

Wonders of the World: ‘Significance in Human History’

Delphi And Petra

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Located in the south-west of Jordan, Petra was built by the Nabatean civilization in around the fourth century BCE, flourishing around four-hundred years later in the first century CE. Its architecture was heavily influenced by the empires surrounding it, including the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and later the Romans. Petra is most famous for its rock-cut facades of the tomb and temple complexes, such as the Al-Khazneh, or Treasury, which was carved right out of the sheer cliff face.¹ Inscribed on UNESCO’s World Heritage list in 1985, the site of Petra makes up a large area consisting of the tomb and temple complexes, the gorges, the monastery, mines, and finally the city itself. Much of the site was controlled by an incredibly advanced system of water distribution, yet another element which qualifies it as a Wonder of the World.² These reasons place the site of Petra on the World Heritage List under three criteria: A masterpiece of human genius, a testimony to a cultural tradition or civilization which has disappeared, and a site that has significance in human history.³

We compare Petra to the Archaeological site of Delphi located in central Greece, at the bottom of Mount Parnassus. Inscribed in 1987, the site of Delphi hosts the Temple of Apollo and the surrounding complex, holding treasuries dedicated to former Greek City States.⁴ Additionally, the site is most famous for hosting the mythical Oracle of Delphi. Referred to also

¹ *Petra - Lost City of Stone*. PBS Firm, 2017. 0:04:00

² “Petra.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/326>

³ “Petra.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/326>

⁴ “Archaeological Site of Delphi.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/393>

as the Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi was believed to speak for the Delphic Apollo, sharing divine knowledge of the future. As a result, the site was sought out by many throughout the Hellenic world, as devotion to the god Apollo or to seek knowledge and advice from the Pythia.⁵ Delphi is placed under five criteria for inscription on the World Heritage List: A masterpiece of human creative genius, an interchange of values, a testimony to a cultural tradition that has disappeared, has significance in human history, and is associated with events or traditions of outstanding universal significance.⁶

Both sites share three criteria for inscription, but the primary interest for this essay is criteria iv), or *a building, architectural example, or landscape that illustrates a significance in human history*. I choose to explore this idea through three different comparison points, linking the two sites together as sites of pilgrimage, their cross-cultural influences, and connections to their respective landscapes. Though, overall, we explore these two sites as being significant because of their locations and how humanity used said locations to their advantage, thus having a lasting impact on human history.

Sites of Pilgrimage

It is believed that the tomb and temple complexes of Petra were sites of religious pilgrimage from evidence of altars and statues carved into the rock dedicated to pre-Islamic Arab gods. The site of Petra is also located adjacent to the Ain Musa, where Moses is said to have struck water from a rock for his followers.⁷ Additionally, Petra was the site of a significant trade

⁵Joseph Fontenrose. "The Delphic Oracle." In *The Delphic Oracle*. University of California Press, 1978. 2.

⁶ "Archaeological Site of Delphi." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/393>

⁷ *Petra - Lost City of Stone*. PBS Firm, 2017. 0:26:40

route crossroads for frankincense and myrrh, typically used in religious ceremonies.⁸ Within Petra, visitors pass through the Siq, where there are several altars, niches, and other religious additions over the 1.2-kilometer-long path. The pathway through the Siq, which snakes through the gorges, is not the only entrance into Petra, but appears to be the most important. Once the traveller reaches the end, the walls of the Siq open to reveal the magnificent Al-Khazneh towering above, thus creating an image of magnificence for the visitor.⁹ Petra's location led it to become a significant crossroads for visitors as well as an important religious location.

Like that of Petra, the architecture in Delphi is constructed in a particular way to give a feeling of enticement as the visitor approaches the main site of pilgrimage. As it was built on a hill, the site was constructed so the individual who approached would have a limited view of the temple of Apollo, giving it an air of mystery. Pilgrims would climb the sacred way, lined with sculptures and treasuries, but only once reaching the top the whole building would be revealed. At the end, the visitors would seek guidance from the Oracle inside the temple.¹⁰ The process of seeking prophetic knowledge has differing interpretations from various scholars, but the most common story involves the Pythia sitting atop a tripod above a chasm. Her visions came when vapours from the depths of the chasm rose and put her into a trance, where she spoke as a vessel for Apollo.¹¹ Evidently, the function of the sacred way and the temple introduces both physical

⁸ *Petra - Lost City of Stone*. PBS Firm, 2017. 0:18:00

⁹ Haupt, Gerhard and Binder, Pat. "Through the Siq" *Universes in Universe*,

¹⁰ Estelle Alma Mare, and Athanasios Rapanos. "The sacred and profane symbolism of space in classical Greek architecture: the temple complex of Apollo at Delphi and the Athenian Acropolis." *South African Journal of Art History* 22, no. 1 (2007): 119

¹¹ Joseph Fontenrose. "The Delphic Oracle." In *The Delphic Oracle*. University of California Press, 1978. 23-24.

and cultural heritage of the complex through the architecture and intangible ritual of visiting the Pythia in her seat.

Cross-Cultural Connections

As they were historically, Petra and Delphi sat in central locations. Where Petra sat between the 'east' and 'west', Delphi was located right in the middle of the Hellenic world. Therefore, these two sites had significant external influences and cultural connections to far off places. Considering Petra was a trade-route crossroads, the architecture of the area shows distinct external influences from the neighbouring empires. The Al-Khazneh, the Monastery, and many other structures within the gorges were built in a classical inspired style. To take a more specific approach to understanding these influences, we can use the Al-Khazneh as an example. The columns, four of them attached and two free-standing, are built in a Nabatean-Corinthian combined style. At the top, we see a Hellenic styled pediment, but split in the middle, a Nabatean alteration of the pediment structure. On the façade, we see statues, including that of the Egyptian goddess Isis and Greek Nikes and Amazons. Along the attic, the rosettes lining its façade are indication of Eastern influence as well.¹² Within the city, the 'Great Temple' and colonnaded streets are built with clear Greco-Roman influences. When the Romans annexed Petra in 106 CE, they added various things to the city and the Great Temple. At the end of the colonnaded main street, the roman styled Temenos gate opens the commercial street once lined with shops.¹³

Known as the Navel of the World to the Greeks, Delphi sat at the centre of Greek Civilization. The Oracle of Delphi had significant political power in the Hellenic World, being

¹² Haupt, Gerhard and Binder, Pat. "Al-Khazneh" *Universes in Universe*,

¹³ Haupt, Gerhard and Binder, Pat. "History of Petra and the Nabateans" *Universes in Universe*,

sought out by leaders of many Greek City States for political advice, including for wartime advice. Along the Sacred Way, the treasuries were dedicated to said City States, with their respective gifts being stored inside the buildings. Therefore, because of its status as a site of pilgrimage, Delphi functioned as a connection point for the Greek world.¹⁴ In addition, Delphi was the site of the Pythian Games, where alongside athletics competitions, art and dance competitions were held, something which was not a feature of the Olympic Games in Athens. These competitions were held in honour of the god Apollo, again tying into the religious nature of the site.¹⁵ The games were a symbol of peace, where people from all around would come to compete, therefore representing how Delphi operated as a pan-Hellenic sanctuary.

Connection to Landscape

As observed with the role of the Siq, Petra's architecture has a deep connection to the natural landscape it is situated within. We see this also with the rock-cut architecture of the temple complexes. As observed with the Al-Khazneh before, these building's facades were carved out of the sheer cliff faces from top-to-bottom.¹⁶ Further, considering Petra is situated in the desert and is far from any major waterways, the construction of the city relies heavily on the impressive water transportation system built by the Nabateans. This system transports water from springs higher up in the mountains, through the gorges, and into the city itself. These water pipes and pathways also assist in controlling the flash floods that tear through the gorges and the valley. Flash flood waters are controlled, redirected, and stored to later supply water to the city.

¹⁴ Elena C. Partida, "The nexus of inter-regional relations established by creators and artisans in the Ancient sanctuary and the town of Delphi." *Pallas. Revue d'études antiques* 87 (2011): 20

¹⁵ Joseph Fontenrose. "The Delphic Oracle." In *The Delphic Oracle*. University of California Press, 1978. 108.

¹⁶ *Petra - Lost City of Stone*. PBS Firm, 2017. 0:32:34

An example of water use is in the ruins of the garden and pool complex located at the Great Temple, where excavation and analysis revealed remnants of pipelines criss-crossing beneath the floors.¹⁷

In contrast, Delphi's connection to the landscape is more of a spiritual one. The temple's elevated position sets it against the sky and the grand scale of the mountain beyond, creating an impression of divinity, making the viewer feel small and human in comparison. Having been constructed in the Doric style of architecture, the Temple of Apollo is characterized by its mathematical perfection, its rationality, and its stability. All these things represent the divine in Greek tradition.¹⁸ The juxtaposition of the stable, rigid temple so tiny against the mountain is purposeful and powerful in its construction. It is known that Delphi runs along a fault line, however, scholars are still trying to figure out if the story of the cavern and mythical vapours has any basis. Some argue that the chasm was at another location, but the myth was carried to the site of Delphi for the sake of ritual. Others argue that it never even existed.¹⁹ Either way, it is important to note that in some capacity, even if the reasons are mythical, the site of Delphi is connected to the landscape surrounding it.

Overall, the two sites have vast differences in style and function, but their general connection relies on several points that inscribe them as examples of sites that have a significance in human history primarily because of their locations and cultural importance. Both

¹⁷ Charles R. Ortloff, "The water supply and distribution system of the Nabataean city of Petra (Jordan), 300 BC–AD 300." *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 15, no. 1 (2005): 95.

¹⁸ Estelle Alma Mare, and Athanasios Rapanos. "The sacred and profane symbolism of space in classical Greek architecture: the temple complex of Apollo at Delphi and the Athenian Acropolis." *South African Journal of Art History* 22, no. 1 (2007): 121.

¹⁹ Piccardi et. al. "Scent of a Myth; Tectonics, Geochemistry and Geomythology at Delphi (Greece)." *Journal of the Geological Society* 165, no. 1 (2008): 16.

share elements of religious significance, and therefore act as sites of pilgrimage because of their temple sites and culturally important landscape. Because of this, these two sites exist as cultural cross-over points, where groups interact, both seeking and exchanging information. As locations, the two sites only function the way they can because of where they are situated. Though Petra's connections are more practical than spiritual, it nevertheless shares the same historically significant reliance on its spiritual location like Delphi does.

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