

## 20th century travel to Petra: A narrative study

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**Abstract:** This study explores the early travelers to Petra, Jordan, during the 20th century. To gain insights into the evolution of early travel experiences to Petra during this specific period, the researchers utilized narrative analysis and conducted in-depth interviews with 14 elderly inhabitants of Wadi Musa who resided in the area at that time. These interviews provided valuable information and served as a basis for visually representing the primary routes that emerged from the participants' narratives. This study delves into the accessibility of early travelers to Petra in the 20th century by creating a comprehensive map that outlines the trails, byways, and roads used by these travelers to reach Petra. The study's findings also revolve around the identified stages derived from the data gathered through these interviews.

**Keywords:** tourism; 20th century; Petra; early travelers; stages; narrative analysis

## 1. Introduction

Up until the beginning of the 20th century, Jordan experienced a period of decline and neglect, leading to its transformation into an impoverished and overlooked part within the Ottoman Empire, and Petra was no exception to this trend (George, 2005; Rogan and Tell, 1994; Robins, 2019). Moreover, Petra did not receive significant attention in the years leading up to the late 20th century until the importance of tourism and its positive effects were recognized. As a result, travelling to and within Petra demanded extensive knowledge of road networks and transportation systems, as well as considerable time. Deciding the most favourable time of year to undertake the journey and selecting the appropriate means of transportation carried notable economic and safety implications. Thus, gaining an understanding of the early routes and pathways employed by visitors to Petra is crucial in comprehending the historical context.

During the 19th century, international travel between countries or continents was characterized by a small number of travellers, a lack of well-established systems, and a primarily driven by the objectives of exploration, commerce, and administration, rather than the leisure-oriented and enjoyment-driven approach seen in the present era (Zuelow and Eric, 2015). However, during the 1840s, a revolutionary concept emerged where organized group vacations were introduced, providing travellers with all-inclusive packages at a lower cost. Thomas Cook, an entrepreneur from England, is credited as the creator of this concept and is considered the trailblazer of commercialized mass tourism (Brendon, 1991; Hunter, 2004; Hamilton, 2005; Zuelow, 2015). In the late 1800s, Thomas Cook began promoting the ancient city of Petra as part of his tour to Palestine and the Nile. Cook's tours expanded to encompass Petra by 1875/1876 (Cook, 1876; Starkey and Starkey, 2020). In 1925, Thomas Cook and

Son Ltd pioneered tourism in Petra through the establishment of the first camp designed exclusively for visitors (Jarvis, 1946; Orbaşlı, 2019).

Early travelers played a crucial role in expanding understanding of the world, and the early 20th century was characterized by a strong sense of curiosity and an adventurous spirit. These courageous people set out on incredible journeys, visiting far-off places and encountering a wide range of societies, cultures, and landscapes (Cook and Marqua, 2016; De Man, 2017). In the latter part of the 20th century, there was an increasing interest in visiting the mysterious “lost city” of Petra. The British Mandate and the literature and art that appeared at that time, showing soldiers exploring the ancient remains of Petra, were the main causes of the interest’s rise in popularity (Jarvis, 1946). In addition, the attraction of travel played a role in the increased curiosity about this historical marvel, particularly following the discovery of Petra.

The latter half of the 20th century marked the initial stage of expansion and development in Jordan’s tourism industry particularly after the 1980s. During this period, the country strategically positioned itself as a preferred choice for global travellers. A key focus was on developments and trends in tourism in Jordan since the 1980s, with particular attention given to Petra (Doan, 2006; Magablih, 2000).

To accommodate the increasing number of tourists, the government made substantial investments in modern infrastructure, including transportation networks, hotels, and tourist facilities. Additionally, Jordan actively promoted itself as a tourist destination on the international stage, employing marketing campaigns, participating in travel expos, and collaborating with international tour operators. These initiatives successfully raised awareness about Jordan’s attractions and facilitated the influx of visitors from around the world (Magablih, 2002).

Jordan’s dedication to preserving and promoting Petra stands out as a significant achievement in its tourism development. In the latter half of the 20th century, Jordan took substantial measures to protect and showcase the historical wonders of Petra, an esteemed UNESCO World Heritage Site (Doan, 2006; Magablih, 2002). This concerted effort aimed to safeguard the site’s profound cultural heritage and entice tourists seeking to uncover its extraordinary historical and archaeological treasures. As a testament to its significance, Petra earned the esteemed recognition as one of the New Seven Wonders of the World in 2007 (Orbaşlı, 2019).

Authors of this paper have uncovered a complete absence of scholarly investigation on early travel to Petra during the 20th century and mapping their itineraries to the ancient city. Consequently, as a pioneering study in this field, the current research endeavours to illuminate this uncharted territory and establish a basis for future investigations.

## **2. Literature**

When T.E. Lawrence, famously known as Lawrence of Arabia, visited Petra in 1914, he wrote in a letter to a friend:

“Petra ... is the most wonderful place in the world ... so you will never know what Petra is like, unless you come out here... Only be assured that till you have seen

it you have not had the glimmering of an idea how beautiful a place can be.” (River, 2016).

With origins tracing back to the 4th century B.C., Petra functioned as the capital of the Nabatean Kingdom—a thriving centre for trade that commanded significant caravan routes. Positioned strategically, Petra allowed the Nabateans to amass wealth and exert influence, leading to the development of a unique urban landscape that harmoniously combined Nabatean, Roman, Assyrian, Egyptian, and Hellenistic architectural elements (Wenning, 2007).

Petra remained undiscovered until the early 19th century, specifically in 1812, when a Swiss explorer, Johann Ludwig Burckhardt embarked on a daring journey through the deserts of the Levant. Disguised as an Arab traveler, Burckhardt aimed to reveal the legendary city of Petra, a place lost in history but mentioned in ancient records. After enduring a hazardous and demanding expedition, he successfully reached the hidden entrance of this ancient city, thus, for centuries, Petra remained shrouded in secrecy until its splendour finally emerged (River, 2016).

Due to a shared desire to solve its mysteries, the “lost” city of Petra has managed to captivate travelers, archaeologists, and explorers from Europe and other regions of the world ever since it was discovered. A few people became well-known and significant figures during the early 19th and mid-20th centuries, contributing to the site’s increased popularity. By means of their written works, pictures, and eyewitness narratives, they effectively presented Petra to the Western world and sparked a general curiosity about its marvels.

After Burckhardt, the subsequent visitor to Petra was William John Banks, a British explorer who arrived in 1818 (Lewis, 2008). During his brief stay, Banks made various sketches and took notes. Following him, Leon de Laborde explored the site in 1830 and spent eight days there with a painter (Laborde, 1838). In 1836, Charlotte Rowley became the first recorded Western woman to explore Petra during the modern era (Kennedy, 2023). In 1837, Gotthilf Heinrich, a German researcher, visited Petra (Augé and Dentzer, 2012). Later, David Roberts and Edward Robinson mapped and photographed the facades of Petra (Roberts, 1842). Towards the end of the 19th century, Charles Montagu Doughty, an English writer and explorer, also visited Petra (Doughty, 1988; Tabachinck, 2012).

Brünnow and Domaszewski led the German archaeological expedition to Petra during the early 20th century (Brünnow and Domaszewski, 1904). During the same period, Alois Musil, a Czech explorer, provided valuable insights into the city’s history and Nabatean culture (Musil, 1907). Gustaf Dalman, a German theologian, Orientalist, and archaeologist, made notable contributions to the study of Petra during this time as well (Dalman, 1908). Sir Alexander Kennedy, a British engineer, captured photographs of the facades of Petra (Kennedy, 1925). In 1929, the French researcher Kammerer made significant written contributions regarding the Nabataean kingdom (Kammerer, 1929).

George Horsfield and Agnes Conway Horsfield conducted archaeological work in British Mandate Transjordan during the 1920s and 1930s, as mentioned in McQuitty (1997) and Thornton (2023). Their archive provides a captivating glimpse into Petra as both an archaeological site and a tourist destination during a significant period in Jordan’s modern history. During the mid-20th century, Nelson Glueck, an American

archaeologist, conducted surveys in Petra (Glueck, 1970). Margaret Murray, a British archaeologist, also made contributions during the mid-20th century, as noted in Murray (1939), Murray and Ellis (1940), and Drower (2004). Philip Hammond, a British archaeologist, conducted exploration and documentation of Petra during the mid-20th century, as referenced in Chadwick (2008).

In the early twentieth century, explorers of Petra seldom embarked on travel solely for documenting purposes, as their primary focus was on experiencing the destination. Instead of extensively chronicling their journeys, they mainly captured photographs and generated limited textual records during their time spent in the city (Brünnow and von Domaszewski, 1904; Bachmann et al., 1921; Dalman, 1908; Musil, 1907; Kennedy, 1924).

From the time of its discovery in the early 19th century until the dawn of the 20th century, Petra was a secluded and relatively obscure archaeological site, known only to a handful of explorers, researchers, and archaeologists. The Ottoman government, which governed the region at the time, introduced the Hejaz Railway, reaching Ma'an during this period (Saunders, 2020). This railway station helped facilitate travel to Petra. However, there was still no direct road connecting Ma'an to Petra. As a result, travellers journeyed from Amman by train had to depend on the assistance of the inhabitants of Wadi Musa, who relied on traditional modes of transportation, such as horses and mules. These guides would then lead them through the rugged landscape to Petra. Access to Petra witnessed an improvement in 1932 when cars finally reached Musa Spring. However, it wasn't until the latter half of the 20th century that deliberate endeavours were undertaken to enhance access to Petra. This period saw substantial measures being implemented to overcome existing challenges and ensure greater accessibility for visitors to the site (Orbaşlı, 2019).

### **3. Methods**

In Wadi Musa, the researchers spoke with 14 senior citizens who are well-known members of the major tribes. Their ages ranged from 80 to 94. The duration of each interview session was one to two hours, and they were conducted over a period of time. Interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and then verbatim transcribed to guarantee accuracy and preserve the insightful information the participants offered. Because the interviews were open-ended, the participants were able to share their opinions and experiences on this comparatively unknown subject.

The significance of these interviews lies in the unique perspective of the interviewees who have not only witnessed but actively contributed to the development of tourism in Wadi Musa since its inception. Their accounts carry immense historical and cultural value, providing invaluable insights into the evolution of tourism, particularly during their lifetime, specifically after the first part of the twentieth century. By capturing their experiences, these interviews offer a window into the past, shedding light on how tourism in Petra has grown and transformed over time.

Moreover, it is of utmost importance to recognize that the interviewees' extensive engagement in tourism has granted them unparalleled insights into the subject of the paper. Their experiences play a vital role in uncovering unexplored narratives and achieving a thorough understanding of the topic. Their contribution is indispensable

in discovering untapped stories and developing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

The literature on computer analysis of interview texts was thoroughly examined by the researcher. It was found that no computer software was available that could be used to code texts written in Arabic. Moreover, translating the writings into English—especially from the regional Jordanian dialect—may change their meaning, which could result in misinterpretations or, worse, inaccurate outcomes. The researcher thus had to do manual text analysis using a pencil and paper because there was no analytical program for Arabic notes and transcripts that was currently in use (Nakkash et al., 2003).

To analyse the obtained data, the responses of the participants were subjected to qualitative analysis through content analysis. The analysis involved identifying and counting recurring themes and items based on their frequency within the data (Weber, 1990; Johnstone, 2017). To confirm the final findings of the research, follow-up interviews were conducted with a selected pair of elderly individuals who had previously been interviewed. These interviews aimed to validate the conclusive map derived from the research.

The primary objective of this research is to uncover and record the trails and byways employed by early travellers to access city of Petra in the 20th centuries. Through thorough exploration of these lesser-known routes, the researchers seek to reveal concealed paths and neglected passages that were once traversed by those journeying to Petra. The ultimate goal is to bring these trails into focus, shedding light on their existence, and producing a map that outlines the various pathways utilized during this specific historical period.

#### **4. Findings**

The interviews have uncovered valuable information about the initiation of travel to the ancient “lost city” of Petra, spanning from the early twentieth century to the late twentieth century. Consequently, the outcomes could be segmented or categorized into four distinct stages (or themes). These stages were:

- First stage (before 1920)

The findings revealed that travelling from Amman to Petra before 1920 posed significant challenges. Prior to this year, travellers would typically reach the Ma’an station by train, and in some instances, by plane, with a runway located near the train station in Ma’an. From there, visitors to Petra would be transported to Petra using horses and mules, navigating rugged terrain and utilizing paths suitable for both animals and travellers (see map below). The transportation process involved back-and-forth travel between the two locations.

In the interview, the participants highlighted that before the 1920s, the available options for accommodation in Petra, as recounted by their fathers and previous generation, were primarily limited to either sleeping in caves or staying in tents. Moreover, based on the information gathered from the interviews, it came to light that during the period leading up to and extending until the 1920s, the Thomas Cook camp served as the exclusive accommodation choice in Petra. Furthermore, it was indicated that food service providers, encompassing cooks, servers, and even evening

entertainers who performed traditional dances like Dabke, played a significant role in enhancing the overall experience. Notably, one interviewee specifically referred to these night-time celebrations as “Fantaza”.

The interviews revealed that the types of travellers visiting Petra during that time were diverse and inclusive of various demographics, including older individuals, women, and even children. Furthermore, it was noted that the majority of visitors were predominantly Europeans. Throughout that particular period, it was noted that travellers visited Petra year-round, with a slight decline in visitor numbers during summer and a notable increase during winter and spring seasons. Additionally, visitors to Petra typically stay for a duration ranging from one to several days.

- Second stage (1920s)

The participants in the interviews noted that the car reached a village known as Basta, transporting travellers during this period. From there, the people of Wadi Musa would assist the visitors by picking them up from this village and escorting them all the way to the site of Petra. It was commonly observed that horses were used for transporting the travellers themselves, while mules and donkeys were employed to carry their belongings and supplies.

Following the government’s initiative to construct a paved road connecting Ma’an to Wadi Musa, the car successfully reached Musa Springs in 1927. This car carried travellers who desired to visit Petra. The interviewees illustrated that upon arrival at Musa Springs, local residents would provide horseback rides to transport the visitors to the Petra site. Similarly, they would return the travellers to the same location where they were initially picked up.

However, a notable number of local residents voiced their opposition to the entry of trucks into the village, referring to them as “Hantour”. In the opinion of the interviewees, it was mentioned that attitude against the existence of car was due to the fact their fathers who had personally endured the injustices imposed by the Turks, expressed their apprehensions, fearing that the introduction of trucks would reduce the demand for horses to bring visitors to Petra. This, in turn, could have a detrimental effect on their livelihoods. Furthermore, one participant mentioned that, according to what he had heard from his father, the presence of car was somewhat disheartening and discouraging because:

“Upon encountering the first car, the people of Wadi Musa found themselves unable to comprehend it... The sight of the unfamiliar vehicle sparked doubts and fear...the car appeared peculiar to them, as they had never witnessed anything similar before...Filled with trepidation over the unfamiliar, they abstained from approaching the vehicle, and a few even fled or concealed themselves, yielding to their apprehensions and anxieties”

- Third stage (1930s–1940s)

The participants in the interviews reported that the car could arrive at the Maghfar (police station) in the early 1930s, where the security personnel would coordinate the transportation of visitors to Petra. This would involve arranging for horses for the visitors. When a group of visitors arrived, the guards would call out for visitors and people with horses. Typically, horses’ owners who lived in close proximity to the station would be present, ready with their horses for the transportation service. As per

the accounts of participants, during the 1930s, it was a usual occurrence for approximately 30 to 40 visitors to visit Petra within a month. Also, in an average month, the number of vehicles transporting visitors to Wadi Musa was fewer than ten.

Moreover, it was stressed that the Maghfar, established during the British Mandate in 1927, played a significant role in the early development of tourism in Petra. It served as a hub for organizing transportation of visitors from the station to the Petra site, as well as providing accommodation for the visitors, who were mainly soldiers from British bases in Jordan and the surrounding region.

According to the interviewees, groups of 4–7 trucks carrying visitors/soldiers would arrive at the Maghfar. They would stay there for a couple of days, using Petra as a form of entertainment or recreation during their time away from their bases. This indicates that the Maghfar police station served as a crucial link in facilitating tourism to Petra during that period.

Based on insights from the interviews, it was evident that during stage one, two, and three, especially until the end of the first half of the 20th century, four distinct categories of early travellers visited the site of Petra, namely explorers, archaeology researchers, missionaries, and soldiers from British bases.

- Fourth stage (1950s–1980s)

In the early 1950s, some participants in the interviews witnessed the fact that site experienced a substantial increase in accessibility as a result of the road being paved from Maghfar to Petra's entrance. This infrastructure improvement not only made travel easier but also facilitated the arrival of visitors to the site. Afterward, based on the testimonies gathered from interviews, it was disclosed that a car taxi carrying tourists from Jerusalem to Petra was observed in the year 1954. The notable aspect of this taxi was that it prominently displayed the label "Jerusalem."

In the late 1950s, the government prioritized the improvement of tourist infrastructure to attract more visitors to the site of Petra. This stage is notable for significant advancements, which encompass the establishment of tourist centre and the provision of essential services, such as dedicated tourist guides specifically catering to the needs of visitors to Petra. According to the interviews, participants recalled witnessing the arrival of the first tourist bus at the entrance of Petra, which is now the tourism centre, in 1958. This event was attributed to the construction of paved roads that facilitated access to the Petra site. The transportation of visitors from Amman to Petra by tourist buses became regular to some extent. These buses were accompanied by guides who offered assistance and information to the tourists throughout the journey. It was observed that during this time, the number of buses averaged around 3–5 per day.

It was reported by participants there were approximately 50 horses at the disposal of tourists visiting the site of Petra in the 1950s. These horses offered a convenient and efficient means of transportation within the vast archaeological area. Tourists had the opportunity to rent one of these horses for their exploration, with a fare of 50 cents required for their use. This arrangement allowed visitors to fully immerse themselves in the wonders of Petra while relishing the convenience and enchantment of traversing the site on horseback.

During the early 1960s, the interviewees stated that there was a notable increase in tourism in Petra. The introduction of tourist buses that directly connected Amman to Wadi Musa played a crucial role in enhancing accessibility to the site. This development in transportation infrastructure greatly facilitated visitors' ability to reach Petra and contributed to the notable increase in tourism during that time. In addition, beginning in the early 1960s, the government initiated the more development of tourist infrastructure, which coincided with the establishment of the municipality. This period marked a growing recognition of the significance of tourism for the local community. Moreover, the government took actions and established the first dedicated accommodation facility in 1960, as reported. This establishment was specifically designed to cater to the needs of tourists and comprised approximately 30 chalets.

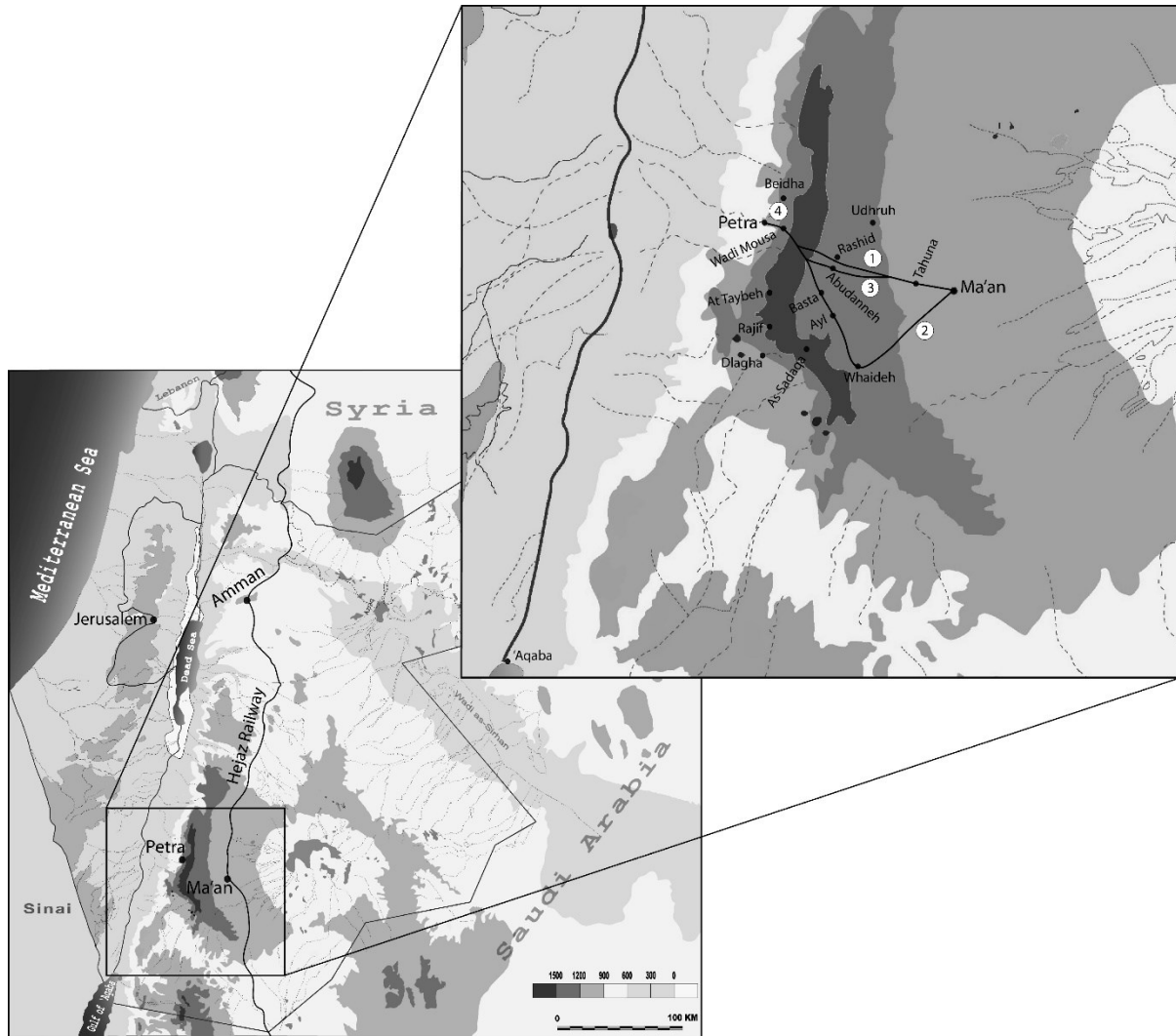
The individuals interviewed commented that the Tourism Authority, presently known as the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, granted the first official assignment of a tourist guide at the site of Petra in the early 1960s. The name of this guide is well known and remembered by all interview participants, as they recall him vividly. This significant development marked the inception of a well-organized system aimed at guiding tourists and offering them informed assistance during their visits to Petra. In the late 1960s, organized groups of visitors to Petra began to be noticed, with tourist travel agencies based in Jerusalem taking on the role of organizing these groups. This was due to the absence of travel agencies within Jordan at that time.

Until the late 1980s, it was mentioned in the interviews that a designated entry fee for visiting Petra did not exist. Rather, visitors were expected to pay fees for various services, such as renting horses for transportation and engaging tourist guides to accompany them and offer assistance throughout their exploration of Petra.

As pointed out by interviewees, the Forum Hotel is notable for being the pioneer in providing tourist accommodation within Petra. Its construction commenced in 1979 and concluded in 1985, marking the grand inauguration of the hotel as a significant milestone in the village. Wadi Musa witnessed the opening of its first restaurant in the late 1980s, signifying a noteworthy occurrence in the village's history. This initial establishment was relatively small and basic in nature, serving the needs of visitors exploring the area, as well as catering to the local community as stated by interviewees.

The participants argued that the negative impacts of tourism on the local community started to be noticed as of the 1980s, as they began to experience higher prices. Additionally, there were cases in Wadi Musa where horse owners opted to send their sons to accompany tourist on horseback to the Petra site. As a consequence, a few young individuals in Wadi Musa experienced temporary absences from formal education, resulting in instances of school dropouts (see **Figure 1**).





**Figure 1.** A map depicting and delineating the byways, trails, and routes utilized by early travellers up until the second half of the twentieth century to access the Petra site.

## 5. Conclusion

Even though Petra was found in the early 19th century, it remained an isolated, little-known archeological site with poor infrastructure and transportation until the 20th century. The Hejaz Railway was built by the Ottoman administration, who ruled the area, to connect Ma'an and Amman and to make Petra travel easier. But there remained no direct road from Ma'an to Petra, and the path to the old city was steep, dangerous, and difficult. Therefore, until a road was built to Musa Spring in 1932, travellers had to rely on the help of the Wadi Musa community to arrange traditional methods of transportation, such as horses and mules, to reach Petra. This made Ma'an a crucial starting point for a more direct and accessible path. Within Petra, walking, horses, and camels were the primary modes of transportation. Compared to walking, horses provided a quicker means of transportation and were more adapted to handle the difficult terrain.

Furthermore, according to the analysis of interviews, the journey to reach Petra was an arduous and physically demanding task, often taking a considerable amount of time. Not until the second half of the 20th century when concerted efforts began to

improve access to Petra. In the 1950s, initiatives were taken to pave the road all the way from Ma'an to the site of Petra, leading to a gradual increase in the number of tourists. The completion of the desert highway between Amman and Aqaba in the 1960s further contributed to the growth of tourism, albeit with modest numbers. In the latter half of the 20th century, initiatives to enhance tourism services, infrastructure, and transportation became particularly prominent after the 1980s, making Petra much more accessible and convenient. As a result, the site experienced remarkable growth and development during this period.

There was a vacuum in the study of the precise early trips to the site caused by the previous emphasis on excavations and archaeological features of Petra's tourism sector. By acting as a catalyst and accumulating important data regarding the early expedition to Petra, this study sought to close that gap. The study's main goal was to document the evolution of Petra, Jordan's tourism industry during the course of the 20th century. In order to do this, the researchers used a qualitative approach and a survey of the literature, interviewing people to get information about their early trip experiences in Petra. The investigation produced a map (see image above) that shows the several pathways and byways through the mountainous topography that these early travelers used. Four unique stages that were derived from the data gathered during the study process are also shown on this map.

The current research constitutes a novel and unique exploration of an overlooked domain. It also opens avenues for potential future inquiries. To enrich the study further, researchers can expand its scope to encompass archival analysis, examination of archaeologists' diaries, historical documents, vintage photographs, letters, maps, reports, and official records. Incorporating these diverse resources would provide a broader array of data. By replicating the study with these additional sources and methodologies, future researchers can build upon the existing research and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context surrounding early travel to Petra in the twentieth century.

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