

## A note on an alleged Nabataean flower pot painting from Mada'in Salih

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A painting representing a flower pot was recently published by Mohammad Al-Daire and Ahmad Al-Abodi in *Adumatu* 34, 2016\*. The authors “discovered” it during a visit to Mada'in Salih in 2010, undertaken during the King Saud university tenth excavation season at Khuraybah, ancient Dadan, near al-'Ulâ. The painting is said to be located in Jabal Ethlib, northeast of the site, an area reserved to the meetings of the Nabataean fraternal societies. More precisely, it is said to be above tomb IGN 11 (Jausen and Savignac A5). The authors interpret the painting as being Nabataean and offer a long development on the representations of flowers in Antiquity in general and in the Nabataean realm in particular. They compare it, for instance, with the paintings of the so-called painted *biclinium* (a room with two benches for meals taken collectively) in the Sîq al-Bârid, north of Petra, Brünnow No. 849.

Not much of this, however, is right, and the purpose of this short note is both to correct inaccuracies in the description and refute the suggested interpretation.

I have long known the existence of this painted flower pot, which is actually not located in Jabal Ithlib but in Jabal al-Mahjar, i.e. further west. Jabal al-Mahjar

is the northernmost area of Madâin Sâlih where Nabataean tombs are carved in the rock. It refers to a group of four rather elongated sandstone outcrops (**fig. 1**) all orientated north-norhtwest, south-southeast. The toponym Jabal al-Mahjar does not appear on the maps drawn by Jausen and Savignac. Indeed, the only toponyms which are roughly associated with the area are Qaṣr Fahad and Qaṣr Ḥalaf, probably two different names<sup>(1)</sup> for the same modern building, a small tower built on top of one of the outcrops (the western one). As for the toponym Jabal al-Mahjar, it is used on the maps of Madâin Sâlih drawn by the French National Geographic Institute (IGN) in 1978-1979 (sheets nos. 3 and 6). Mahjar means “quarry” in Arabic, and this toponym is particularly adapted to the area, which is characterized by the presence of several quarries, some probably ancient (**fig. 2**, Mah28), while others are certainly modern (**fig. 3**, Mah32). The white sandstone of Jabal al-Mahjar certainly provided a building material of good quality, as did the sandstone of Jabal Ethlib, where several quarries, all ancient, have been recorded.

The flower pot is painted roughly in the middle of the quarry face numbered Mah27 (see **fig. 1**), on an artificial terrace along the

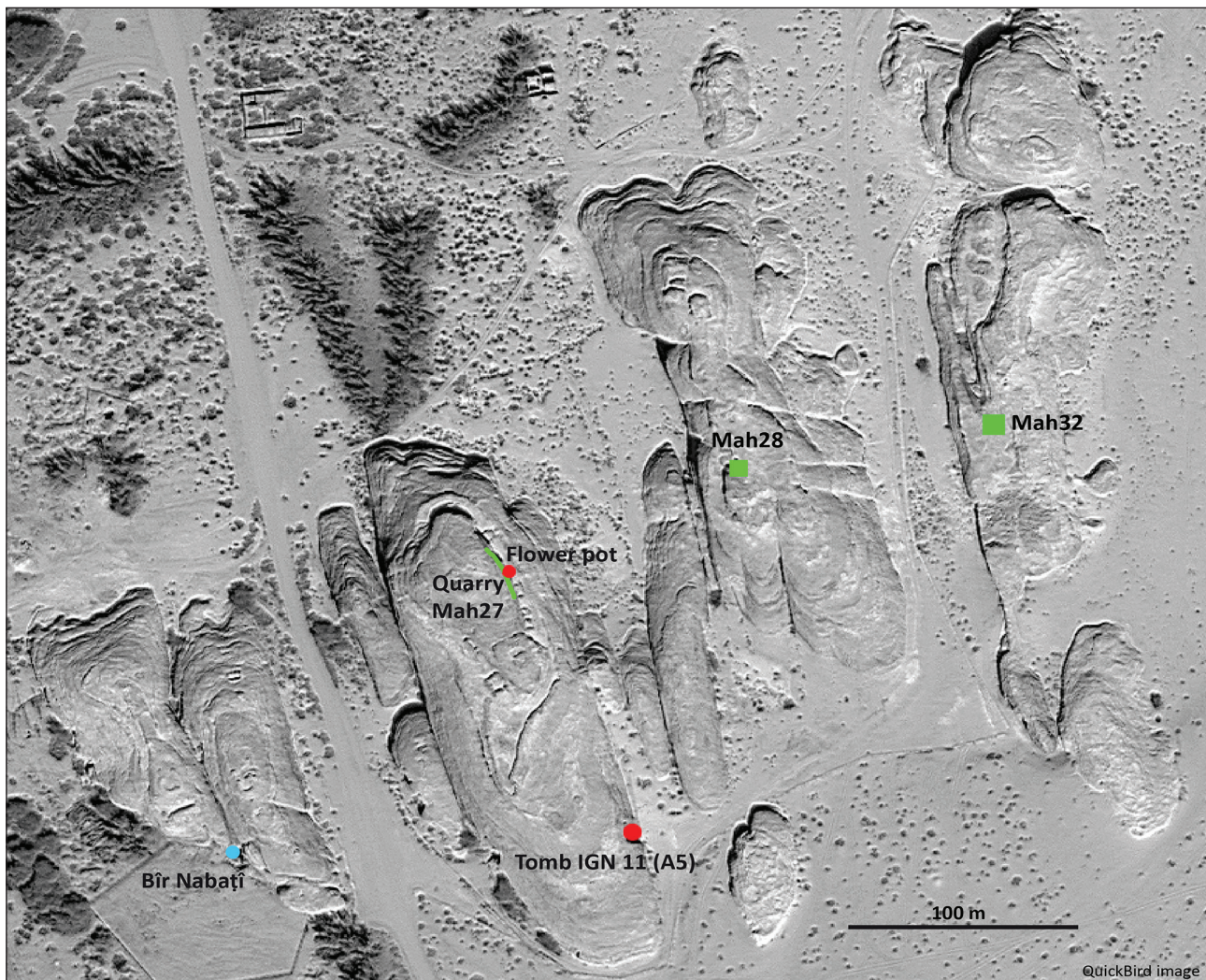


Fig. 1. Satellite image showing the location of the elements mentioned in the text in Jabal al-Mahjar.

eastern flank of the second Jabal al-Mahjar (starting from the west). It is no way related to the Nabataean tomb IGN 11, which is more than 100 m further south and below. The pot is painted on a quarry face (fig. 4), which means that the date of the latter gives it a *terminus post quem*. A quick examination of the quarry and its surroundings shows that it is certainly not ancient. This is evidenced by the traces left in the quarry face by dynamite sticks. These are about one meter long and placed at regular intervals. The

flower pot was obviously painted *after* the rock were blown up, perhaps by the people (guards?) who dwelt in the small dry stone houses built on the terrace and elsewhere on top of the outcrop. This outcrop and the one to the west are indeed covered with dry stone shelters and dry stone protective walls with arrow slits. A line of stones laid on the ground forms a mosque with a *mihrâb* in the middle which is particularly well preserved. While I was taking photographs on the terrace, I found a cartridge case





**Fig. 2. Probable ancient quarry Mah28. Note the traces of the wedges on the terrace.**

with an inscription in Arabic letters on its bottom. It reads “Mauser” and the date 1329 (AD 1911), i.e. four years after the opening of the al-Ḥijr railway station. It is well known that the Mauser rifles (Gewehr 93?) equipped the Ottoman army and it is likely that soldiers were on guard on top of this outcrop. The railway is only 750 m west of the outcrop, but the latter forms a high point from which it was very easy to monitor the surroundings.

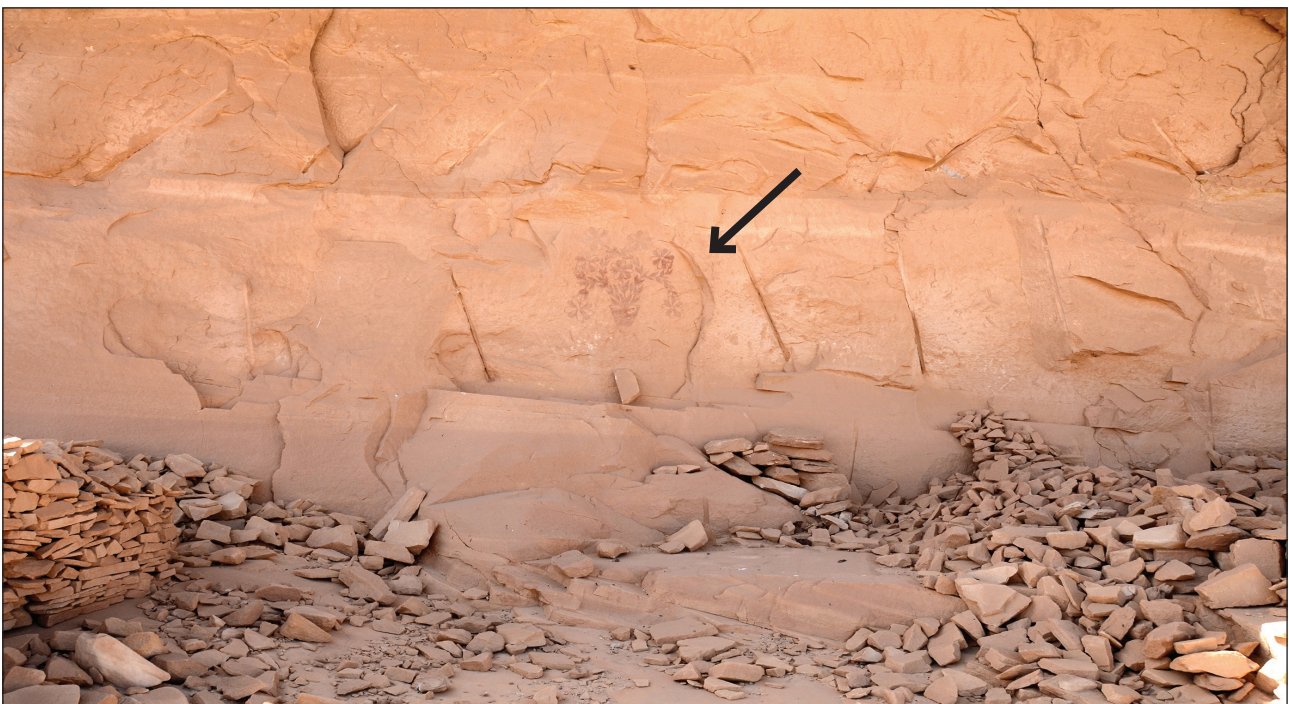
The only conclusion one can draw is that the

painting of the flower pot is not Nabataean but modern, and that its *terminus post quem* is given by the quarry on which it is drawn. The date of the latter is not known precisely, but the Mauser cartridge makes it very likely that it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In conclusion, I would finally say that it is always very important, in archaeology, to look at the context in which the monuments and other remains appear, as it can save one from misinterpretations.





**Fig. 3. Modern quarry Mah32. The blocks are just thrown down from the terrace.**



**Fig. 4. The flower pot in context. Note the traces left by the dynamite sticks.**

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### Notes

\* "Nabataean Rock Paintings at Higra (Mada'in Salih) Flower Vase Painting of Jabal Ethlib", **Adumatu** Issue No. 34, July 2016). (Editors).

(1) Used in 1907 map, in vol. 1, pl. III, and in the 1909 map, in the Atlas, pl. XXXVII, respectively.