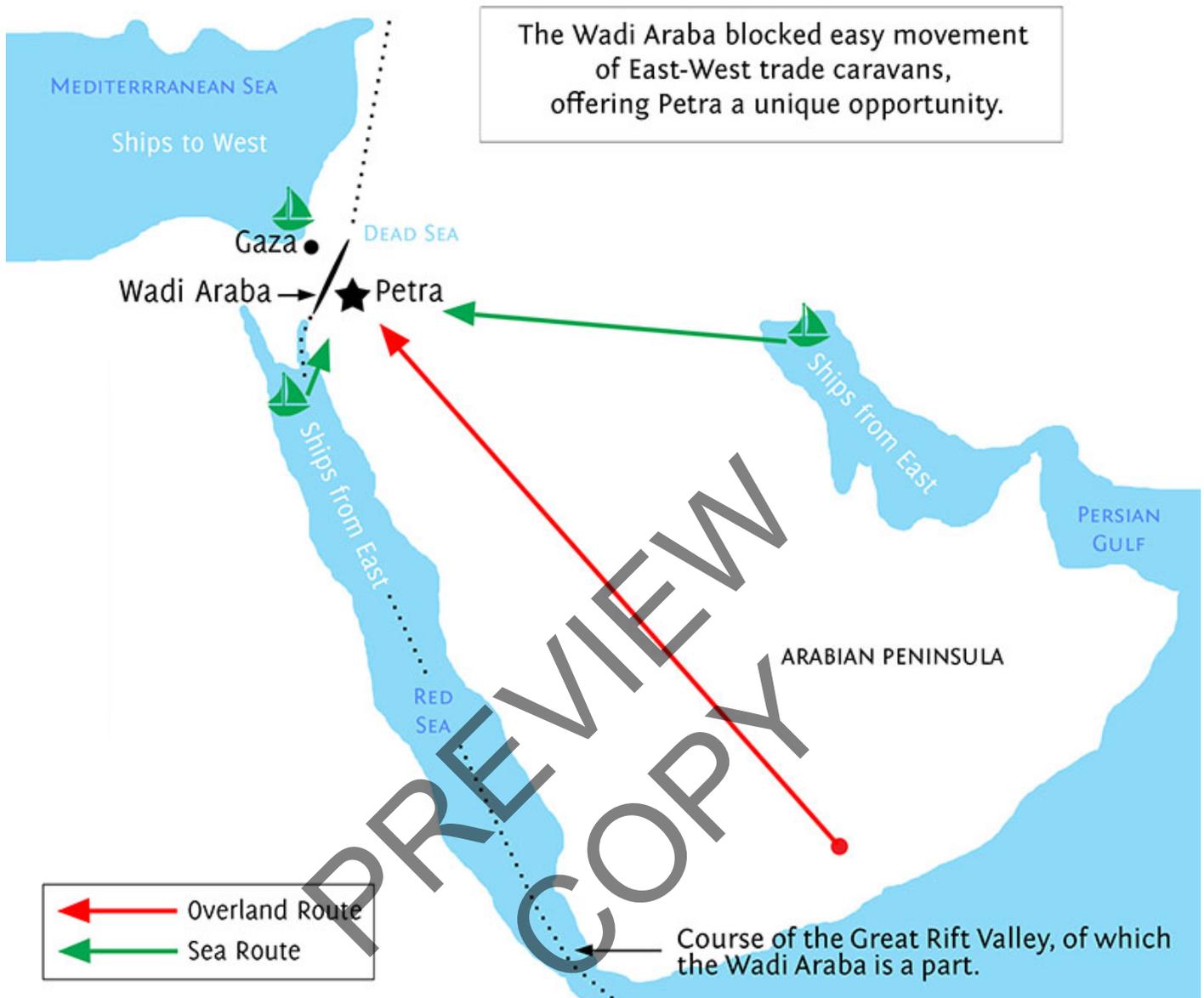


Fig. 44. The movement of trade goods from East to West through Petra.

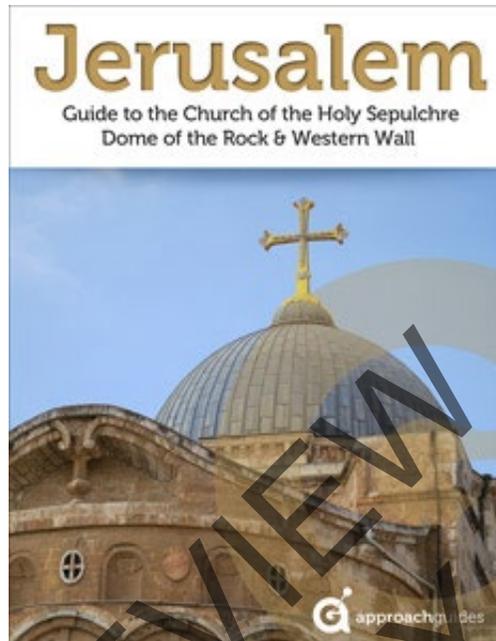
The Movement of Trade Goods

Trade goods followed a number of different potential paths to Petra on route from East to West.

- **Sea-transported goods.** Maritime goods from Asia landed in either Red Sea ports (to the west of the Arabian Peninsula) or Persian Gulf ports (to the east of the Arabian Peninsula) and were carried overland northward to Petra. After passing through Petra, they crossed the Wadi Araba and onto Petra's primary seaport, Gaza, where they were met by Western sailing vessels. These movements are marked in green in Fig. 44.
- **Overland-transported goods.** Overland goods arrived on desert caravans from South Arabia. Once in Petra, they took the same route to Gaza. These movements are marked in red in Fig. 44.

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If you are also planning a visit to Israel, get our [Guide to Jerusalem](#), which offers deep insight into the most important religious structures in the old city: the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall.



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Jordan Reading List

We recently launched, [Trip Reads](#), our meticulously-curated collection of inspired information for the world's top destinations. We go beyond the "top 10" and "best of" lists, allowing travelers to appreciate the essence of a place.

Here are just a few of our Jordan recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **Bedouin: Nomads of the Desert** Invaluable insight into the nomadic people of the desert. *By Alan Keohane.*
- **"Islamic Calligraphy"** An excellent, highly visual review of the subject by a renowned Harvard professor. *By Annemarie Schimmel.*
- **The Archaeology Book** Just for kids! Learn both the techniques of the archaeologist and the accounts of some of the richest discoveries of the Middle East. *By David Down.*

We encourage you visit tripreads.com to get our Trip Reads for [Jordan](#) and other destinations throughout the world. Enjoy your travels!



Where to Stay, Eat and Shop

While there are many excellent sources for recommendations, we have included a collection of the places that we personally enjoyed while on location researching this guidebook.

Where to Stay

- **Petra: Moevenpick Resort.** This hotel is all about location: it sits right at the entrance to the ancient city of Petra, making early morning and evening visits very easy. www.moevenpick-hotels.com

Where to Shop

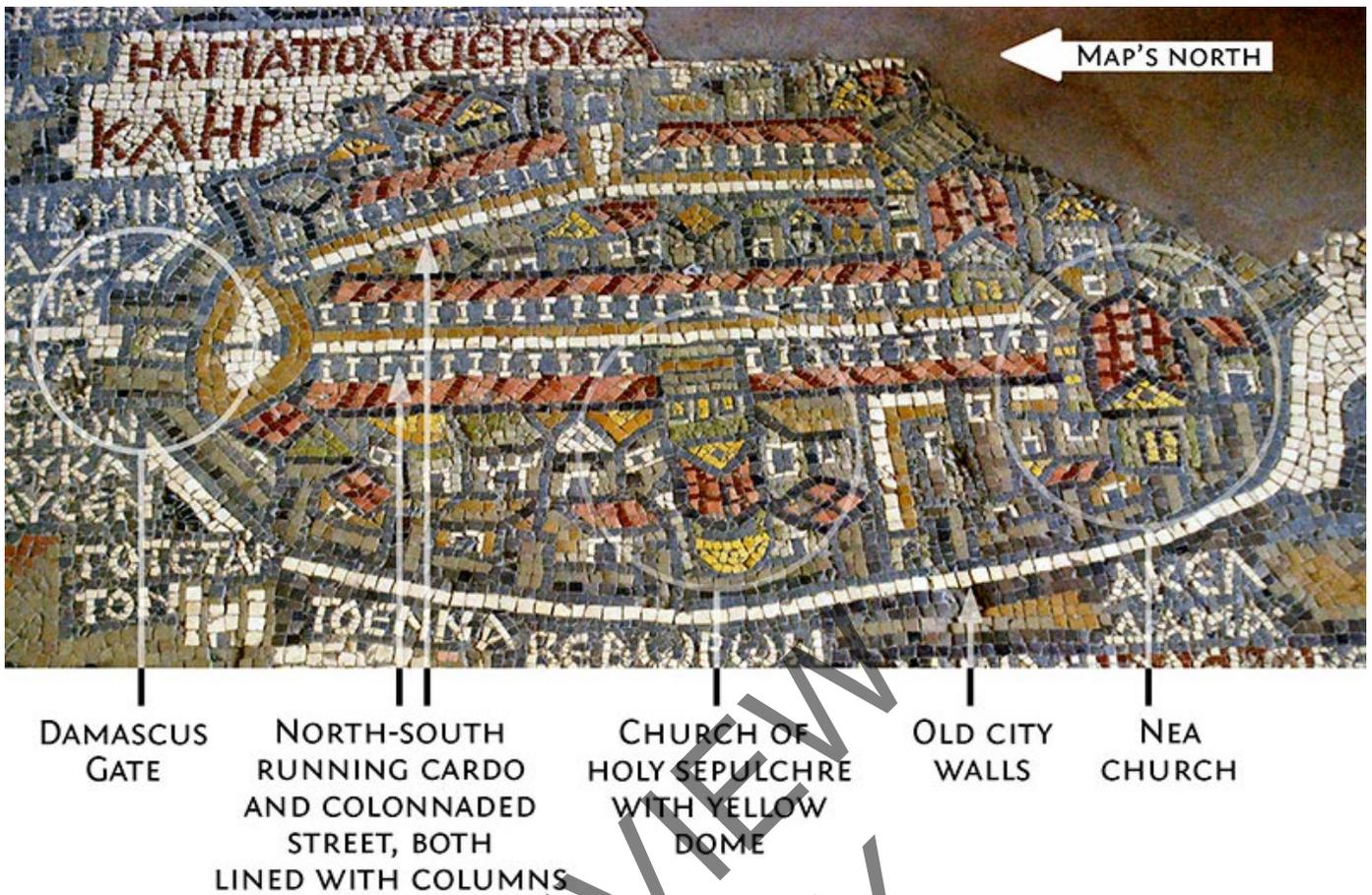
- **Amman: Nadia Dajani.** Very cool jewelry by a local designer. Our favorite pieces are those with hand-carved Islamic inscriptions. Her store is located just outside the InterContinental Hotel in Amman. www.nadiadajani.com

Where to Eat

- **Amman: Tanoreen.** This local restaurant serves some of the best Middle Eastern food we have ever had. Excellent experience. Also, their Arabic coffee is not to be missed. Located on Shatt-al-Arab St., near the Sixth Circle.

Where to Go

On the way to Petra from Amman, the small town of Madaba is worth a stop.



Map of Jerusalem in the Church of Saint George at Madaba, Jordan.
Photo by: Jean Housen

Church of Saint George at Madaba (aka Church of the Map)

This unassuming Byzantine church has an impressive and by far the most well-known mosaic in the Holy Land.

- **Floor map mosaic.** Dating from the second half of the 6th century, the floor map mosaic depicts the geography of the Holy Land in the 6th century. It is the oldest map of the Holy Land in existence.
- **Position in church.** It occupies all of the floor space in the apse of the church.
- **Orientation implies Constantinople's west-to-east viewpoint.** The map assumes an oblique perspective, as if the viewer were standing atop a very high mountain and looking eastward (north is on the left). This is interesting since it is the opposite view that a viewer would have from Madaba in Jordan: a viewer in Jordan would look westward for a view of Jerusalem (north is on the right). The eastward vantage suggests that the artist was likely creating the mosaic based on a map prototype that was designed in the West, likely in Constantinople.
- **Key Jerusalem structures.** The walled old city of Jerusalem stands out on the map. In the photo above, we have marked the most clearly identifiable structures of the 6th century city, most of which are still in place today. The famous Temple Mount — the site of the ruined Jewish Second Temple; the Islamic Dome of the Rock had yet to be built — is conspicuously absent

for reasons unknown.

- **Compare with Google Maps.** Compare this map with our [Google Map of Jerusalem](#). You will find many of the same landmarks.

Author tip: Also visit Madaba's Archaeological Park. It has the city's most impressive small-tesserae mosaics, the highlight of which is the 6th century Hippolytus Hall mosaic.

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Packing List

PACKING LIST

for global voyagers

We're constantly on the road and as you can imagine, have a pretty defined list of things that we never leave home without. Here's a peek at [what's in our luggage](#), from our favorite camera to portable wine glasses. It's the ultimate list for a seasoned traveler!

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Founders, Approach Guides

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Travel + Leisure

What started as one couple's travel notes aimed at filling in the gaps in guidebooks has become Approach Guides — a menu of downloadable travel guides that cover cultural and historical topics of interest to thoughtful travelers. What's hot: Bite-sized travel guides that specialize in topics ranging from the foods of Italy to one that helps you explore the historical and architectural significance of Angkor's famous temple structures in Cambodia.

Los Angeles Times

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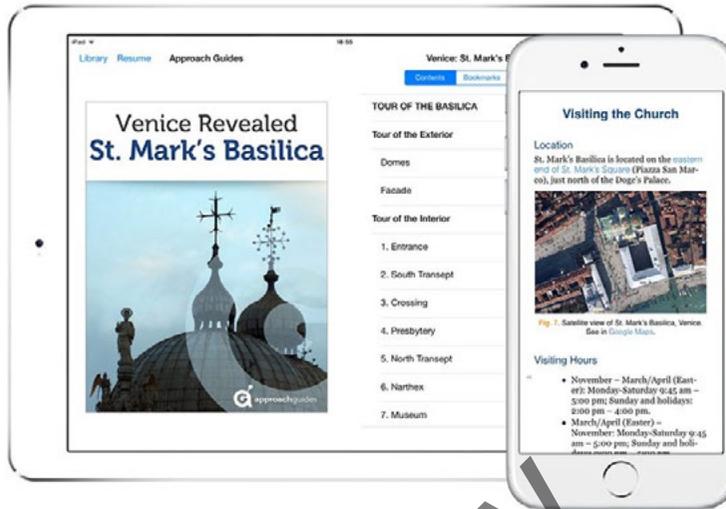
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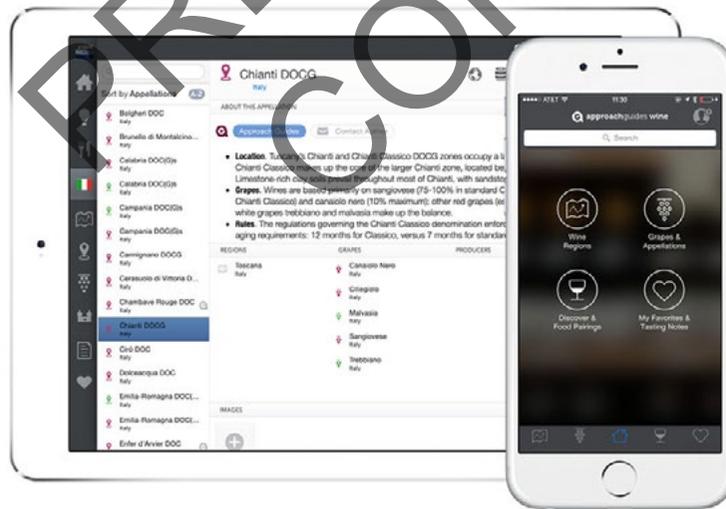
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