

Kenneth Russell: An Archaeologist with a Passion for the Power of the Question

By Ashley Lumb. Published June 4, 2020

Twenty-eight years have passed since North American archaeologist Kenneth Russell tragically died on May 10, 1992, in Amman, Jordan from complications arising from a tick bite. Ken was only 41 years old and in the prime of his scholarly career, having recently discovered the remains of a Byzantine-era (5th-6th century) church at Petra. He was appointed Director of the Petra Church Project, which was a co-partnership between ACOR and the Department of Antiquities and was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The excavation was due to commence with an opening ceremony attended by H.M. Queen Noor on May 15th, 1992. Sadly, the planned celebrations turned into a solemn occasion as Ken was instead laid to rest in Petra that same day, on a promontory overlooking the ancient city, leaving his friends and colleagues with a deep sense of loss.

The catalyst for this essay on Kenneth Russell is the addition of his collection to the [ACOR Photo Archive](#); over one thousand color slides have been digitized and made freely available online. The photographs were taken between 1974 and 1991 in Jordan, Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon, among other places. The whole Kenneth Russell collection can be browsed [here](#).

To chronicle Kenneth Russell's life is to participate in the history of the discipline to which he contributed notably, as his intellectual influence on ethnoarchaeology was significant [1] [2]. In this photo essay, we at ACOR present the principal projects he was involved with in Jordan, together with recollections from his former friends and colleagues Steve Simms, Jane Taylor, and Bert de Vries. We are deeply grateful for these insights into Ken's life and we hope that this essay provides a starting point for further research.

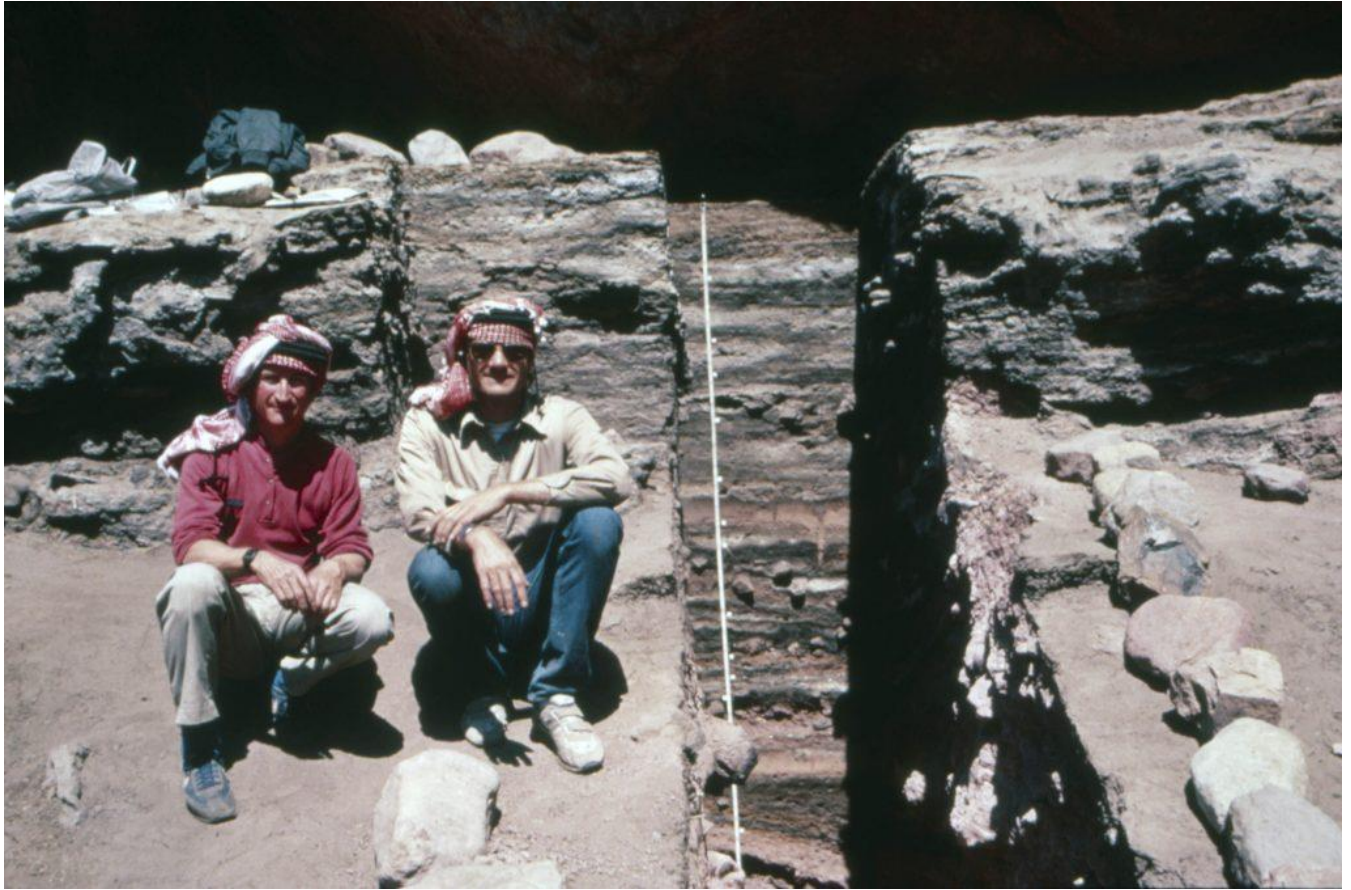


Image 1: Petra, Tur Imdai, Steve Simms (left), Kenneth Russell (right), ca. 1990 (KR_J_S_1025)

Full of life and soul, Ken was well liked. Friends and colleagues have described him in many ways: driven and flamboyant, irrepressibly positive, witty, generous, passionate, a romantic, and an animated lecturer. He chafed at authority and at times had a short temper. He was known for his colorful style, his infectious enthusiasm, and loud laughter: he was once kicked out of a hostel for laughing too hard and too long. His friendships were many, his acquaintances legion. Ken blended the qualities of empathy and compassion with a brilliant mind, a love of learning, and tireless scholarship. A leading light in archaeology, Ken's short but productive career has much to teach us.

Bert de Vries, former ACOR Director (1988–1991), whose photographic collection is also [available online](#), recalled that Ken was engaged in numerous projects in Jordan, including studying pottery sequences from the Nabatean domestic structures, ethnoarchaeology studies of the Bdoul Bedouin community in Petra (also referred to as the Bedul), analyzing the sediment patterns and flood cycles at Tur Imdai, gathering data on earthquakes in antiquity, consulting on cultural heritage work at the Temple of Hercules at Amman Citadel and at Ayla in Aqaba, participating in Phillip Hammond's Temple of the Winged Lions project, and launching the Petra Church Project. [3]

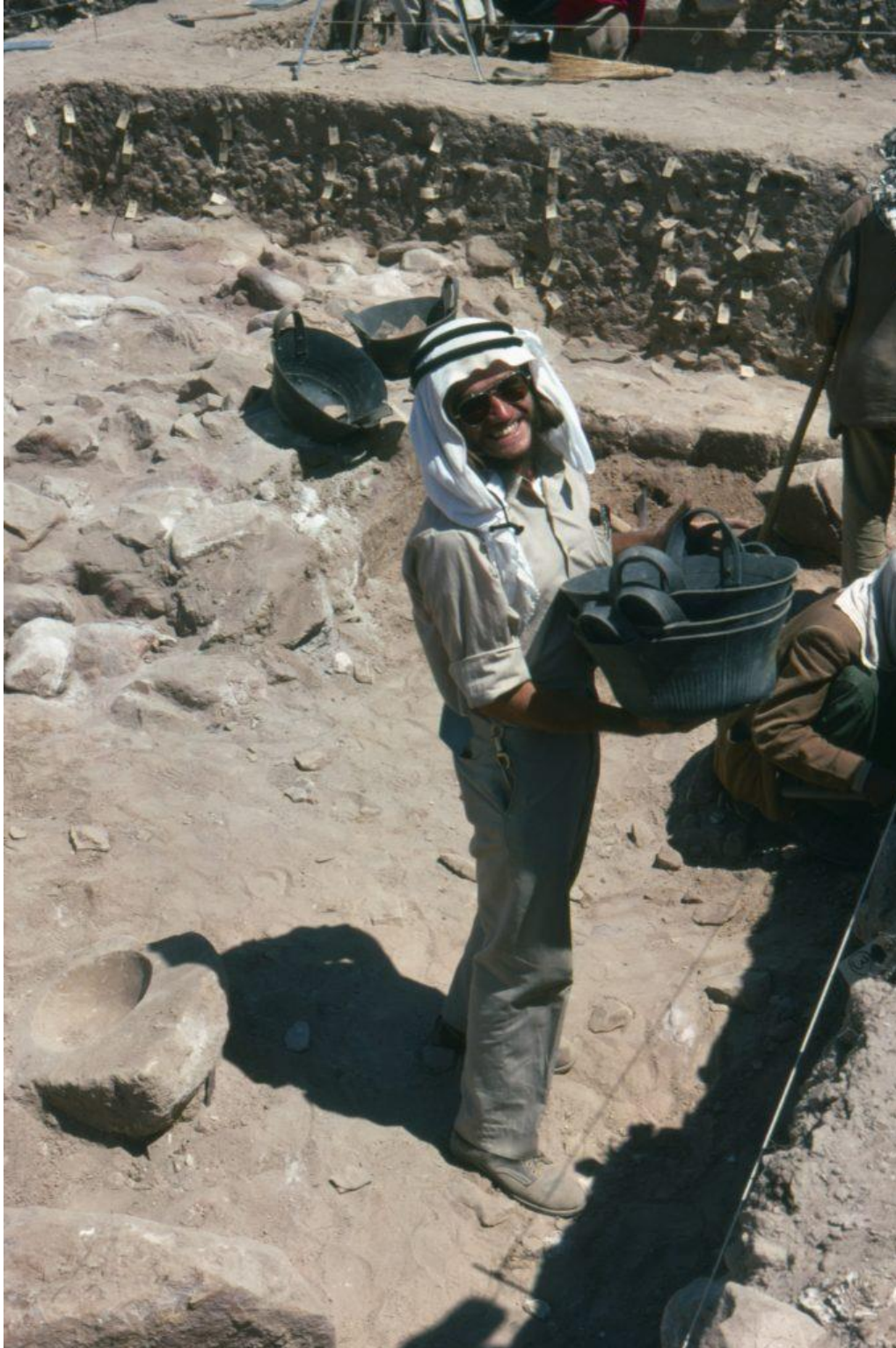


Image 2: Kenneth Russell in Petra, ca. 1974-1977. Creator: Steven Simms, (KR_J_S_802)

During the first few years Ken worked in Petra (1973–1977), he befriended the Bdoul while working as an area supervisor for the American Expedition to Petra (AEP). When he returned years later, the Bdoul still remembered him fondly, especially because he had once carried an

injured boy down a hill in order to get medical treatment. Fellow excavator Steve Simms recalled that “Ken had worked with Phillip Hammond on the Temple of the Winged Lions in the 1970s. He pleaded with Hammond for years to let him [Ken] open a trench to excavate a domestic structure to the east of the temple, as so few had explored Nabataean dwellings until that time. Hammond was opposed to it but Ken pestered him long enough that he finally said ‘Go over and do your thing.’ Ken wanted to get a sequence of residential occupation, which he did.” [4] The results are depicted in the photo below.



Image 3: House excavations in Petra, 1974–1977 (KR_J_S_698)

Ken returned to the University of Utah in 1977 to work on his doctorate, but, in 1986, after a nine-year absence, he was eager to return to Jordan. Together with Steve Simms, Ken submitted a grant application to the Leakey Foundation, proposing to study the site formation processes of nomad pastoralist camps and how to ensure recognition for mobile peoples archaeologically. Upon visiting friends in Petra, Ken wrote back to Steve in Utah, excitedly, saying he thought the history of the Bdoul Bedouin [5] would be the perfect subject because there was a large group of people that had resisted pressures to settle and instead continued to live “the old way” in black tents. As a result, Ken and Steve began the Petra Ethnoarchaeological Project in 1986. This work differentiated them from other scholars in the Petra region who largely focused on the archaeology of the Nabataeans. The Bdoul Bedouin subjects formed deep relationships with Ken and Steve, as previously they had typically been engaged with archaeological excavations in

limited roles including manual labor; no one had ever taken an interest in their own archaeology. As Steve recalled, “the Bdoul thought that someone was finally going to pay attention to them. And that was immensely satisfying to both of us.”



Image 4: Back of Qublan's (Goblan's) tent, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_072)



Image 5: Bdoul Bedouin man and detail of urn at Ad-Deir (Monastery), Petra, 1991 (KR_J_S_964)



Image 6: Bdoul houses, Petra, 1988 (KR_J_S_508)

Tur Imdai is located in the foothills of Wadi Araba, about 5 km northwest of Petra. Ken and Steve's excavation of a rock shelter there yielded a record of habitation by pastoralists beginning about 1650 C.E. and continuing to the present. The name Tur Imdai can be translated as "spacious" or "perpetual shelter" and is said to have been a preferred site for winter encampments. The Bdoul Bedouin of Petra have been associated with the site for over a century. Dating back to the 19th century, the Bdoul often moved their goat herds out of the highlands around Petra to the lower elevations of the Wadi Araba to exploit the local winter vegetation and escape the wet plateaus. Wadis are valleys that are typically dry except in rainy seasons. Steve recalls that the elderly Bdoul revered Tur Imdai because it represented living "the old way." They were consequently very supportive of Steve and Ken's effort to document the history of the Bdoul.

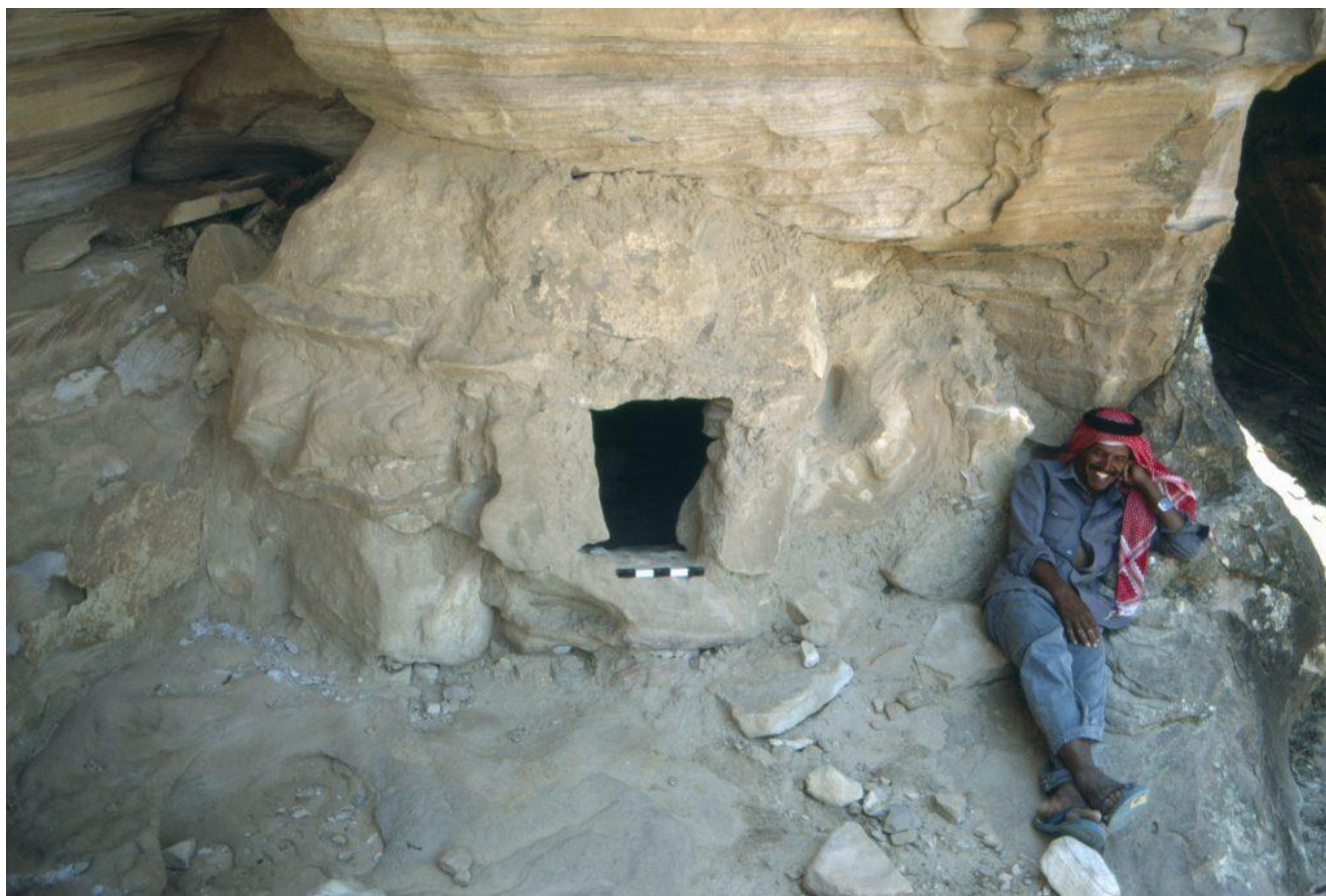


Image 7: Remote storage unit #2, Tur Imdai, Petra, 1988 (KR_J_S_646)



Image 8: Storage structure S-1, Steve Simms looking out, Ron Holt standing, Tur Imdai, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_443)



Image 9: The team at Wadi Siyagh, Tur Imdai, 1990 (KR_J_S_990)

It took several years to get permission to begin excavations, but the project at Tur Imdai finally commenced in 1990. Steve remembers going on a long journey to reach the site, and as soon as they arrived, they found the whole archaeological sequence was right there in front of them, exposed due to a flash flood through the Wadi Musa and at the location pictured below ([11](#)) in Wadi Siyagh in 1963. This was the same flood that caused the drowning of a local guide and 22 French tourists in the Petra Siq. The flood altered the course of this wadi at Tur Imdai and caused a 2 m high, 18 m long entrenchment of archaeological deposits.



Image 10: Site 88-114, Utah archaeologist Monson (Bill) Shaver, Ken Russell, and a Department of Antiquities representative at Tur Imdai for the first time (KR_J_S_592)



Image 11: Site 88-14, Monson (Bill) Shaver, Tur Imdai, Petra, 1988 (KR_J_S_591)

Presumably, the shelter at Tur Imdai was repeatedly subject to events similar to the historic flood in the 1960s, with the stream periodically shifting its course. The very existence of the shelter was most likely due to stream erosion.

Here, Bert de Vries tells us more about Ken's work with the Bdoul Bedouins and Tur Imdai:

“This is the project I am most fascinated with, because it reflects Ken’s scholarly gregariousness and scientific seriousness. The research field was paleobotany and climate. Tur Imdai is a cave located in a sharp bend of the Wadi Mousa to the west of the ancient city of Petra, after the stream plunges about 250 m straight down. In winter floods, the wadi would carry sediments into the cave, which were then periodically covered by ceiling collapse. You can see these alternating striations of sediment and bedrock in the Tur Imdai photographs. Because this ceiling collapse sealed the soil layers, it was possible to get a chronological profile of the changes in botanical species over the millennia it took to lay down these deposits. You can see this bend in the wadi from the outlook points west of the Petra Monastery [Ad-Deir]. Steve Simms finished the work and published reports as a post-mortem homage to Ken.”

When asked how he would describe what motivated Ken, Steve said this: “Ken had a passion for the power of the question. He really understood science as being the development of questions, rather than of answers, and in that regard we were really soul mates in that way. He would still be pursuing it today. He defined himself through his work, as so many scholars do.”

During intermittent fieldwork from 1986 to 1994, the Petra Ethnoarchaeological Project focused on the ethnography, ethnohistory, and ethnoarchaeology of the Bdoul Bedouin. In addition to their pastoral activities, the Bdoul traditionally cultivated fields of wheat, barley, and tobacco throughout Petra. Their agricultural fields were encountered and recorded by early travelers, and this showed that cultivation was a Bdoul practice dating from at least the 19th century. Archaeological evidence from Petra suggests that some fields there may even date to the medieval period.



Image 12: Inweijeh hand-feeding goats on ephedra. Umm el-Biyara, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_130)



Image 13: Agricultural fields south of Petra at Ras Wadi el-Batahi (Route to Wadi Sabra), Tulul Mutheilya to right. Possibly further north, 1986 (KR_J_S_210)



Image 14: Complete two-donkey ard, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_250)

At the time of Ken and Steve's ethnographic study in 1986, many Bdoul cultivated wheat and barley during the wet seasons using local seed stocks and by using ards, a type of light plow. Steve recalls being out on an excursion and coming across a barley field and seeing that it was being harvested by hand. This chance find sparked high excitement. Ken suggested that they started measuring return rates on this process, and that soon became the project's focus. The Petra Ethnoarchaeological Project, therefore, transformed from comparing living and abandoned tent camps in order to develop understanding about the camp formation processes into the study of Bdoul Bedouin harvesting methods. Of particular interest to Ken and Steve was the method of harvesting: dry or slightly green tillers of grain were gathered together with a sweep of the hand and broken off with a short jerk backwards, accompanied by a downward tilt of the wrist. This method continued until both hands were full of small bundles of grain, at which point they were laid on the ground in piles.



Image 15: Closeup of tall wheat in drainage north of Wahidat (Umm Seyhoun) and south of Beida. Wheat sample #4, 158 kg/du, 1986 (KR_J_S_181)



Image 16: Steve Simms, wild cereal harvesting, Petra, 1988 (KR_J_S_489)

In observing the Bdoul go about their work, Ken and Steve were able to compare the cost of hand harvesting with that of harvesting with different types of sickles. They found that harvesting by hand proved less costly than the use of early sickles, and hand harvesting of cultivated cereals was similar in cost to the harvesting of wild cereals, despite the investment in field preparation.



Image 17: Posed close-up of man hand harvesting wheat, Petra. Wheat sample W-S from this field, 1986 (KR_J_S_219)

These findings had important implications for the recognition of food production in the archaeological record. Comparing these figures showed that hand harvesting was as efficient as harvesting with advanced lithic and early metal sickles. Steve explained that “[i]n grass seed collecting, it is the processing costs that overwhelm all the other costs. Thus, ancient peoples were experiencing selection pressures as they made decisions about which grasses to exploit or ignore.” Therefore, Ken and Steve’s goal was not so much to find the “real” return rate for early cultivators as it was to identify potentially robust relationships within harvesting activities.

**Efficiency of Bidūl Males Hand Harvesting Wheat
and Barley Near Petra in May and June, 1986**

DATA	SUBJECT			
	1	2	3	4
SUBJECT'S AGE	45-48	45	20	30
CEREAL	Barley	Wheat	Wheat	Wheat
FIELD LOCATION	S. Petra Valley	L. Wadi Beīḍa	S. Petra Valley	L. Wadi Beīḍa
SAMPLE #	B5	W4	W8	W6
KG/DU	67	40	64	248
NO. OF M ² TIMED	20	4	12	4
MINUTES/M ²				
Mean	1.1	0.64	0.65	2.68
Median	1.1	-	0.63	-
St. Dev.	0.22	-	0.2	-
Min.	0.83	0.6	0.4	1.6
Max.	1.5	0.8	1.0	3.7
KG GRAIN/HR	3.66	3.74	5.94	5.58
KCAL/HR *	12,078	13,090	20,790	19,530
MEAN HRS/DU	18.3	10.7	10.8	44.7

* Calculated for barley at 3,300 Kcal and wheat at 3,500 Kcal. This excludes all prior tillage and sowing labor costs, and all subsequent processing labor costs.

Image 18: Bdoul hand harvesting efficiency chart (KR_J_S_1225)



Image 19: Hand harvesting in wheat field at head of Wadi Marwan, Petra. Wheat samples 7 (tall, thick) and S (short, thick), 1986 (KR_J_S_221)



Image 20: Photo by Steve Simms. Kenneth learning to hand harvest barley under instruction from Sahlim Im-Mohammed (to left). Fields south of Petra. 67 kg/du, 1986. Creator: Steven Simms (KR_J_S_432)



Image 21: Two young boys gathering and stacking harvested wheat in field at extreme south of Petra. Field for W-S, 1986 (KR_J_S_217)



Image 22: Closeup of dry barley, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_161)



Image 23: Harvested section of barley field at Ras Wadi Muesra. Field of barley sample B-1, Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_228)



Image 24: Threshing floor, stacked grain, and camel saddle, at extreme south of Petra, 1986 (KR_J_S_239)



Image 25: Phenotypic variability in wheat from same field, north of Wahidat (Umm Seyhoun), south of Beidha, Petra. Left: Wheat sample #3, 90 kg/du, Right: wheat sample #4 158 kg/du, 1986 (KR_J_S_158)

At the time of his death, Ken was about to begin excavations on the find of his life, the Petra Church. Ken had known about the structure since 1973 but formally recorded it only in April 1990. His untimely death so soon before breaking ground at the excavation site was especially tragic because Ken was the driving force behind the Petra Church Project and it was likely to have been a turning point in his career.



Image 26: Aerial image of Petra Church area prior to excavating, Petra, 1990 (KR_J_S_944)

Author Jane Taylor, whose photographic collection is available to browse [here](#), also recalls her memories of Ken:

“Ken introduced me to some of the Bdoul Bedouin whom he knew from his work in and around Petra—people who knew the out-of-the-way places that I would want to photograph. In particular he introduced me to Dakhilallah Qublan and his family, who have been my friends ever since. Wherever he went in Petra Ken was greeted by the Bedouin with a touching blend of affection and respect. It seemed there was no place—within Petra or in the hinterland—of which Ken did not know its name and what had happened there. He was the perfect guide for someone wanting to delve more deeply into the story of the place.

“When I was offered the opportunity of photographing Petra from the air for my book, [6] Ken was the obvious person to ask to accompany me, to ensure I was able to find every site on the list we had put together. It was the first time he had seen Petra from the air—a place he knew so well from the ground.

“What I didn’t know then was that he was already convinced that Petra had had a very big and early church—almost certainly a cathedral—decorated with a wealth of mosaics. He surreptitiously photographed its outline from the air—and later started his successful campaign to get the funding to excavate it.

“But on the day in May 1992 when the excavation was scheduled to begin, instead all his friends, both from Amman and from the Bdoul Bedouin, attended his burial at a site—given by the Bdoul—that overlooked his beloved Petra.” [7]



Image 27: Dahkilallah Qublan on a picnic in Wadi Umm al-Alda, Petra, 1988 (KR_J_S_499)



Image 28: Umm Seyhoun, aerial shot, Petra, 1990 (KR_J_S_871)



Image 29: Royal tombs, Petra, 1990 (KR_J_S_952)

The excavation of the Petra Church continued after Ken's passing, and it soon revealed that the church was built around 450 C.E. by Christian communities living in Petra. Two aisles of important mosaics were discovered, as well as a cache of 140 6th century papyrus scrolls that had been carbonized in a fire and thus preserved. ACOR has published [several books](#) on these exceedingly rare documents—the “Petra Papyri”—providing fascinating insights into late Byzantine-era society in Petra. [The Petra Church](#), published in 2001, was dedicated to Kenneth Russell and his unswerving devotion to recovering Petra's past. [8]

In 1997, Steve finished their work and published two articles that he co-authored with Ken: “Tur Imdai Rockshelter: Archaeology of Recent Pastoralists in Jordan” [9] and “Bedouin Hand Harvesting of Wheat and Barley: Implications for Early Cultivation in Southwestern Asia,” [10] thereby completing an important chapter in Ken's professional career.

To honor Ken's memory, [The Kenneth W. Russell Fellowship](#) was established with the support of family and friends. The fellowship is managed by ACOR and offers a yearly prize that provides financial assistance for Jordanian students enrolled in an archaeology or cultural heritage degree program in any country, as well as support for non-Jordanian students to conduct fieldwork in Jordan. The Russell Fellowship also supports the Bdoul of Umm Seyhoun through an annual Tawjihi prize, which goes to the highest performing male and female high school students in the village of Umm Sayhoun. You can support the Kenneth W. Russell Fellowship by

setting up a one-time or recurring monthly donation [on our website](#) or by mailing a check to our U.S. office. Details on this and on general support for ACOR can be found [here](#).

Ashley Lumb has served as ACOR's Project Archivist from July 2019 to May 2020. Her term at ACOR is part of the ACOR Research Library Photographic Archive Project (also known as the ACOR Photo Archive Project) which is supported through a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education (2016–2020).

References

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