



Fig. 64. Wall with niche, Umm al Hamtha

PETRA: BA'AJA

David F. Graf

University of Miami

The Ba'aja project, conducted in June 2017, consisted of excavations in the vicinity of Ba'aja and a regional survey from Baydha, just north of the site. Ba'aja, which is around 10 km north of Petra, was previously highlighted by Manfred Lindner in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to excavations by the German Archaeological Institute from 1999 to 2010. These efforts did not discover evidence of Lindner's presumed "large Nabataean settlement." A visit to the site in 2016, however, suggested the potential of Ba'aja for Nabataean occupation was more extensive than indicated by the initial investigation, based on the large hydrological system on the adjacent massif associated with a few Nabataean inscriptions.

In 2017, with a team of ten, we began to explore the site and region for more evidence of the Nabataean occupation. Two areas were selected for excavation: (1) the area adjacent to the Ayyubid-Mamluk settlement in the north near the massif where the earlier German survey had discovered some Nabataean pottery and (2) at Wadi Umm Hamtha just 1 km south of Ba'aja, where some niches in a cliff's rock face with some adjacent ruins and a pottery scatter suggested a possible Nabataean farmstead.

Near the Medieval settlement at Ba'aja, the inspection of two adjacent Ottoman buildings revealed that they were constructed almost entirely of recycled Nabataean building stones with the typical diagonal dressing. A sondage between the buildings exposed mixed Nabataean, Roman, and Islamic sherds in the top soil, including some Nabataean painted fine ware. These finds suggest that a Nabataean settlement of some complexity and depth existed at the site, requiring more time and effort to explore than we had initially planned. For this reason, we shifted our focus to the ruins at Umm Hamtha, just north of the waste water treatment plant. It was immediately recognized that the six niches that were initially presumed to be "cultic" were rather

the springs of arches for a structure built against the rock face, based on parallels with other such "niches" elsewhere in the area (Fig. 64). A series of four sondages were plotted where the hypothetical adjoining wall would have been constructed in order to demarcate the outlines of the building. Trench 2 revealed a well-constructed parallel wall ca. 4 m from the rock face and about 0.70 m wide—evidently the supporting opposite wall for the arches. Most of the ashlar blocks of the wall and the arches had been removed. The pottery produced by the sondages included Nabataean fine ware, bowls and a lamp, with evidence of a subsequent Roman and Byzantine occupation. The building was a 12 x 4 m structure with no discernible dividing walls and a single doorway. The primary function of the building appears to have been agricultural storage. A horizontal channel ca. 20 to 30 cm wide cut into the rock face above the arches evidently prevented water from draining directly onto the structure.

During the regional survey, between Baydha and Ba'aja, we encountered other such apparent Nabataean farmsteads scattered across the landscape. Their origins were signaled by adjacent Nabataean inscriptions, betyls, and nephesh. But the most remarkable discovery across this limited region was several dozen wine presses cut into the protruding bedrock (Fig. 65). All evidence indicates their origin to be Nabataean, and these are thus to be added to the 50 or more wine presses already discovered between Baydha and Petra. The impressive hydrological system of the Ba'aja Massif, the scattered Nabataean farmsteads, and the numerous wine presses in the environs suggest that this was prime Nabataean agricultural real estate created in this dry, desolate landscape.



Fig. 65. Wine Press at Khirbet Makata