

What is called the Petra archive or Petra papyri is a group of ca. 140 carbonized papyrus rolls found in 1993 in a room adjacent to the main Byzantine church of Petra. The documents date from the 6th century. They are private papers of a well-to-do local family, mainly financial documents concerning marriage, inheritance, sales, loans and disputes, but also documents connected with taxation. The documents are written in Greek, the administrative language of the Byzantine empire, though they contain a large number of Arabic place-names written in Greek letters, and one text includes three lines written in Latin. They were apparently drawn up in Petra or its immediate surroundings, except for one contract composed in the city of Gaza.

The Petra papyri are one of the most important finds of ancient documentary texts ever made outside of Egypt. Compared with the approximately one million papyrus texts from Egypt, Roman and Byzantine documents found elsewhere have been few and far between. Apart from the Vindolanda writing tablets from Roman Britain, the tablets from the Vesuvian cities, the Bu Njem ostraca from Tunis, the Tablettes Albertini from Vandal Africa, the Ravenna papyri from Ostrogothic and Byzantine Italy, and a few stray texts preserved in Egypt but written elsewhere, documents have so far been found mainly in the Near East. The so-called Babatha archive and other private deeds from the Judean desert date from the 2d century, the Dura papyri and the documents from the Middle Euphrates from the 3d. The nearest parallel to the Petra corpus, both in the date, nature and number of texts, is provided by the Byzantine documents from the town of Nessana, about 100 kilometers northwest of Petra, published in 1958. Seen together, the Nessana and Petra papyri allow a unique glimpse into the life in Palestine during the last century of Byzantine rule.

Of the approximately 140 papyri originally found, not all could be saved and deciphered. Some cannot be opened at all, others yielded only small fragments with little intelligible content. It is presently estimated that around three dozen documents will provide substantial information, though many more will be published as minor documents.

For the publication work, the material was divided into two groups to be worked on by two teams of papyrologists, one from the University of Michigan, headed by Ludwig Koenen, and the other from the University of Helsinki, headed by Jaakko Frösén. The work of the Finnish and American teams has run parallel since 1995. The division of the texts between them took place at a stage when their contents were known only in a most preliminary fashion. The division was thus made mechanically by assigning the even field numbers to the University of Michigan team and the odd field numbers to the Helsinki team, except for Field Number

XXXIV, a large number of roll fragments which were later used to balance the division of the other papyri. Many links between individual texts have emerged later when both teams have worked on the documents and formed a better idea of the nature of the papyri. Consequently, although both teams have worked in cooperation, the division has sometimes appeared rather artificial. For example, some papyri edited by the University of Michigan team could well have been published together with similar documents here. However, it seemed preferable to bring out the first volume according to the original plan and only cite relevant unpublished Petra texts where necessary. The unpublished Petra papyri are referred to by their Inventory number. Attempts will be made to publish related documents more closely together in the future volumes. The last volume is intended to contain a general index and some concluding chapters on the world of the Petra papyri.

Over the course of years, there have appeared a number of preliminary notices on the Petra papyri, on their contents and significance for the history of Transjordan and Byzantine social life. A list of such articles is included on p. xi here. Inevitably, some of the earlier interpretations have been modified as work on the documents has progressed. This applies, e.g., to the conjectural family tree of Theodoros, the main figure of the Petra archive. The resulting contradictions are usually not signalled in this volume. We just generally remind the reader that when statements on the Petra papyri in the present volume are at variance with earlier publications, this text should be taken as reflecting the latest views.

We join the director of the American Center of Oriental Research and of the Petra Church Project in his acknowledgments of all those persons who have helped us in the edition and publication of these papyri. The necessary prerequisite for our work has been the unfailing support of Pierre M. Bikai and Patricia M. Bikai together with all their staff in Amman. To them we express our warmest thanks.

J. FRÖSEN, A. ARJAVA, & M. LEHTINEN