



AN UNDERGROUND TOMB FROM KHIRBET SUBOOR SOUTHEAST PETRA, SOUTHERN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents new evidence concerning the discovery of an ancient tomb in the vicinity of Petra in southern Jordan. The discovery of intact ancient tombs is very rare in the countryside of Petra. Research fieldworks have revealed too many structure sites and very small number of tombs. This paper offers a thorough description to a recently discovered tomb in southern Jordan. It also includes discussion of the dating evidence and the function of such tomb. The tomb is quite significant in terms of its layout, masonry and location. Tombs of this type have not been recorded hitherto in the study area or elsewhere in Jordan.

KEYWORDS: tomb, shrine, Wadi Suboor, Nabataean, rescue excavation, google earth

THE SITE DISCOVERY

The site was first noticed late in 2007, with the aid of Google Earth (Figure 1), in the area just east of al-Tayyibeh. The first author was looking, through Google Earth, for ancient sites in the area southeast Petra.



Figure 1: Google Earth image showing the tomb

At the beginning there was a debate among the authors over the date of the tomb as it looked like a modern structure from the satellite images. The discovery of the site was immediately reported to the Department of Antiquities Office at Ma'an and the director of the office, Hani al-Falahat, decided upon a ground investigation into the site. The authors visited the site early in 2008 and explored its components which appeared to indicate an ancient tomb. It was also noticed that the tomb had been partly damaged by treasure searchers. Hani al-Falahat decided that a salvage excavation or at least a sounding must be carried out. The Department of Antiquities permitted and funded a rescue excavation at the site. The excavation was carried out under the supervision of Hani al-Falahat who was assisted by the other authors together with five workers. The work started on 08/02/2008 and continued for two weeks.

GEOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The site is about 3 km northeast the centre of the modern town of al-Tayyibeh and about 15 km southeast Petra (Figure 2). It can be reached by car using the modern road which heads eastward via Wadi Suboor from the northern part of the town. The site is evidently connected

to an ancient road passing the area and heads southeast. The area where the site is located is called Umm Rujum due to the considerable number of mounds in the area, most of which are clearance piles. The archaeological features at the site were located on relatively flat ground in a hilly area. To the west of the site the hill-sides descend significantly, especially towards Wadi Suboor and the slopes get sheer near the bottom of the valley. The site also has a particular view westward over Wadi Araba. This view, however, is partly blocked once one moves southward or northward from the site.

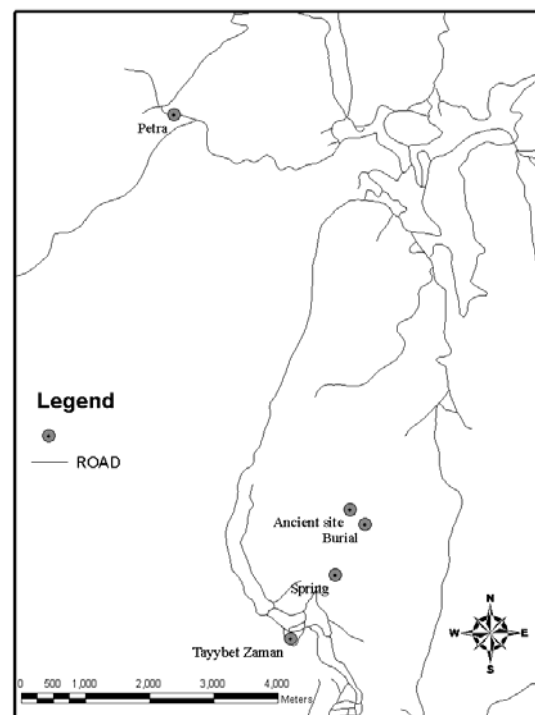


Figure 2: map shows the location of the Tomb at Suboor

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

The tomb at this site is well organized and so are the associated features. Thus, the archaeological features can be divided into two groups according to their positions; surface and underground.

Surface Elements

The first overground element to be noticed is a narrow corridor leading to the courtyard of the tomb. This passageway is 18.80m long and 2.30m wide. It is built of large blocks of limestone (flint). The walls of the corridor on either side

consist of one row and still retain the height of two courses. No mortar or mud was used to fix the blocks, but small stones were used as fillings and to stabilize or wedge the large stones. This feature is linked directly to an ancient road passing the western side of the site. The road can be traced and seen in an aerial image (Figure 1). At the point where the passage opens into the courtyard, no significant elements or additions may be seen to indicate the presence of a door. The second overground element and the first feature to be noticed at the site, especially from the air, is the square enclosure or "curtain wall" that surrounds the tomb and identifies the site. Its stonework is very similar to the masonry of the corridor. The enclosure is square; 25.60m each side, and consists of one row of stones. The wall does not seem to have originally maintained the height of more than two courses. Right in the centre of the enclosed area, or courtyard, lies the tomb (Figure 3).

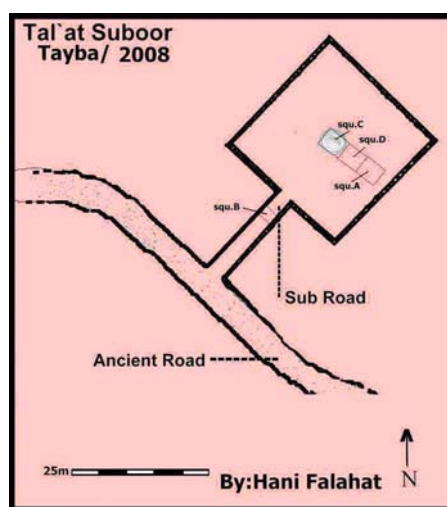


Figure 3: drawing of the site and the associated features besides the excavation trenches

Before initiating the salvage excavation, only a shallow and circular mound could be seen on the ground. Unfortunately, this feature was abused and partly damaged by treasure hunters. They dug right in the centre of this mound and removed some stones (slabs) to get vertical access to the underground tomb chamber. The dimension of this feature is approximately 3m in diameter and it does not rise for more than 50 cm above the ground. The colour of this mound is generally white-to-yellow due to the use of

limestone slabs and because of the soil which was probably extracted from underground to construct the tomb chamber. .

UNDERGROUND FEATURES

The Result of the Rescue Excavation

Without an excavation it would have been too difficult to reach the tomb chamber and understand the layout of the whole tomb. The cavity which was created in the centre of the tomb by treasure hunters helped in deciding where trenches should be located. A slim person slipped through the hole and it was noted that the slabs which covered the tomb extended southward. Consequently, the excavator (Hani Falahat) planned four trenches for digging. Two of them (Squares A and D) were located on the southern edge of the shallow cairn and square C was positioned right on the shallow mound (Figure 3). Square B was placed at the end of the corridor which leads to the courtyard of the tomb site. The most significant result of the excavation is uncovering the true entrance to the tomb in square D. It is very simple and was cut right into the bedrock as a narrow ditch. The bedrock is somehow soft (chalk) and is easily cut. The depth of the ditch (entrance) gradually increases towards the chamber. No steps, cut or built, were found throughout the ditch. A person of normal height cannot stand or walk to reach the door of the tomb because of the slabs above (Figure 4).



Figure 4: photograph of the slabs that cover the access to the tomb chamber

It is therefore believed that this entrance was created just to give access to and from the tomb

chamber during the process of depositing the body of the deceased person. Having entered the tomb chamber, it became obvious that it had been robbed and the floor was almost entirely covered with fallen stones and debris. It is likely that the stones were deliberately taken off the side and rear walls when the tomb was first opened by the treasure hunters. Skeletal remains were not found inside the tomb chamber but some human bones were seen on the surface during the first visit to the site. They were obviously scattered outside the tomb chamber when it was first abused. It is also not clear if associated funeral offerings were looted from the tomb.

The Tomb Chamber

The tomb chamber is a magnificent architectural piece of work and probably unparalleled in the entire region. Its masonry, plan and architecture are completely different from the surface features discussed above. The tomb can be divided into five contiguous parts forming the tomb chamber.

These are as follows: 1- the entrance 2- the tomb box (vault) 3- the two walls above the vault 4- the rear wall 5- the ceiling. They are all constructed of well dressed ashlar of limestone blocks, but the latter vary in size and shape and sometimes in dressing method. The entrance is a rectangular frame of limestone slabs without a door (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Photograph shows the entrance of the tomb

This part appears to have been separately built. The vault is rectangular and the longest

sides are built of variable-sized blocks while the shortest sides are built of one stone each. Its floor is paved with dressed limestone slabs considerably damaged as the treasure searchers attempted to look underneath the floor (Figure 6).



Figure 6: photograph shows the damage in the floor of the vault

The third internal part of the tomb is the two side walls which carry the ceiling. They were constructed directly above the walls of the vault. The first course of each wall was not located immediately above the stones of the vault; instead there is approximately 10 cm between the edges of the two features (Figure 7a and 7b).



Figure 7a: photograph shows the edges of the vault upon which the side walls were constructed

Each wall consists of three courses of limestone blocks of varying size. The ceiling is a significant architectural part of the tomb. It is vaulted and has a half-barrel shape (Figure 8a). The barrel-vaulting is clearly visible in the stone courses and starts immediately in the first course above the side walls (Figure 8b). The ceiling consists of four rows of curved stones of differing sizes. The latter are significant in that

they have soft frames. The rear wall, which appears in figure 8b, is built of well dressed limestone blocks. It consists of four courses, the uppermost of which is vaulted to suit the shape of the ceiling. However, considerable damage affects the blocks of the rear wall, but it is not clear what caused this damage. There are two possible reasons for the fall of some stones from the rear wall. The first could be deliberate damage due to the action of the treasure searchers and the second could be a pressure on the wall from the stones behind it.

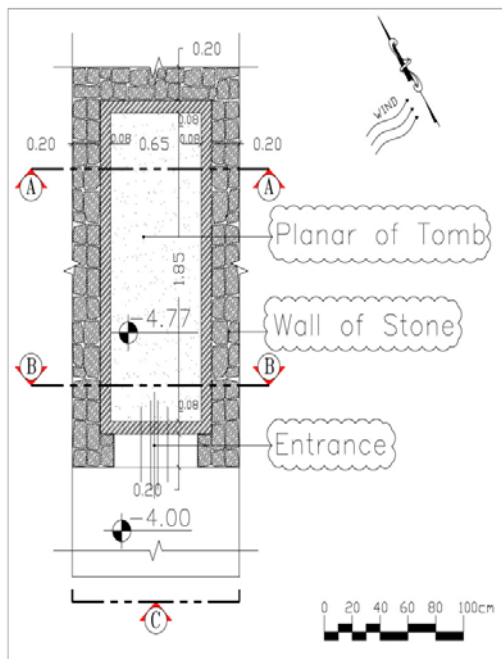


Figure 7b: Top-plan drawing for the tomb chamber (drawn by Ahmed Hasanat)

HOW WAS THE TOMB CONSTRUCTED?

Despite the complicated organization of this tomb and the absence of similar examples, it seems quite reasonable, in the light of the available evidence, to presume that the construction process of the tomb involved several phases. The first phase was certainly choosing the location of the tomb site. The construction of the curtain wall or enclosure and the corridor which links the site to an ancient road could come second or last. The next phase was the digging of a circular hole into the ground to accommodate the tomb. The diameter of the assumed hole should be more than 4m and its depth is likewise. Access to and egress from this

hole was possible through the ditch-like (sloping entrance) which was covered with large slabs in a later phase. The next step after completing the digging of the hole was to build buttress walls on ground level within the hole to protect and support the tomb. The builders of the walls appear to have had accurate measurements of the tomb and knew where it should be constructed. Thus, the assumption here is that they left a specific space to locate the actual tomb.

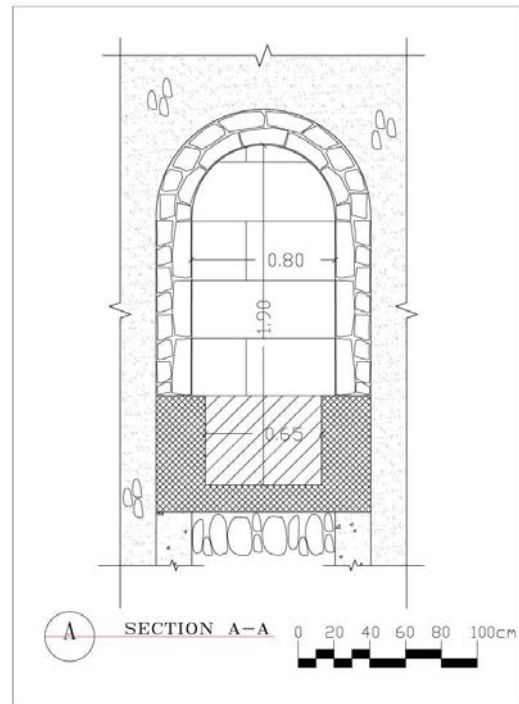


Figure 8a: drawing of the tomb chamber ceiling (drawn by Ahmed Hasanat)

A close investigation to the rear wall reveals that there are large blocks of stones placed behind the well dressed stones of the tomb (see figure 8b).



Figure 8b: photograph shows the rear wall and the ceiling of the tomb

Once the tomb chamber was built, the last phase involved covering the tomb with slabs forming a dome-like feature above the ground. These slabs, although large, would have been

easily located on the buttress walls surrounding the tomb and the pressure of their weight would be distributed over these walls.

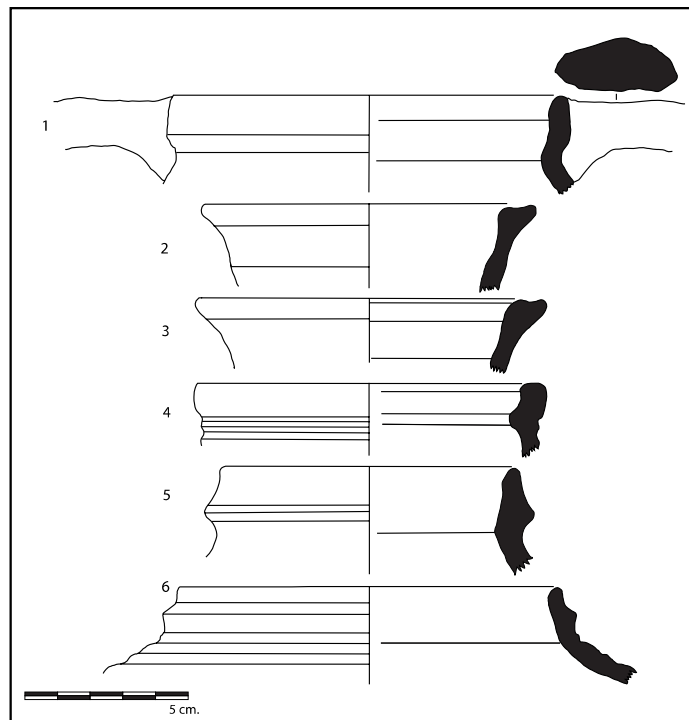


Figure 9: drawing of pottery sherds from Khirbet Suboor

- 1) Interior: 5YR reddish yellow 7/8, core: 2.5 YR light red 7/8, surface: 5YR gray 5/1 (parallel: Stucky *et al* 1994: fig. 15.L) dated to first century AD (1994:287). Diameter: 11cm (jar)
- 2) Exterior, interior 5YR reddish yellow 7/8, core 2.5 pale yellow 7/4 (parallel: none). Diameter: 10.5cm (jar)
- 3) 2.5YR light red 6/8, surface 2.5 YR 6/1, few small black grits (parallel: Stucky *et al* 1994. fig. 16.I) dated to very early second century AD (Stucky *et al* 1994:287); (Gerber 1995:410.. fig. Fig. Dated to end of first/beginning of second century AD) Diameter: 11cm. (bowl)
- 4) interior and exterior 5YR reddish yellow 7/8, core 2.5 pale yellow 7/4, few small black grits (parallel: Stucky *et al* 1994, fig. 16.G), dated to very early second century AD (Stucky *et al* 1994: 287). Diameter: 10cm (jug)
- 5) Interior, exterior and core 5YR reddish yellow 7/8 (parallel: none). Diameter: 9cm (small jar/jug)
- 6) Core 10R light red 6/8. Very small black and white grits. Surface 5YR pinkish white 2/8 (parallel: Gerber 1995. fig. 6) dated to middle and second half of the first century AD (Gerber 1995:409-410). Diameter: 11.8cm. (Storage jar).

DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, the tomb was disturbed by treasure hunters, and consequently many of the dating artifacts, such as bones, pottery, coins and other material culture have been lost. Nothing was uncovered *in situ*. The only dating tool available to help dating the tomb is the pottery sherds. A few pottery sherds were scattered on the surface and on debris inside the

tomb chamber. Some of these sherds bear recent broken edges suggesting that they were intentionally broken by the treasure hunters. The pottery assemblage collected from the site included jars, bowls and jugs. All are of the Nabataean coarse ware and dated on a comparative basis to the second half of the first century AD (Figure 9). However, this may indicate some human activities at or near the site during

the Nabataean period but does not necessarily mean that the tomb is Nabataean. It should be borne in mind that the pottery sherds discussed here are not stratified and it is well known that Nabataean pottery sherds can be found anywhere in the hinterland of Petra.

One serious question arises here regarding the time period of this tomb since the collected artifacts from the site are not enough to date the tomb and other datable materials such as bones, inscriptions or sarcophagi do not exist at the site. The lack of parallel examples is another difficulty. The fieldwork research conducted in the vicinity of Petra in the past did not record a single site that may resemble the site under discussion (Tholbeq 2001, Abudanh 2004)

Geographically and historically, the region where the tomb is located was part of the Nabataean realm till its annexation by Rome in AD 106 (Kennedy 2004: 37; Bowersock 1970: 39). However, the region continued to flourish throughout the Roman and Byzantine periods. Therefore, it is quite possible that the tomb was constructed during one of these periods. Considering the fact that the tomb is located in the vicinity of Petra and that the region significantly flourished during the Nabataean period, one would argue that the tomb is Nabataean as the first choice.

Scholarly speaking, much attention is given to the tombs at the Nabataean capital at Petra and other major sites throughout Jordan and less attention is given to the countryside of Petra. However, despite the large geographical extent of the Nabataean state which included lands in the Negev, in southern Syria as well as in northwest Arabia (Kennedy 2004: 37-38), very few intact Nabataean tombs have yet been excavated. The evidence, however, suggests notable diversity in the Nabataean tombs. The excavated evidence in Petra (Bikai and Perry 2001; Perry 2002; Johnson *et al.* 2007 and Horsfield & Horsfield 1941); in Wadi Musa ('Amr and al-Momani 2001); in the Negev, Mampsis in particular (Negev 1986, 76-80) in Khirbet Gazon near the Dead Sea (Politis 1998; 1999; Politis and Granger-Taylor 2003) and in Khirbet ed-Dharih (Lenoble *et al.* 2001), all suggest three forms of tombs at the Nabataean sites. These include: 1- Monumental rock-cut tombs with elaborated

facades such as those of Petra and Madain Salih (Mackenzie 1990); 2- Tomb in a communal shaft tomb, like these of 'Petra North Ridge' (Bikai and Perry 2001; Perry 2002) and Wadi Musa ('Amr and al-Momani 2001). The Wadi Musa burial is communal tomb, the walls of which contains 'box-holes' built of stone slabs and likewise the tombs at Khirbet ed-Dharih (Lenoble *et al.* 2001), and finally 3- Single shaft or cist tombs like those of Khirbet Gazon (Politis 1998; 1999; Politis and Granger-Taylor 2003); Wadi Mataha at Petra (Johnson *et al.* 2007) and at Mampsis in the Negev (Negev 1986, 76-80). Other than these excavated examples our information on Nabataean funeral customs and tomb practices and rituals is still very poor. However, the general idea of Nabataean tomb customs is that there is a stress on family grouping of the same ancestral descendants in tomb practices, *i.e.* via a family tomb. For example, the tomb inscriptions of Madain Salih indicate that each tomb was founded by a specific person, for himself, his children and their descendants (Healey 1993). The same conclusion can be applied to the Petra tomb facades. Further more, non-monumental Nabataean tombs excavated in Petra and other Nabataean sites also suggest family tombs. For example, the onomasticons of the Nabataean *nefeshes* at Khirbet Ed-Dharih suggest that the tombs are all related to a group of the same descendants or an extended family.

Furthermore the group of single shaft tombs of Wadi Mataha at Petra has also been suggested to be related to an extended family or a group with the same ancestor (Johnson *et al.* 2007: 344). Still further to say, despite this diversity in the forms of the Nabataean tombs, the general impression of the tomb evidence suggests a direct inhumation process, rather than any other type of tomb (Perry 2002, 265-266; 269-270 for further discussion). If the tomb of Khirbet Suboor is Nabataean, the evidence would provide us with different Nabataean social and ritual phenomenon in that the tomb is singular but semi-monumental. As it is mentioned above, the general indication of Nabataean tombs is that there was a stress on family ties via a family tomb. Here one should mention that all the above mentioned Nabataean

tombs came from urban or semi-urban sites. The Khirbet Suboor tomb, nevertheless, is a rural site at the periphery of the main urban center at Petra. However, there are some common features which one may notice at the tombs of Petra and at Khirbet Suboor tomb. The first thing to be noted is the enclosure which encircles the tomb at Khirbet Suboor. At Petra, there are dedicatory inscriptions associated with tombs talking about the presence of a courtyard or a space that is legally associated to the tomb and part of it. The enclosure at Khirbet Suboor tomb seems to have been deliberately constructed to define the site and its precise dimensions indicate legal issue. The space within this enclosure was most likely used to conduct ritual rites at what appears to be a shrine. The rock-cut tombs at Petra are located on either side of the main street where the traffic can see and probably show respect to the tomb's builder and owner.

Likewise at Khirbet Suboor, the tomb is linked to an ancient road passing the area through a well-built corridor. This organization clearly suggests that the traffic used to visit this tomb and probably read some prayers. It also suggests that the deceased was a figure in his community or probably had a religious position. The authors of this paper do not exclude the idea of ancestral importance in the location of tombs amongst the Nabataeans, but would say that Nabataean rural communities, at least in the case of Khirbet Suboor, appear to have expressed this idea through an ancestral shrine. It is well known in ethnographical records and anthropological studies that pastoral and rural communities have strong emphasis on genealogical decent, that they have long genealogical lists of names, while urban societies place less emphasis on genealogical descent (Salzman 1980: 106-108).

The other period during which the tomb may have been constructed is the Roman. The Romans came to the region in AD 106 and annexed the Nabataean state. This act led to the establishment of the Roman province of Arabia. The region continued to flourish after the annexation and many of the Nabataean traditions continued to exist. The Nabataean traditions of pottery manufacturing for instance remained in

use up to the fifth century AD according to some scholars ('Amr 2004; Politis 2007: 187-199) and many of the sites recorded in the areas around Petra show continuity from the Nabataean into the Roman and Byzantine periods (Abudanh 2006). Thus, it is also quite possible that the tomb at Khirbet Suboor was founded during the period when the region was under the Roman control. Dozens of Roman and Byzantine tombs were found and excavated in the Decapolis region in northwest Jordan (Homès-Fredericq and Hennessy 1989), at Hesban (Waterhouse 1998) and at the site of Yasileh near Irbid (Al-Muheisen 1991: 341-346; Khrais 1997). The tombs at the latter site were cut into chalk rocks and discovered in 1988 (Khrais 1997: 25).

Four types of tombs were documented at the Yasileh and dated to the Roman period (Khrais 1997: 25-52 and 90). Nevertheless, none of the four types of tombs at Yasileh resembles the type of the tomb at Khirbet Suboor. Six types of Roman and Byzantine tombs were also encountered at the necropolis of Hesban (Waterhouse 1998: 21-108). Again, none of these types is similar to the typology of the tomb at Khirbet Suboor. In 1998, Krug published an up-to-date catalog containing information about the different topology of Roman-Byzantine tombs in Jordan. The catalog, beside the six types of tombs found at Hesban, included two more types and had a total of eight tomb types (Krug 1998: 135-171). The catalog included too the tombs discovered at the Decapolis towns of Gerasa, Gadara, Abila and Pella (Krug 1998: see tables no. 9.1, 9.2, 9.3 and 9.4). However, the tomb of Khirbet Suboor is once more not applicable to the eight types of Roman and Byzantine tombs that Krug classified throughout Jordan. And what may complicate any attempt to date this tomb is the lack of data regarding death practices and burial customs in southern Jordan during the Roman period. Finally, there is no archaeological evidence from the site hinting that the tomb was built during the Roman period or after AD 106. Nevertheless, there is still a possibility that the tomb was made during the Roman period according the Nabataean traditions.

In respect to the Byzantine period, it is less likely that the tomb was constructed during the Byzantine period (the fifth or sixth centuries AD). The tomb at Khirbet Suboor does not preserve any sign indicating Christian death practices. Throughout Jordan, many Byzantine tombs and mass graves were documented (Krug 1998).

The majority of these tombs could be securely dated since they contain datable materials and have symbols pointing out the time period during which they were constructed. Crosses, epitaphs, Greek inscriptions and grave stones are very common symbols in association with Byzantine tombs (i.e. Nabulsi *et al* 2008: 203-207). None of these symbols were found at the tomb of Khirbet Suboor.

CONCLUSION

The overground organization and the underground architecture of the tomb at Khirbet Suboor are quite significant. None of the an-

cient tombs which have been documented throughout Jordan is similar in its general layout and architecture to the tomb at Khirbet Suboor. The architecture of the tomb indicates that the deceased was a very important person in his society and the tomb connection to an ancient road and the enclosure suggest that it may have been a shrine or an ancestral tomb. However, there is a problem concerning the time period during which this tomb was constructed since datable materials, apart from some surface pottery sherds, were not found at the site. The authors suspect three periods: the Nabataean, the Roman and the Byzantine according to the historical and archaeological context. None of these periods is strongly present at the site, nevertheless; the authors argue that the tomb is most likely Nabataean on the basis of the pottery evidence, its architecture and its location in the hinterland of Petra, the capital of the Nabataean realm.

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