Ancient City of Petra Tombs Reveal 61 Burials and Islamic Gold Medallion

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Archaeologists have made two major tomb discoveries at the ancient city of Petra in southern Jordan.

They discovered a rock-cut tomb that contained the skeletal remains of 61 individuals, along with a wealth of wooden artefacts, animal bones and ceramics.

The second discovery was made at a place called tomb 676. While excavating it archaeologists found a gold medallion with an Islamic inscription on it. The find dates to long after the tomb was abandoned.

“This object was placed in the tomb in a later period - perhaps as a way of warding off evil coming from the tomb,” said Professor David Johnson, of Brigham Young University in Utah, who led the team that made both tomb finds. He has been working in Petra for nearly three decades.

Each of the tombs date back about 2,000 years, to a time when the city was prosperous. At that time Petra was ruled by a people called the Nabataeans – an Arabic people who made the city the centre of their kingdom. Petra's location made it a natural place to do business with people coming from Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Romans were aware of the city's wealth. In the first century BC, Plutarch wrote that they sent an army, led by general Pompeius Magnus, to move against the city, forcing its rulers to obey Rome –

*The king of the Arabs near Petra, who had hitherto despised the power of the Romans, now began to be in great alarm at it, and sent letters to him promising to be at his commands.*

The city's wealth is reflected in its architecture. Its inhabitants built buildings into the rock cliffs themselves - creating spectacular facades - like those seen in this article's pictures. The Romans would return in AD 106, eliminating Petra's local rulers for good and making the city part of the Roman Empire.

Today Petra is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a major tourist attraction. Hollywood has taken notice and part of the 1989 film
The tombs are located in an area called Wadi Matala – located on the northeast fringe of the city. It is “outside the major city, just barely outside, so it’s kind of a suburb,” said Professor Johnson. It is an area characterized by rocky valleys, small knolls and sandstone in red, purple and yellow colors.

“We found a very strange artefact...”

Tomb 676 was likely a tomb for the wealthy - with a facade that was carved into the cliff itself. “The bigger tombs, the ones that have a facade, would have been upper class,” said Professor Johnson.

Inside the team excavated two of the tomb’s 15 chambers. One of them turned out to be an area used for ablation – ritual washing. The other contained the skeleton of an adult female - that's where the gold medallion with Islamic inscription was found.

“It was placed above the grave – not in the grave itself,” said Johnson. It was put “in a crack, in the covering stone.”

Islam didn't exist at the time this tomb was created – in fact it wouldn't be around for another 600 years.

That wasn't all. The team also found items that would have been used as votive offerings - a wooden spindle whorl, an arrow shaft and even an item that “looks like a walking stick.”

Outside, in front of the facade, the team found the remains of a stone platform. It's two meters high and 10 meters by 10 meters wide. "The excavated squares indicate a large, solid platform forming a plaza in front of Tomb 676," said Johnson in a report recently published in the American Journal of Archaeology. Other platforms have been found at Petra, they may have served a religious purpose.

The discovery of the gold medallion hasn't appeared in a scholarly publication yet and, as such, Johnson didn't want to release a picture or translation at this time.
One Tomb, 61 Burials

The other tomb is smaller and less elaborate (with no facade) but contains an enormous number of burials. To get inside you have to climb two meters up a rock wall, using handholds cut into the side.

Inside the tomb there are 12 “loculi” – a term archaeologists use to describe the narrow, one meter deep, chambers that have been cut into the rock. Each of these chambers holds several skeletons.

The tomb “was pretty full, there wasn’t really any space left to cut any more loculi,” said Professor Johnson.

In total the tomb contains 41 adults, nine adolescents and 11 children. They would have been interred between the late 1st century BC and the late 1st century AD – a 100 year time period.

It’s likely that everyone in this tomb was related – with those most closely related being buried in the same loculi. “Like a clan group of people being buried together,” said Johnson. He said that inscriptions found in other Nabataean tombs show this practice existed.

The Nabataeans used a technique called “secondary burial” to bury the dead. It’s common throughout the ancient world – but quite grisly to describe. “They would expose the body out in the open and would then gather the bones up and carry them back to the tomb,” said Johnson. “Sometimes they lost various parts of the bones in the transfer process.”

A Middle Class Lifestyle

Professor Johnson said that it’s likely that the people of this tomb would have been members of Petra’s middle class. While this tomb is not as wealthy as tomb 676 it was still nicer than the open air tombs which Petra’s poor were buried in.

Skeletal analysis backs up this idea. “Most of these people were probably not engaged in hard labour situations,” said Johnson. Although that’s not to say that they didn’t spend some time out in the rocky terrain. It’s easy to break a bone in Petra and “there’s evidence of a lot of fractures” from the skeletons in the tomb. Also “a lot of them show evidence of arthritis – which may be an occupational thing from climbing around on the rocks.”
Rituels

The team has found evidence for several rituals that took place in this middle class tomb.

It seems that the family members held an annual funerary meal to honour the dead. This may have included “the breakage of pottery that was used in the ritual meal and (then) being placed in the tomb,” said Johnson.

Indeed many different kinds of ceramics were found inside. Johnson wrote in the *American Journal of Archaeology* that:

"Recovered ceramic shards included black wares, red wares with tan, yellow, and black slips, fine red ware bowls and cups, Nabataean dark red painted thin ware plate terra sigillata, Nabataean plain orange ware bowls and plates, brown drip-painted jars, and a Hellenistic black ware fusiform unguentaria."

Quite the treasure trove of pottery!

Another ritual the team found evidence for is the use of animal parts as tomb offerings. Inside the tomb the team found the remains of snakes, falcons, birds, goats and a paw that may be from a dog, fox or jackal.

It’s possible that the goats and birds were consumed in the ritual feast before being put in the tomb cave. The other animals were likely killed, chopped apart, and some of their remains put in the cave.

But why would they do this?

Professor Johnson said that these animal parts would have been proxies for deities that the Nabataeans worshipped. “For example the snake is associated traditionally with the sun god, the falcon is associated with Horus,” he said. Johnson added that the dog paw may actually be that of a jackal – an animal associated with Anubis.

You may have noticed that Horus and Anubis are Egyptian gods. Petra’s location as a place of trade meant that its culture was influenced by many lands including Greece, Rome and, yes, Egypt. That influence can be seen in the architecture which its inhabitants created and the gods whom they worshipped.

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"Each individual that came to the funeral perhaps would bring an offering and place it in the tomb"

Images of the Gods

“I also think that they were bringing votive offerings to the individuals to have in the tomb,” said Professor Johnson. "Images of deities associated with the afterlife and the resurrection."

These include nearly 500 wooden artefacts. “Most of them are small and seem to be carved in various ways,” said Johnson. One is like a totem pole. It has the image of a deity carved onto a stick. Another is painted and has an image of the god “Dhusares,” a Nabataean male deity commonly seen in Petra. He may have been god of the royal family.

A common image seen in this tomb is that of the Egyptian god Harpocrates, “sometimes called Horus of the child – and represent..."
the rising sun, the resurrecting sun," said Johnson.

So how might this process have worked? How do you bring a votive offering before the deceased? Johnson envisions a process similar to how a Jewish funeral works today – where each individual places a stone at the grave.

“It probably occurred during the actual burial process,” he said. “Each individual that came to the funeral perhaps would bring an offering and place it in the tomb.”

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Owen Jarus is a freelance writer based in Toronto, Canada. He has written articles on archaeology for a variety of media outlets including The Canadian Press newswire (CP), U of T Magazine, The Mississauga News and The Guelph Mercury. Education: BA from the University of Toronto in History, Geography and Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations.