

## **A large Nabataean/Roman-period house at adh-Dharih**

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In the 1980s and 1990s, an ancient dwelling house was excavated on the hill above the sanctuary of Dharih<sup>1</sup>. Of the twenty or so dwellings found on the site,<sup>2</sup> this one is the largest and has the most interesting interior features. In 2007, the plan of the house was update and, along with a review of its architecture new information came to light which encouraged us to resume its study. This will be completed in the coming years by an analysis of the material and photographic archive kept at Yarmouk University in Irbid. The finds from the excavations, which are being studied currently, suggest that the house was founded in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD, while the material from the destruction/abandonment layers is no later than the 4<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> New soundings will allow the dates of construction and abandonment to be determined more accurately, as well as the use of certain rooms and the status of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, it is already possible to present an overall description of the building and some ideas on its interpretation and hypothetical reconstruction.

### *Description*

The house stands on the north slope of the hill which overlooks the sanctuary (**figs 1 and 2**). It is a compact block covering a surface of at least 900 m<sup>2</sup>, made up of three adjoining sections with two courtyards (**fig. 3**). The walls are double-faced, occasionally with buttresses, and are uniformly built of limestone ashlar blocks about 0.35 m high. Wall

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<sup>1</sup> In 1984, François Villeneuve excavated room G; all the rest of the structure was excavated by Professeur Zeidoun al-Muheisen between 1992 and 1996. We thank François Villeneuve for his corrections and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000 and 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000.

thickness is fairly uneven, from 0.70 to 1.50 m. Those walls abutting the hill to the south are preserved up to 4 m high, but most of the others are only one to three courses high, a few retaining only the foundations. Several rooms and the two courtyards have remains of paving made of small rectangular blocks, between 0.30 m wide, 0.60 m long and about 0.15 m thick. The first section of the house (315 m<sup>2</sup>) is organised around a trapezoidal courtyard (A) (118 m<sup>2</sup>), which still retains some of its limestone paving. The only known entrance to the house is on the east side of this courtyard. The western and southern sides consist of a stone-built platform 0.50 m high, with two small sets of steps in the northwest and southeast corners. To the south, the platform provides access to two paved rooms (B and C) of the same size (29 m<sup>2</sup>), both of which have two pairs of arch springers and traces of plaster on the walls. To the west, the platform provides access, via two doors, to a central room (D) surrounded on three sides by a wide corridor (E).

The second section of the house (F and G) (73 m<sup>2</sup>) is on the southwest corner which, because of its attachment, seems to belong to the house. Its floors are nearly 3 m above those of the first section, a difference in elevation that can be explained simply by the slope of the land, which has been terraced. It comprises two square rooms, a smaller one (F) (13.65 m<sup>2</sup>) and the other, larger one (G) (27 m<sup>2</sup>) to its west. Both can be reached by doors in their north sides and neither have any traces of paving.

The third section (365 m<sup>2</sup>) is different from the previous two because of its orientation and its installations. It is aligned 13.5° further to the west. The main room of this section was probably the large (36.5 m<sup>2</sup>), central rectangular room (H), which has springers for the three evenly spaced arches for supporting the roof. The north wall might have had three doors. This room cannot be reached from the courtyard, but a wide corridor (I) to the east probably linked the courtyard (A) with a small room (J) which could have functioned as a vestibule for the large room. Unfortunately, the presumed threshold between (I) and (J) has disappeared as

well as one that probably provided access to the western part of the house, between (J) and (M). The corridor (I) provides access to two small rooms (Q and R) to the east.

One of the most interesting installations linked to this part of the house is a large paved courtyard, or esplanade (S) in front of the north face of the 'vestibule' (J) (**fig. 4**). Only its southern part is preserved because the north part has been destroyed by the gulley erosion of the hill, but there are traces of several installations and of the original plan. Also, some of the paving and installations that must have existed seem to have been partly robbed out, which prevents us from determining its original eastern, western and northern edges. The preserved southern part of this terrace, adjoining the vestibule (J) and the better preserved room (K), is a paved esplanade, comprising a lower central part separated by two steps, about fifteen centimetres high, from a higher surrounding pavement. A buried monolithic basin (1.04 m x 0,84 m x 0.44 m), whose top is at the same level as the bottom of the paving stones, was perhaps a central feature of this esplanade or terrace. It lies in the line of a channel which divides the paved surface in two. We did not find any remains of steps leading up to the house from the bottom of the hill, nor of walls or buildings enclosing the esplanade. The dominant position of the esplanade and its panoramic view over the Wadi al-Laaban and the hills of the Wadi al-Hasa, as well as over the sanctuary about a hundred metres lower down might explain its presence here (**fig. 5**). We call this courtyard esplanade or terrace (S) in order to distinguish it from courtyard (A). Its connection with the north façade of the house has been heavily damaged by earthquakes. These tremors were of such violence that they raised the foundations of the east half the façade by the height of one course. Equally, part of the paving of the terrace abutting this façade was raised by 0.75 m and, with the façade, was projected slightly forward (**fig. 6**). There are two small stepped blocks (at least 1.5 m wide) on the upper part of the terrace, one abutting the façade of room (K) to the west and the other the façade of vestibule (J) to the south. The former leads to room (K), but its four steps are

incomplete; the latter, the first four steps of which are well preserved, would have provided an uncomfortable access to vestibule (J) and the large room (H).

The terrace (S) can be reached from the western part of the house complex we are describing. This part consists of six rooms: two adjoining rooms of 20 m<sup>2</sup> to the north (K and L); one long, paved, L-shaped corridor (M) with two steps in its paving that ends at two other, contiguous rooms (N and O); and lastly, a small, square, paved room (P), which by its structure and orientation belongs to this block, but the door that links it to the corridor (M) is carefully blocked, making room (P) accessible only from the platform of courtyard (A) in the last phase of the house.

The southern wall of room (K), which is better preserved than the others, has a door through it, in the thickness of which there are three steps leading to the higher room (L). This room also has three pairs of springers for arches that would have supported the roof; those on the south side are in a particularly thick wall. Two steps are integrated into the paving in corridor (M) running across its whole width, which take care of the difference in level between the northern and southern parts of the house. The north face of the wall separating (M) and (P) has two wide notches twelve centimetres high cut in it about one metre above floor level and on either side of the central axis of the corridor. These notches are linked by a narrow horizontal groove the top of which must have been the next course of the wall, which no longer exists (**fig. 7**). These clearly represent the recessed fittings for the ends of two small wooden beams that would have supported a small wooden table recessed in the horizontal groove in the wall. Just to the west of the notches are the doorjambs of the doorway that was carefully blocked with facing stones, against which the paving slabs in room (P) are abutted. The southern part of corridor (M) leads to the small room (N), which in turn opens onto the small room (O). They each cover about 9 m<sup>2</sup>. The wall separating (M) and (N) is almost completely gone, only the northwest corner with its plaster still remains today. Room (N)

forms one room with room (O), and the imprint of the robbed clay tile floor is still visible (**fig. 8**). This room forms a sort of alcove which becomes wider in its façade, in a T-shaped plan. The interior face of the western wall is cut by three vertical channels characteristic of rooms heated on hypocausts. The underground part is well preserved; the small surrounding walls of brick and the remains of twenty pilae stacks of fired clay (0.17 m in diameter) that carried the *suspensura* of fired clay slabs (0.52 m wide by 0.05 m thick) are still in situ. Two other vertical channels flank the opening of the furnace in the south wall of the room. The furnace was fed from room (E) and the stones from the part of the wall separating the hearth from the heated chamber have shattered from the heat.

Dispersed pieces of architectural blocks pose new questions or provide additional information. The base of a small column was found fallen on the paving of the terrace, along with a fragment of capital (**figs 9a and 9b**). Two column drum fragments were found in rooms (J) and (K). A complete capital and two pieces of entablature from the excavations were stored twenty metres further west. All these elements could belong to a small portico which, given their position, is more likely to have been on the side of the terrace than of the courtyard. The diameter of the well-preserved drums, base and capital is 0.33 m and the height of the complete columns must have been about 2.50–3 m. Courtyard (A) probably did not have a stone portico, but there might have been a wooden one, which would have protected a part of the yard and the domestic activities taking place there from the sun. Equally, given the present condition of the site, it is difficult to visualise a portico in front of the northern façade. Indeed, the well-preserved southern part of the esplanade (S) is obstructed by the stepped blocks and is cut by the channel, so that it is difficult to reconstruct the position of columns for a portico. The rarity of fragments of a portico and the absence of traces of walls or buildings around the other sides of the esplanade do not suggest the existence of a surrounding portico. Thus we need to find alternative hypotheses for its location.

There is nothing to attest to the existence of an upper floor in this house, nor to a staircase. If one had to be reconstructed, to access the roof for instance, then we would have to assume that it was supported on the bulk of the small rooms (Q) and (R). Several rooms were roofed using arches, the span of which means that they were about 4 m high. The terrace-roofs must have been almost directly accessible from the slope above the house to the south and west. Unlike the excavations of house V12, a small house excavated at the southern edge of the village of Dharih, our building did not produce large limestone covering slabs. Apart from assuming that such slabs may have been removed for reuse, we are tempted to assume a roofing of matting or lathwork supported on wooden beams covered with a layer of earth.

The surroundings and boundaries of the house are more or less known: to the east and north it is not attached, nor does it appear to be to the south, where an alley or passage about 4 to 6 m wide separates it from a buried oil press. To the west, the house backs onto the slope where there are no adjacent constructions.

It has not yet been possible to identify and date the different construction phases of this house, but the northern half seems to have been added to the older, southern half. It is clear that, after the destruction and abandonment of the house, parts of the construction, facing stones and perhaps the arch stones, and certainly some paving slabs, thresholds and doorjambs were removed for reuse in domestic buildings of the Byzantine and early Islamic times in the area of the sanctuary below.

### *Interpretation of the remains*

The standing remains allow us to hypothesise about the function of the different rooms. There are two complexes: one in the south, where all the rooms open onto the courtyard, which was probably for domestic use as attested by the items still in situ (work bench, cutting table,

grindstones, basins, benches), perhaps belonging to a family and associated with living quarters. In the other, northern part, the rooms connect to each other and have more interesting installations: a terrace whose design is structured around a central element, a large room that was perhaps a reception room, and a heated room on hypocausts. Together these represent a certain degree of luxury. The two complexes are more or less the same size; the southern one was perhaps intended to serve the northern one, and they were probably joined by corridor (I) and also, at one time, by the door between (P) and (M).

The only known entrance to the house is in courtyard (A), but there was perhaps another one by the esplanade. The layout of the courtyard (A), with its lower yard and L-shaped raised platform, is unusual, although it resembles a plan often used in the houses of the area that normally had an L-shaped portico, for example at Mamphis.<sup>4</sup> The three large square rooms (B, C and P) were probably living and sleeping rooms. At least two phases can be identified in rooms (D) and (E). Initially, room (D) was not accessible from room (E). Three blocks with a sloping surface still in situ inside the south wall 1.10 m above the floor level most probably belonged to mangers, which would make this complex a cowshed or more probably, given the height of the mangers, a stable (**figs 10 and 11**). Stables of this sort are well attested in the Near East, for example at Mamphis, Oboda and Sobata in the Negev,<sup>5</sup> and in southern Syria.<sup>6</sup> The animals were kept in the southern and western wings of the surrounding corridor, which is 2.30–2.40 m wide, and the mangers were supplied from the central room (D). In a later phase, the mangers seem to have gone out of use, a door was pierced between (D) and (E) and perhaps smaller animals (sheep and goats?) were kept in the room (D) which had a long water trough standing on the beaten earth floor. The corridor became, at least in its northern part, the access to the furnace for the heated chamber (O), and in its western and southern parts probably a store for forage and for fuel for the furnace. It is perfectly possible to assume that

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<sup>4</sup> Netzer 2003; Negev 1981.

<sup>5</sup> Negev 1988 and 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Most recently, Clauss-Balty and Bodo 2009.

supplies were brought in through the roof, which was probably accessible since it backs onto the hill slope. The surrounding corridor (E) was roofed, but the central room (D) could have been open. The two rooms (G) and (F) that stand above this complex to the southwest were also used for domestic purposes: during the excavations they produced a lot of kitchen wares, a hearth and items such as a broken basin, which is still visible in the floor of room (G), and fragments of grindstones.

The northern part of the house, no doubt accessible from the southern part through the corridor (I), is organised around three main features: the large room (H), the room with niche (L) and the chamber heated by hypocausts (N-O). It is tempting to see room (H) as a banqueting hall of the *triclinium* type, if indeed it had stone benches along the east, west and south walls. The paving in this room has almost totally disappeared but the position of the few remains does not contradict such an interpretation. It was approached from the vestibule (J), probably via three doors, two of which have completely disappeared. Its plan is similar to that of the *triclinium* of the luxurious Roman house built on the top of the hill at Sepphoris in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD,<sup>7</sup> which is surrounded by corridors and opens onto the courtyard; the north part of that house was used for domestic purposes and has a cistern, service rooms a bathroom and latrine. The poor state of preservation of the vestibule (J) precludes a description of its exact organisation, but the floor level is known thanks to a paving slab that has remained in situ in the southwest corner of the room. Its four walls are badly eroded and, like elsewhere, it seems that the door thresholds were robbed out. Thus, it is purely hypothetical to reconstruct a door in the east wall and another in the west wall. These two openings would have allowed movement between the two halves of the house.

There is no hint as to the function of room (K), which is accessible from the esplanade and in which a betyl was found. The betyl is aniconic, narrow and tall (0.69 x 0.19 x 0.14 m),

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<sup>7</sup> Netzer and Weiss 1994: 30-39.



without a tenon (**fig. 12a**). Room (L) still has fragments of a basin and the niche mentioned above (**fig. 13**). Its lower part, 0.35 m high and 0.60 m wide, is narrower than the upper part and could have supported a shelf, probably of wood. The upper part is at least 1.32 m high and 0.62 m wide. Its inside face is made of narrow blocks placed upright and the façade is an opening 0.43 m deep and about 0.80 m high. Under the opening, a small round basin cut into a rectangular block directed any liquids into the lower half of the niche. This niche must have had a paved floor in front of it, about 1.60 m wide and edged by a low wall on the east side. This installation was interpreted by the excavators as perhaps being a wine press; the paving would have been used to tread the grapes, the must would have flowed via the small round basin built into the floor and the spillway into a receptacle placed in the lower part of the niche. Indeed, the niche still seems to have some remains of a water-resistant mortar. The upper part could have been used to store the grapes before they were trodden. The niche it is tempting to reconstruct directly to the north could have served the same purposes or could have been used to ferment and store the wine. However, the presence of such an installation in the house, in the centre of a part that does not, at first glance, seem to have been used for agricultural or craft purposes, is surprising; other explanations and hypotheses for its identification need to be explored (**fig. 14**).

In the L-shaped corridor (M), leading up to the heated chamber (N-O) there are notches in the wall, mentioned above, which supported a wooden table that carried one or several unknown objects. In the alcove in the south of room (N-O), a floor of wide tiles was laid on hypocausts and heated; the front, northern, part was also paved with wide tiles, but was not heated. The walls were covered with plaster which hid the chimneys on the south side. We can speak unequivocally of a heated chamber, but there is nothing to prove that it was a bath rather than simply a room, for example. There are no traces of a basin, of hydraulic plaster or water channels, but it could nonetheless have been used as a heated bathroom as long as the water

was brought in and poured using movable bowls or basins which have since disappeared. A cistern should be looked for nearby higher up on the hill. Several more or less contemporary houses, including a nice villa in Wadi Musa and the houses az-Zantur, EZ III,<sup>8</sup> EZ IV,<sup>9</sup> also have heated chambers like this one; some have been interpreted as private bathhouses.<sup>10</sup>

In its general plan the paved esplanade (S), composed of a lower central area separated by two steps from a higher surrounding pavement, resembles on a smaller scale that of the courtyard on the north forecourt of the nearby sanctuary below. It, too, comprises a lower esplanade separated by two steps from a higher surrounding part with a portico. The design of the *al-Madhbah* high place in Petra and the nearby courtyard of the sanctuary at Khirbet et-Tannûr,<sup>11</sup> with its two small steps, are also similar. In fact it brings to mind a *theatron*, as already mentioned by al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, but there are several installations that are difficult to interpret. The paving of the pavement and sunken esplanade is crossed by a small open channel, 0.26–0.30 m wide. There does not seem to be remains of any lining, clay channelling or hydraulic mortar. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in spite of its patchy preservation, it must have supplied the central basin. This latter has no drainage hole. If it was filled with a liquid, it had to be bailed out to empty it, but this is how the rock-cut basins are in Petra, for example. The southern end of the channel that crosses the paving seems to abut the face of the vestibule wall (J). It does not turn either east or west. Therefore, it must have been supplied from above. Perhaps a mortar gutter-slide collected runoff water from the roofs and directed it to this reservoir (fig. 15). This plan resembles that of the so-called “Garden triclinium” in Petra, on the high terrace of Wadi Farasa, which has been identified by Schmid as a complex for secular use belonging to a residence.<sup>12</sup> It consists of a hall reached through a deep, rock-cut portico *in antis*, which in turn is preceded by a peristyle in the centre of which there is a buried, vaulted

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<sup>8</sup> Nehmé and Villeneuve 1999 : 62-71.

<sup>9</sup> Kolb 2000 ; Kolb and Keller 2001 : 319.

<sup>10</sup> Augé 2012 forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup> McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Schmid 2003 : 482 and Schmid 2004 : 343-345

cistern. A narrow channel cut in the bedrock links the cistern with the portico (**figs 16 and 17**).

The discovery of the tall, rectangular betyl in room (K), described above, and of another shorter flatter one with a tenon (0.36 x 0.19 x 0.12 m)<sup>13</sup> (**fig. 12b**), found on the esplanade, suggest that some religious services might have taken place on this terrace. We might also suggest that, for example, an altar stood against the north face of the house, above the start of the channel which would thus have collected the liquids from libations or sacrifices. The stepped blocks against the wall of room (J) look like a flight of stairs, but if the supposed missing steps are reconstructed one hits the wall that still exists without reaching the floor level of the room it is meant to reach. As has long ago been suggested by al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, these steps might be better interpreted as a stepped block or dias for the display of betyls along the lines of those found against the cliff faces on the way up Jabal al-Nmayr in Petra,<sup>14</sup> in the many examples illustrated in Dalman's work<sup>15</sup> (**figs 18a and b**), the one on the façade of the temple in Ramm,<sup>16</sup> and the one built near house EZ IV at az-Zantur.<sup>17</sup>

The small portico, several pieces of which have been found, could be visualised in front of room (H), in vestibule (J), in the style of a distyle pronaos *in antis* of a sanctuary (**fig. 19**). It was here that most of these architectural fragments, described above, were found, along with two fragments of a latticework window that might have been used as an oculus (circular window) above the central door of this large room (H). This window (0.47 x 0.66 m) bears red painted decoration suggesting that it was in a sheltered position (**fig. 20**).

Thus, there are several indications that both the southern and northern complexes belonged to one and the same house and were inter-dependent: the threshold of a door between courtyard (A) and corridor (I), the blocked door between room (P) and corridor (M), the furnace

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<sup>13</sup> Bloc 8.242. al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Tholbecq 2011 forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> Dalman 2011 : 125 and 212.

<sup>16</sup> Tholbecq 1997 : 1076.

<sup>17</sup> Kolb and Keller 2002.

supplied from (E) to heat the alcove (O). If our interpretations are correct, this house seems to consist on the south side of three dwelling rooms with paved floors and plastered walls, a stable or cowshed and a large courtyard, and on the north side of a heated chamber, a room which may have sheltered the betyls, a terrace overlooking the main sanctuary and perhaps a large reception room. The installations linked to the esplanade (S) and adjoining rooms (J-vestibule, H-large room, L-room with niche and round basin and K-room with betyl) need further exploration because the interpretations presented here remain too hypothetical. Nevertheless, perhaps we can say that this was the residence of a rich owner, perhaps of the family responsible for the construction of the sanctuary, or which administered its possessions or took care of the religious services.

*P.S.: Archaeological excavations have been conducted in this house in May 2013. The results of this search will be published in an article that will appear soon:*

*DURAND C., AL-MUHEISEN Z., PIRAUD-FOURNET P. et THOLBECQ L. « A public bath-House, a caravanserai and a luxurious villa in Khirbet edh-Dharieh (Tafleh, Jordan) : preliminary report on the 2013 excavation season », ADAJ, 2013.*

## **Captions**

Fig. 1 : Plan of the site of Dharih (by J. Humbert 2004).

Fig. 2 : House V1, the sanctuary and the hills of the Wadi al-Hasa, looking north (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 3 : Plan of house V1 (by A. Omari and P. P.-F. 1996–2007).

Fig. 4 : Aerial view of the house, looking south. (photo H. Fontaine 1996).

Fig. 5 : Esplanade (S) in front of house V1.

Fig. 6 : Façade of room (J) and the upper part of the esplanade (S) deformed by and earthquake (photo P. P.-F. 2007).

Fig. 7 : Corridor (M) and the square notches in the southern wall at the back (photo P. P.-F. 2007).

Fig. 8 : The heated chamber (N-O) looking south, the hypocausts and chimneys for the smoke (photo F. Villeneuve 1993).

Fig. 9a and b : Capital (a) and base (b) of a column (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 10 : Rooms (D) and (E), probably a stable. Remains of mangers both fallen and in situ (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 11 : Oblique reconstruction of the stable in house V1 (by P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 12a and b : The long betyl 13.001 from room (K) (photo P. P.-F. 2007) and the short betyl 8.242 from the esplanade (photo Y. Zu'bi).

Fig. 13 : The niche with round basin in room (L) (photo Y. Zu'bi 1993).

Fig. 14 : Section through the niche with round basin in room (L) (by P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 15 : A first hypothetical reconstruction of the house, looking southwest (by P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 16 : Façade of the “Garden triclinium” in Petra, from the outside (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 17 : Façade of the “Garden triclinium” in Petra, from the inside (photo P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 18a and b : Petra, a) Niche for betyl, b) niche with steps (by Dalman 1908, figs 43 and 135).

Fig. 19 : A second hypothetical reconstruction of the house, looking southwest (by P. P.-F. 2010).

Fig. 20 : Limestone window with latticework, (photo D. Seigneuret 2007 and reconstruction by P. P.-F. 2010).

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