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# Edward Lear in Petra\*

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It seems no work of Man's creative hand,  
By labor wrought as wavering fancy planned;  
But from the rock as if by magic grown,  
Eternal, silent, beautiful, alone!

Match me such a marvel save in Eastern clime,  
A rose-red city half as old as Time.

(J.W. Burgon, "Petra,"  
Newdigate Prize Poem, 1840)

The ancient rock-bound city of Petra captured the imagination of the Victorians. Dean Burgon's famous prize poem about a place he had never seen has made the city rose-red for generations of armchair travelers. Although the Crusaders had built castles in the vicinity of Petra, the city, which lies today in the southern part of the kingdom of Jordan, disappeared completely from the books and itineraries of Europeans. Petra was known from the ancient Greek and Latin texts to have been the capital of the Nabataean Arabs, famed for their commercial activity in transporting the spices and incense of south Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> But until 1812 no one in the West had ever seen the city or even knew where it was located.

Posing as a Muslim, the Swiss traveler Johann Ludwig Burckhardt managed to persuade the suspicious Arabs of Transjordan to convey him to an ancient site of which he had heard fabulous reports. He was led into Petra in August of 1812 through the narrow defile that is called the Siq and remains today the principal access to the city. Burckhardt penetrated far enough into Petra to see the great tombs of the eastern cliffs. In his account of his journey he said modestly and correctly, "It appears very probable that the ruins . . . are those of the ancient Petra."<sup>2</sup>

Burckhardt's discovery incited a succession of scholars and adventurers to make the dangerous journey into the Nabataean capital. Most

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\*Read 10 November 1989

<sup>1</sup> For overviews of the city and its people, see I. Browning, *Petra* (London, 1973); *Die Nabatäer*, Erträge einer Ausstellung im Rheinischen Landesmuseum Bonn 24. Mai - 9. Juli 1978 (Bonn, 1981); G.W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1983); M. Lindner (ed.), *Petra und das Königreich der Nabatäer*, 4th ed. (Munich, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> J.L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London, 1822), 431.

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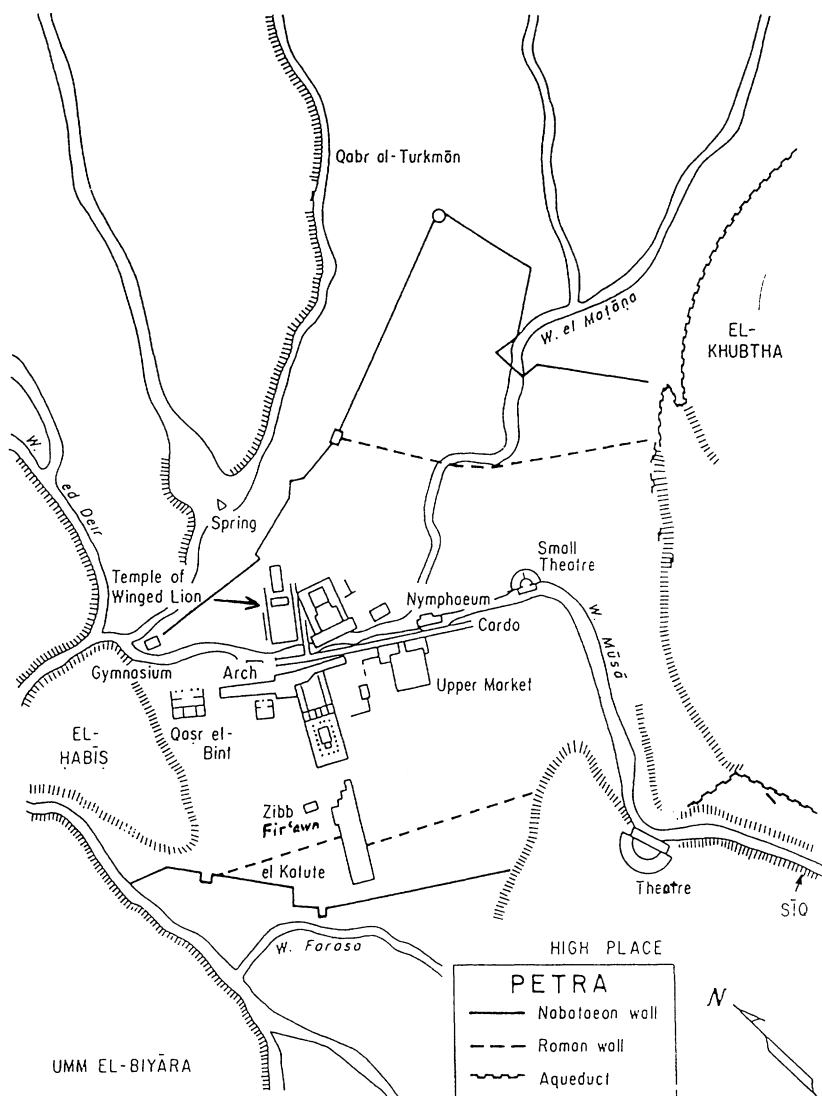


FIGURE 1. Map of Petra

travelers went there from Jerusalem by way of Hebron and the northern Negev, on across the steamy Wadi Araba south of the Dead Sea and into the mountains of Edom. Important images of the city created by Léon de Laborde were widely disseminated and widely admired;<sup>3</sup> but, as the excellent American traveler Edward Robinson, from the Union Theolog-

<sup>3</sup> Léon de Laborde, *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée* (Paris, 1830), recording a journey made in 1828. For Laborde's view of the Siq, with a magnificent high arch (now lost) over the defile, see most conveniently Browning, *Petra* (n. 1), 114.

ical Seminary in New York, observed when he made his visit in 1838,<sup>4</sup> Laborde's drawings were often seriously inaccurate. For example, of Laborde's depiction of the great theater at Petra, Robinson wrote, "This Laborde has given with a good general effect, though not with great exactness."<sup>5</sup> It was not until 1860 that Francis Frith took the first photographs of Petra, and they show eloquently how right Edward Robinson was in censuring Laborde.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years reports of visits to Petra in the nineteenth century have been systematically collated and studied in order to recover features, remains, and vegetation that have long since disappeared.<sup>7</sup> Yet curiously one visitor to the city, who not only described his experiences in detail but also made drawings of several parts of the city, has been completely neglected by students of Nabataean civilization. In a register of all visitors to Petra that was made in the early part of this century—a register that includes every known graffito scratched before 1902—one name is conspicuously absent.<sup>8</sup> It is the name of Edward Lear.

Best known as the incomparable writer of nonsense verse but also a serious artist and world traveler, Lear went to Petra in 1858.<sup>9</sup> For this amiable but sad man, who suffered throughout his life from epileptic seizures, the journey into Petra was anything but easy. And once he was there his visit was cut short by local tribesmen who importuned him for money and robbed him of much of what he had brought with him. In a letter written to a patron a little over a month after he left the city, Lear remarked rather testily, "Of my own mishaps at Petra you perhaps have heard how above two hundred of them came down on me, and everything which could be divided they took. My watch they returned to me—but all money, handkerchiefs, knives, etc. were confiscated . . . English people must submit to these things *because we have no influence in Syria or Palestine nor in the East generally*. I should like to hear of a French party being stopped or murdered—the Arabs (and Turks) know too well that neither French nor Austrians can be touched with impunity."<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless Lear was able to bring back a collection of drawings and to write subsequently an enchanting account of his journey to the Nabataean capital, an account that was not published until April of 1897,

<sup>4</sup> E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Years 1838 and 1852*, 2nd ed. (London, 1856).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, (n. 4), 134.

<sup>6</sup> A Frith photograph of the theater may be seen in Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, (n. 1), plate 5.

<sup>7</sup> The first collations of the travelers' reports and still perhaps the most valuable are those of R. Brünnow and A. von Domaszewski in each of the three volumes of their pioneering work, *Die Provincia Arabia* (Strassburg, 1904-1905-1909).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, (n. 7), vol. III, pp. 192-94 ("Verzeichnis der Besucher von Petra").

<sup>9</sup> For the general context of Lear's visit, see the authoritative biography by Vivien Noakes, *Edward Lear: The Life of a Wanderer* (London, 1985), 125-29.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Lear, *Selected Letters*, ed. Vivien Noakes (Oxford, 1988), p. 154.

nearly a decade after his death.<sup>11</sup> Lear's narration of his journey is very precise in its topographical detail. It allows one to follow him step by step in the course of his progress through Petra and to identify exactly the places in which he did the drawings that survive today. Biographers of Lear, unacquainted with the site, have understandably failed to recognize the scholarly value of this document. We can see nineteenth-century Petra through Lear's own eyes, and that in itself is an uncommon privilege. Furthermore, what we see is a Petra that is no more.

Lear prepared himself for his journey through a careful study of Edward Robinson's travel narrative, and in Hebron he actually succeeded in engaging the same Arab guide to Petra that had led Robinson twenty years before.<sup>12</sup> Since the local tribes were known to take advantage of travelers who tried to enter the city through the narrow entrance of the Siq, Robinson's guide and Lear's brought him in over the mountains from the southwest. On 13 April of 1858 he had his first glimpse of the city from its western extremity. In his journal he wrote, "Reaching the open space whence the whole area of the old city and the vast eastern cliff are fully seen, I own to having been more delighted and astonished than I had ever been by any spectacle."<sup>13</sup> There were far more ancient remains on the surface of the city in its central part than there are now. Lear, like other travelers, reported that he saw "innumerable stones, ruined temples, broken pillars and capitals," and so on.<sup>14</sup>

From the west he moved eastward toward the great rockhewn tombs. He was stunned, as all visitors are, not only by the architectural magnificence of these tombs but by the colors of the stone. Lear wrote,

Wonderful is the effect of the east cliff as we approach it with its colours and carved architecture, the tint of the stone being brilliant and gay beyond my anticipation. "Oh master," said Giorgio (who is prone to culinary similes) [he was, after all, Lear's cook on the journey], "we have come into a world where everything is made of chocolate, ham, curry powder, and salmon."<sup>15</sup>

Lear and his little party pressed on still farther to the east, approaching the point at which the Siq opens out into the city. Lear went a little way into the interior of the narrow passage and then turned around to come out again and face the magnificent monument which all visitors

<sup>11</sup> "A Leaf from the Journals of a Landscape Painter," *Macmillan's Magazine*, April 1897, pp. 410-30. Lear died in January 1888.

<sup>12</sup> Lear, *ibid.*, 411: "Iri came my dragoman Abdel with various Arabs, and lastly no less a person than the Sheikh of the Jehaleen himself, no other than Abou Daouk or Defr Alla, the guide to Petra of Robinson in 1838." Cf. Robinson, *Biblical Researches*, p. 95: "The following morning, Friday, as we were sitting after breakfast in our tent, we were somewhat surprised to see the head Sheikh of the Jehâlin, Defa' Allah . . . We now made a bargain with him in the presence of Elias."

<sup>13</sup> Lear, "A Leaf From the Journals," p. 421. He passed by way of "the solitary column which stands sentinel-like over the heaps of ruins around": this is the object known locally by the rude name of Zibb Fir'awn.

<sup>14</sup> Lear, *ibid.*, 421. These remains appear to be those registered by Brünnow-von Domszewski, *Die Provincia*, vol. I, as nos. 407 and 421.

<sup>15</sup> Lear, "A Leaf From the Journals," p. 422.

behold with amazement on emerging from the narrow ravine, the so-called treasury, or Khazneh. "I turned round," he wrote, "to see the effect of the farfamed Khazne or rock fane which is opposite this end of the ravine, a rose-coloured temple cut out in the side of the mountain, its lower part half hidden in scarlet blossom, and the whole fabric gleaming with intense splendour within the narrow cleft of the dark gorge."<sup>16</sup> Lear's drawing of the Khazneh from just inside the aperture of the Siq conveys the enchantment of the place, even if it does not accurately represent what one can see from inside the Siq. This hitherto unpublished drawing is one of three from Petra that are now in the Lear collection at the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

The Houghton drawings, together with one other, of which the whereabouts is now unknown, document perfectly Lear's own account of his artistic activity on that first day in Petra. From the Khazneh he went back westwards to work on what he called "the whole view of the valley looking eastward to the great cliff." He describes himself as drawing "in the bed of the stream among its flowering shrubs."<sup>17</sup> Another of the Harvard drawings shows this location quite precisely. It is now known to scholars as the Nymphaeum. A second version of this picture was exhibited in London at the Royal Academy in 1985.<sup>18</sup> Both pictures show an astonishingly rich vegetation which has unfortunately disappeared almost entirely from Petra today. What Lear called "the bed of the stream" was the course of the Wadi Musa, which many visitors see when it is completely dry but which carries torrents of water in periods of rain, particularly in the spring. Lear's images were made, as we have seen, on 13 April.

The artist then moved up to what he described as "one of the higher terraces where a mass of fallen columns lies in profuse confusion."<sup>19</sup> His drawing at this point is clearly documented by a picture that had once been in the collection of Philip Hofer. We see an admirably accurate representation of the eastern cliffs together with some figures in the foreground. Lear was never very good at drawing figures, and it is therefore not surprising that, when he refashioned this drawing into a substantial oil painting some years later, he eliminated the figures.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that Lear was sitting on the northern side of the wadi where the ground slopes upward and where today modern archaeologists have uncovered a Nabataean temple, the so-called Temple of the Winged Lion. The rising ground on the other side of the stream is the site of Petra's marketplace and several additional temples. The "mass of fallen columns" that Lear describes in his

<sup>16</sup> Loc. cit. The printed text gives Khasme, rather than Khazne.

<sup>17</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>18</sup> *Edward Lear, 1812-1888*, at the Royal Academy of Arts, ed. Vivien Noakes (London, 1985), pp. 110-11, cat. no. 25a.

<sup>19</sup> Lear, "A Leaf From the Journals," 422.

<sup>20</sup> I am profoundly grateful to the owner of this picture, who wishes to remain anonymous, for allowing me to make public, for the first time, a reproduction in color.



**FIGURE 2.** Lear, *Drawing of the Khazneh* (by permission of the Dept. of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard University)

journal are clearly represented in both the drawing and the oil painting. They have long since disappeared.

Finally, as the sun was setting, Lear turned to draw the cliffs in the opposite direction. In his own words: "And lastly at sunset I turned to draw the downward stream running to the dark jaws of the western



FIGURE 3. Lear, Drawing of the Nymphaeum (by permission of the Dept. of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard University)



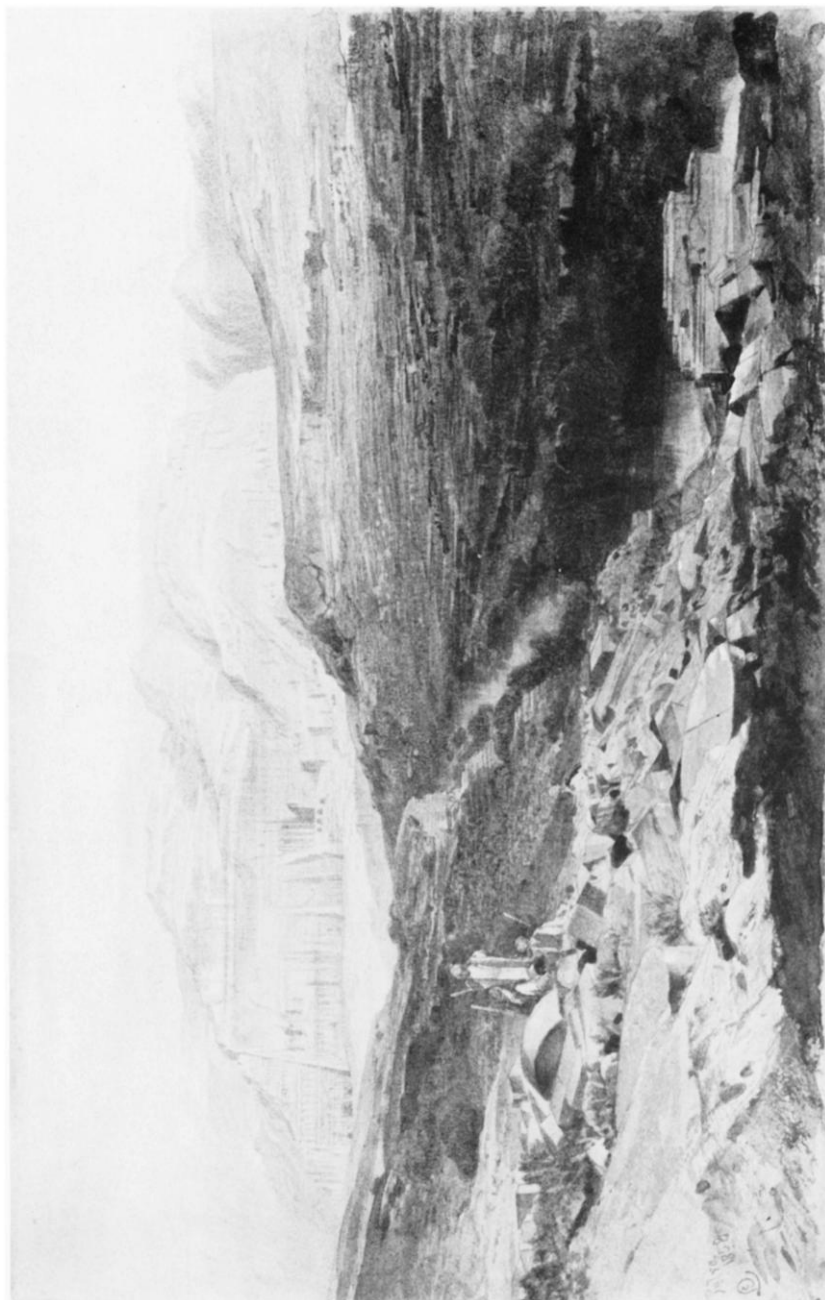


FIGURE 4. Lear, Drawing of the Eastern Cliffs (by permission of the family of Philip Hofer)

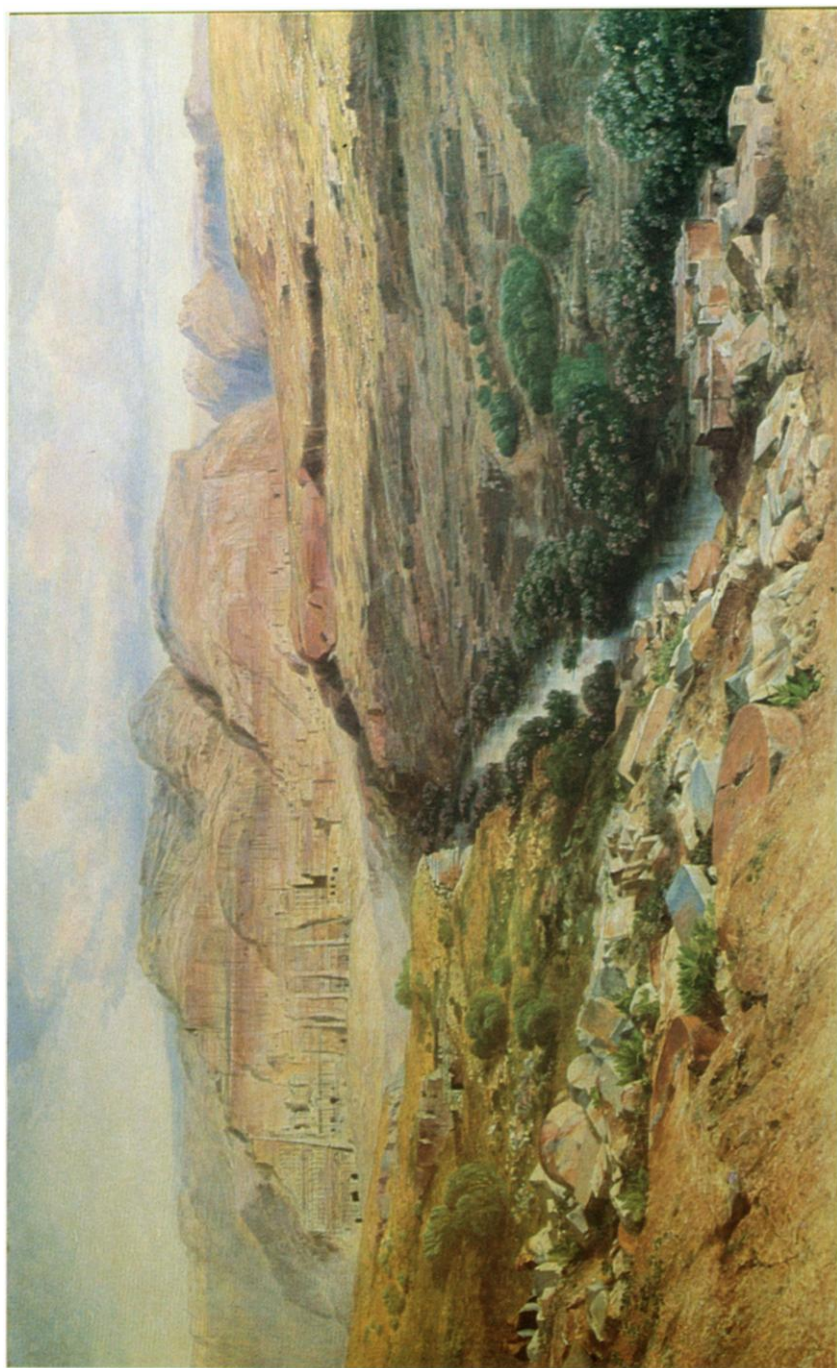


FIGURE 5. Lear, Oil Painting of Petra (courtesy of the owner)

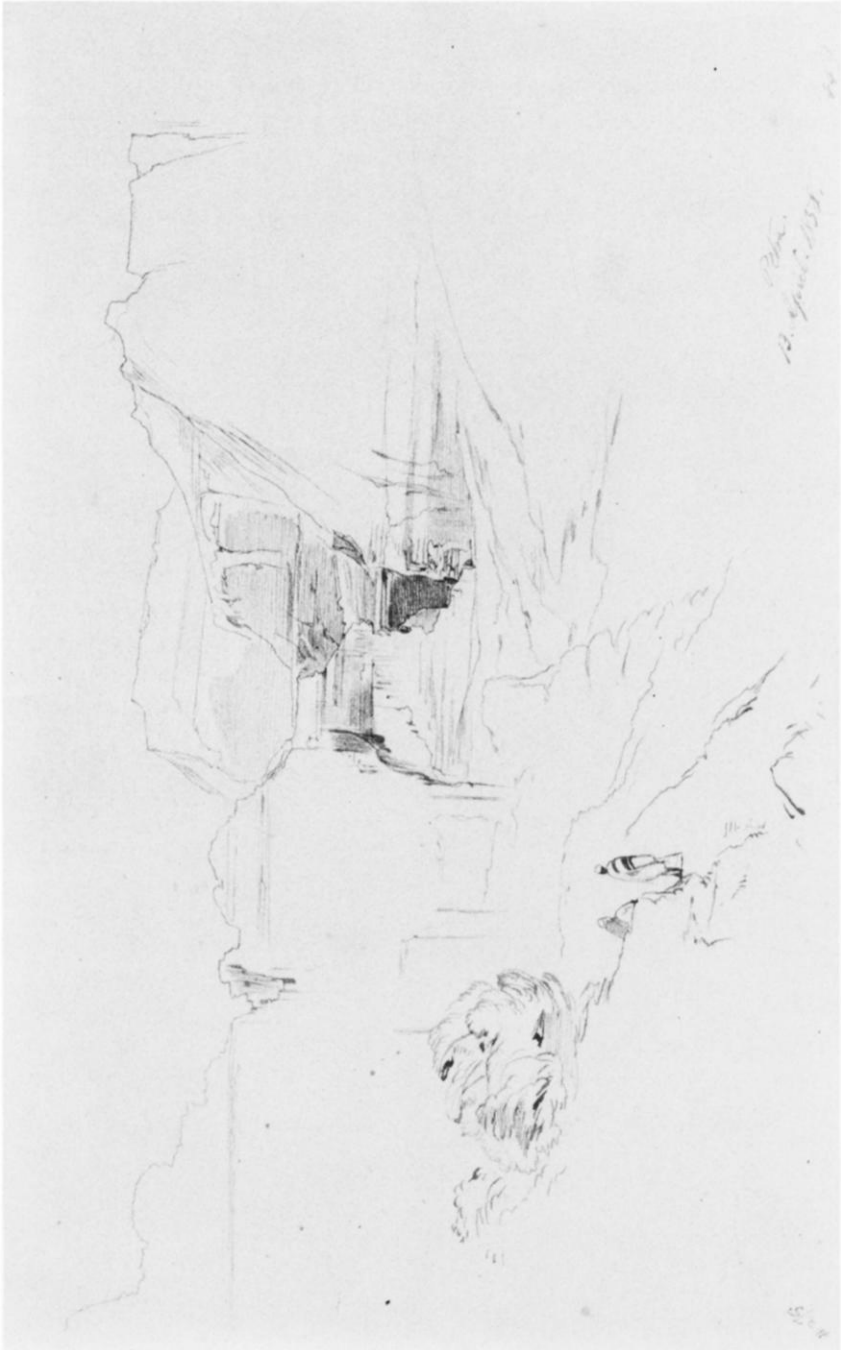


FIGURE 6. Lear, Drawing of the Western Cliffs (by permission of the Dept. of Printing and Graphic Arts, Houghton Library, Harvard University)

cliff."<sup>21</sup> Another of the Harvard drawings was clearly done at this moment. It shows the familiar elevations of the rocks just to the north of what used to be known as the acropolis, on the top of which a small crusader fort still remains.

It was a good thing that Lear managed to do so much on his very first day in Petra, because, once the word got round that he and his party were there, all the local tribes decided to press their claims for compensation, either called pleasantly a tax or simply *bakhshish*. All through the night crowds of Arabs kept gathering round Lear's tent. And yet, with admirable *sang froid*, he picked himself up before dawn and went with three guides to make the ascent of the western cliffs in order to see a monument that he undoubtedly knew about from his reading of Robinson's journals.<sup>22</sup> It takes an hour, more or less, to reach the rock-hewn monument known as the Deir, or monastery. The ascent is arduous, but Lear enjoyed every moment of it. While he found the scenery astonishing and admired the colors of rock and vegetation, he concluded, as many other travelers have, that the Deir itself is somewhat disappointing in comparison with the Khazneh, "neither so beautiful in colour nor so attractive in situation, yet a fit crown to the marvels of the ascent."<sup>23</sup> From that lofty eminence Lear was able to look far away to the east, back to the tombs he had drawn the day before.

It seems as if Lear did no drawing at all on his ascent to the Deir. At least he mentions nothing of the kind in his journal, and I know of no drawing that represents this region. Lear could not have been gone for more than three hours altogether. He returned to his camp in time for breakfast and an uproarious squabble with the importunate Arab tribesmen. As the situation around his tent became increasingly alarming, Lear gave the signal for his party to retreat. Even so, before they saved themselves from serious harm, Lear scrambled back up to the top of the theater and for half an hour made another sketch, or at least so he tells us—I have not yet discovered that any drawing from that half-hour survives.<sup>24</sup> The entire party withdrew in the late morning of 14 April, with rather fewer personal belongings than they had had when they arrived but otherwise in reasonably sound condition.

Lear's account of his visit to Petra was written in a good-humored tone and with the wit and humanity that characterized everything he did. His text and his exquisite drawings constitute a record of Petra in the mid-nineteenth century that is without parallel. At the same time

<sup>21</sup> Lear, *ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>22</sup> Lear, *ibid.*, p. 424: "I therefore order Giorgio to close and watch my tent, while I try a visit to Ed Deir." Cf. Robinson, *Biblical Researches*, p. 140: "Thus the Deir lies high up among the cliffs of the western ridge, more than half an hour distant from the area of the city."

<sup>23</sup> Lear, "A Leaf From the Journals," p. 425.

<sup>24</sup> Lear, *ibid.*, p. 426: "I had not long to devote to my drawing from the upper part of the theatre." I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Nancy Finlay of the Houghton Library at Harvard University for cooperation in making available prints of the Lear drawings of Petra at Harvard as well as the Hofer drawing of the eastern cliffs.

they tell us a little more about the curiosity and courage of one of the most attractive of the Victorians.