

**EUROPEAN UNION  
AND  
ENPI CBC MEDITERRANEAN SEA BASIN PROGRAMME**



# NABATU

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## THE NABATAEANS THROUGH THEIR INSCRIPTIONS

FRANCISCO DEL RÍO SÁNCHEZ

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Text: Francisco del Río Sánchez, Juan Pedro Monferrer Sala

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	Thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high...	15
	Inscriptions can still be seen in the solid rock! It is obvious from the characters that they were done hurriedly and using rudimentary tools, some enormous and others minuscule...	37
	The King is so democratic that, in addition to serving himself, he sometimes serves the rest himself in his turn. He often renders an account of his kingship in the popular assembly; and sometimes even his mode of life is examined.	61
	Nobody knows whom these people worship! However, I was able to see a statue of their god that was like a square stone.	99
	The doors and façades are sculpted on the stone and there is nothing constructed. Everything is but into the rock like a grotto.	135
	They used to roam freely in these lands before the Romans took them over.	157
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The sense of mystery and the dream-like state you experience when you watch the sun setting over Wadi Rum or walk between the sheer rocks of Petra is very similar to the feeling that philologists and historians have when they enter the culture of the Nabataeans – a people that built a prosperous empire on the desert sands and then disappeared, leaving behind a rich and vast testimony hewn into the stone. In fact, the fascination that they arouse even today is not dissimilar to that in the past, since the exotic customs and riches of these desert dwellers on the edge of the Greco-Roman empire frequently inspired the imagination of historians and travellers in the ancient world.

Many of the monuments sculpted out of the red stone stand before us in silence, since in most cases there are no written texts to reveal how and why they were built. The monuments left by the Nabataeans provide a visual testimony to their cultural vitality, political strength and their capacity for social and linguistic hybridisation. However, for those trying to explain the wealth of this civilisation the absence of documentation, to tell us exactly who the Nabataeans were, means that it remains an enigma.

We know of thousands of Nabataean inscriptions conserved in the rocks of the canyons, mountains and valleys – a good number of which have been published. Even so, many of them have yet to be read and interpreted. All of these testimonies, plus a number of papyri and a few handfuls of coins, represent just a small part of what must have existed during the golden age of the Nabataean kingdom. Despite all the archaeologists' efforts, excavations carried out to date have been unable to find what must be the most valuable treasure for any researcher: the libraries or archives of documents that would reveal many secrets about that society.

This book presents some of the most significant aspects of Nabataean history and culture using a rather original methodology: we invite the readers to explore some of these inscriptions, which have been conserved by good fortune and time, so that they can have a direct involvement in history as it unravels. In most museums, it is generally accepted that written texts can only be enjoyed by the specialists who are able to read them; everyone else has to stay on the edges of the information that they offer and restrict themselves to visiting architectural monuments of past cultures, or viewing pieces that are more accessible and less complicated to interpret, such as tools or figurative images.

The aim of this book is therefore to explore the history and culture of the Nabataeans using the inscriptions not just as a complement to illustrate the text but as a primary source of information. The receiver of that information is the reader, motivated by curiosity and a wish to experience the satisfaction of obtaining first-hand data written by this ancient people. We are not thinking of providing readers with the thousands of known inscriptions, but a selection that we think are among the most interesting or significant. We used different criteria to choose them: the information that the text provides to understand Nabataean history, culture and institutions, the formal beauty of the piece itself and the state of conservation of the graphemes, so that they can be readily identified.

Join us in revealing the mysteries hidden in the Nabataean written texts. Just as the explorers and philologists did before us, we can learn to enjoy reading these texts. Let's touch the stone and interpret the voice of the ancient script; the language and culture that the Nabataeans established in the middle of the desert.

THOU THAT DWELLEST IN  
THE CLEFTS OF THE ROCK,  
WHOSE HABITATION  
IS HIGH...

# OBADIAH 1, 3

[illegible]

One of the most influential factors in forming the idea of the Nabataeans that has persisted into modernity was the discovery of the city of Petra by Johann Ludwig Burckhardt in August 1813. The Swiss explorer (disguised as an Arab to be able to secretly enter the hostile desert unnoticed) was completely hypnotised by the monuments he saw hidden behind the Siq gorge. He ignited the imagination of the Europeans of his age, ensuring that the hitherto almost completely unknown Nabataeans were seen through definitively rose-coloured spectacles.

The European adventurers who followed in the wake of Burckhardt had no hesitation in propagating the romantic view of the Nabataeans in the spirit of the time. Perhaps the most defining contribution to this idea came from Léon de Laborde, who visited the ruins of Petra in 1828 (also, of course, dressed as an Arab and riding a camel) guided by Louis-Maurice Linant de Bellefonds. On his return to Europe he published *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée*, which was full of etchings and information aimed at forming a mythicised image of the ancient Nabataeans: a mysterious people with exotic customs who were mentioned in ancient sources, living in the desert in a hidden capital city hewn from the rock, and who remained independent even during Roman rule.

Although it may seem strange, this idea of the Nabataeans survived the Roman era and has lasted until the present day, even subtly penetrating academic spheres. Perhaps that is the reason why, traditionally, the little-known and exotic Nabataeans were thought of as a monolithic society in terms of their institutions, customs and beliefs. Recent studies suggest that the most accurate description would be a “Nabataean” culture that extended from Petra and, with greater or -lesser intensity, influenced the different, heterogeneous non-Nabataean populations that existed in the area. In any case, this is still a question for debate among experts.





*Léon de Laborde del.*

*Léon de Laborde sculp.*

OUADI MOKATTEB  
( Presqu'isle de Sināï.)



*Huet del. Pig. V. Anon.*

Nabataean inscriptions in the Sinai Peninsula,  
as represented in *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée* by Léon de Laborde.

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# NABATU

Although *Nabatu* is sometimes simply translated as *Nabathaea*, or “the country of Nabataeans”, it appears to be originally an ethnical denomination; in fact, the most likely explanation is that it was the word that they used to describe themselves (“*the Nabatu*”) – a people whose activities and influence covered a large area that extended approximately 700km southwards from the Hawran (southern Syria) to Hegra (Saudi Arabia) and another 700km west from the Dumah Oasis to the Red Sea. The Nabataean people were probably the result of a confederation of tribes that were united by a common interest.

The Nabataeans probably proudly called themselves the Nabatu because they had learned the art of controlling and storing

water, making it part of their wealth and their cultural, political and social development. Their talent for storing and distributing precious water in the middle of the rocky desert must have been noticed very quickly by visitors passing through. In fact, Diodorus Siculus, the first historian to talk about them, wrote this some fifty years before the Christian era:

*They fill cisterns with rain water... and place signs only known to them, but not by anyone else. They water their herds every three days so that, if they have to flee to the arid regions, the animals are not in constant need of water.*

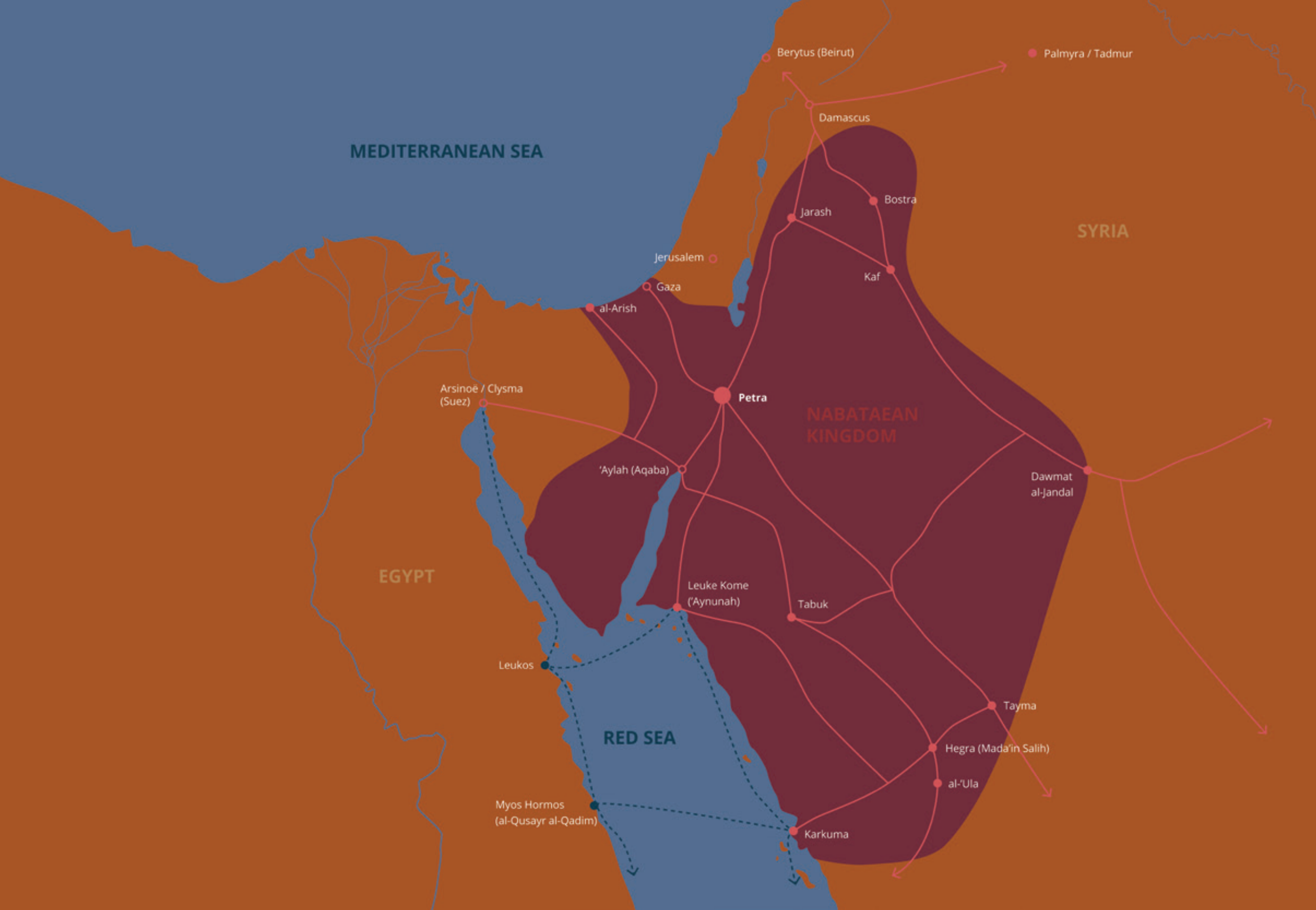
THE ENGLISH WORD **NABATAEAN** COMES FROM **NABATU** – A TERM WHICH FREQUENTLY APPEARS IN THE INSCRIPTIONS AND SEEMS TO BE RELATED TO THE CONCEPT OF “**IRRIGATION, WATERING, CHANNELLING WATER**”.



A representation of the term Nabatu as it appears in a Nabataean inscription. The Nabataeans referred to themselves as Nabatu in their texts.

As we shall see later on, the Nabataeans only used consonants in their words which are read from right to left, like this: wtbn ←





MEDITERRANEAN SEA

SYRIA

EGYPT

RED SEA

NABATAEAN  
KINGDOM

Berytus (Beirut)

Palmyra / Tadmur

Damascus

Bostra

Jarash

Jerusalem

Gaza

al-Arish

Kaf

Arsinoë / Clysma  
(Suez)

Petra

'Aylah (Aqaba)

Dawmat  
al-Jandal

Leuke Kome  
(Aynunah)

Tabuk

Leukos

Tayma

Hegra (Mada'in Salih)

al-'Ula

Myos Hormos  
(al-Qusayr al-Qadim)

Karkuma



## THE MYSTERY OF THEIR ORIGINS

There are many hypotheses about the origins of the Nabataeans. In fact, even today the question still arises of whether they should be identified with one of the 36 tribes of Aramaean rebels who lived in Babylonia and are mentioned in the Assyrian annals of the prominent King Tiglath-Pileser III (745-729 BCE) or even with the Arab tribe of the *Nabaiat-Nabaiati*, who were mentioned in texts during the reign of King Asurbanipal (668-627 BCE). In the west, they tended to be considered the descendents of Nebayoth, one of the sons of Ishmael, according to the Bible.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who lived during the second half of the 1st century CE and was witness to the final period of the Nabataean kingdom, associated the inhabitants of Nabathena (the name of the northern part of the Arab Peninsula at that time) with the descendents of twelve sons of Ishmael as mentioned in the Book of Genesis (chapters 25, 13; 28, 9 and 36, 3) and identified the Nabataeans with the Arabs. According to Josephus, the region had taken the name of Nebayoth, the eldest son. Saint Jerome, commentator and translator of the Bible, who lived between 340 and 420 CE, re-established this interpretation in the chapter 25 of his *Comments on Genesis*:

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***Nebayoth was the whole region that extended  
from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.  
Today is called Nabathena, and is part of Arabia.  
(Saint Jerome)***

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Some authors claim that they came from the south of Arabia, although there are no historical or cultural remains to prove that theory. Others think that they were originally an Arab clan that dominated the north of Arabia during the 8th-5th centuries BCE until they became the dominant population of what today is Jordan and the north of Saudi Arabia (precisely the same region that was occupied by the ancient Biblical Edomites, with whom they shared customs without identifying with them). The words of the Prophet Obadiah that appear at the beginning of this chapter, although explicitly aimed at the Edomites, could equally apply to the Nabataeans.

In any event, in addition to these two hypotheses there is also a third that is based on the linguistic peculiarities of the Arab dialect used by the Nabataeans, about which we know something thanks to the written material that has been conserved. This theory situates the origin of the Nabataeans in the area of Mesopotamia and more specifically in the north-east part of Arabia. Since the Nabataean presence in the Sinai, in Petra and in Oultre Jourdain had already been documented in the 4th century BCE, the migratory process of this people must have begun in the Persian era.

# SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The documentation that survives from the Nabataeans is very scarce. In order to find out about them, apart from what they say about themselves in the inscriptions, coins and documents, we also have testimonies in material culture studied by archaeologists and historians. We can also make a comparison with other cultures in the same area, and use what others said about them.

The clearest information that we have about the Nabataeans therefore comes from the contemporary Greek and Latin sources. Looking first at the information in chapters 5 and 9 of the *First Book of the Maccabees*, it can be deduced that there were friendly relations between Jews and Nabataeans, at least during the time of the Jewish insurrection against the Hellenistic monarchs. In fact, the book tells how, in 164 BCE, Judas Maccabee and his brother Jonathan met them after marching for three days in the south of Jordan and, having received a friendly welcome, were given useful information for liberating the Jews in Galaad. Even before the battle against Bacchides in 161 BCE, Jonathan offered to look after some of the more transportable goods.

As we have said, the first detailed description of the Nabataeans appears in the *Historic Library* of Diodorus of Sicily, a historian who was writing around 50 BCE. In the passage narrating the failed campaign of Antigonos I Monophthalmos (“Antigonos the One-Eyed”) against the nomads living in the Edom region (southern Jordan) in 312 BCE, Diodorus used reports provided by Hieronymos of Cardia, a Seleucian official who lived in the 4th century BCE and had fought in the war personally. Consequently, in his description, Diodorus offered information about the lives of the Nabataeans from a very ancient period, talking of them as nomads with no permanent abode and no sedentary habits.

*It is worth listing again the institutions these Arabs have through which they were able to protect their freedom. Their country has neither rivers nor copious springs from which a hostile army would be able to quench their thirst. They have a rule: not to harvest corn or plant fruit trees. They maintain this law because they think that those in possession of these goods can be easily forced to do what the powerful say as a result of their enjoyment of them. Some of them have camels and others sheep, grazing them in the desert (...) many of them are used to transporting frankincense, myrrh and the most expensive spices from the sea, receiving them from a place called Arabia Felix. They are tremendous lovers of freedom and they hide away in the desert, using it as a stronghold.*  
(Diodorus)

In the part about geography, Diodorus placed the Nabataeans around the Gulf of Aqaba and described them as the owners of numerous settlements both on the coast and inland. He commented that the Nabataeans had previously been incredibly rich in animals herds, and very numerous, but their national character had degenerated and many had ended up as pirates on the coasts of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. In any case, trade was always the mainstay of the Nabataean economy; both Petra, the capital (probably from the 4th century BCE) and Hegra in north-western Arabia were points on the trade routes that went through Al Hayl and Tayma before moving on to southern Arabia. Control of such major communications, which linked the peninsula to the continent, and the capacity for collecting water in the desert, thanks to the perfecting of channelling systems and storage, were key elements in their policy as a state and their prosperity as a people.

Nabataean remains found in areas as far away from their lands as Egypt, Phoenicia and Italy (Pozzuoli and Rome, where the Nabataean colony had its own temple) bear witness to the eminently commercial character of their civilisation. In fact Strabo, the Greek historian who lived from 63 BCE to 24 CE, confirmed in the 16th volume of his *Geography* that the main virtues of the Nabataeans were prudence in business and the ability to make a profit, to the point where the state punished those who lost their property and rewarded those who increased it. The simplicity that characterised the Nabataeans in the earliest ancient times had given way to luxury and refinement.

*The city which bears this name ranks highest in the land of the Arabs and to this day is called by the whole Arabian nation with the name of its royal founder, Rekeme: it is the Petra of the Greeks.*  
(Josephus)

In this mountainous refuge the Nabataeans built their main city, which they called Rakmu and which would be famous as far away as China. In Greek and Roman annals it was known as Petra, perhaps as a reminder of the ancient Ammonite settlement of Sela (a name that means “rock” in the Ammonite language and in Hebrew).

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**There are around 6000 known inscriptions in Nabataean script on stone. In addition, some papyri from the Dead Sea, texts on metal fragments and texts in ink on frescoes have also been discovered. Most of them are simple signatures or commemoration of people's names and epitaphs on tombs. The area in which the inscriptions have been found is very extensive and spreads well outside the Nabataean kingdom. Of course, the most important sources of texts are the ancient Nabataean cities: Petra, Bosra and Hegra, and their surrounding areas.**

In Petra, apart from the conservation of some 132 signatures there are also monumental inscriptions on tombs, royal images, cult places and chambers for ritual banquets. Further south, in the Ramm desert, several dozen examples of graffiti are conserved in the rock as well a couple of inscriptions dedicated to the goddess Allat.

In Hegra (the city that served as gateway to the desert that extended towards the central and southern Arabia) numerous funeral inscriptions and some graffiti containing names have been found. In the settlements of Dedan, Duma (al-Jawf) other texts have also been found. The furthest discovery was made at the Oasis of Najran near Yemen.

In the far north of the Nabataean territory is the city of Bosra where, in a region called Hawran, almost 300 inscriptions were found, some of which remain unpublished. Almost all of them are formal texts related to temples, altars, statues and sepulchral epitaphs.

In addition of these locations, texts have also been found in other regions which belonged to the Nabataean kingdom, at least temporarily. For example in the Southern Dead Sea Valley some legal papyri written in Nabataean Aramaic were found. In the Negev desert some extremely interesting inscriptions have been discovered in Nabataean centres such as Ein Avdat and Elusa.

Outside the Nabataean territories, inscriptions using similar calligraphy to Nabataean have also been found. In the Sinai Peninsula around 4000 examples of graffiti were discovered and in Egypt another 100, in addition to two monumental inscriptions found in the Nile Delta. Some isolated testimonies have been found in Greece and even in Italy.

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It is important to remember that Nabataean writing was never uniform, and ultimately it is a reflection of the heterogeneity of the peoples that used it and the diversity of lands in which the texts have been found. While the calligraphic model found in the inscriptions of Petra bears more resemblance to the cursive script written in ink on papyrus, the variant in the northern region of Hawran is characterised by much squarer, angular letters, as seen on this sepulchral inscription found in Umm el-Jimal.



**1. Epitaph (h-f-sh) of Zabudu.  
2. son of Shamitu.**

# SPLENDOUR AND DECLINE

The history of the Nabataeans can be divided into two phases. The first (170BCE - 106CE) is the period of the monarchy and an age of the greatest Nabataean splendour. Thanks to epigraphic documentation, information by contemporary authors and numismatic materials, a list of Nabataean kings can be reconstructed in an uninterrupted line from the end of the Hellenistic era to the full occupation of the region by the Romans.

The Nabataean kingdom, located in the same area that had been inhabited by the Edomites, with its nucleus in the region of Petra between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba, did not carry any specific weight in the area until the end of the 2nd century BCE when the fall of the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire in Syria made it possible to create an autonomous state there. In Greek sources, the Nabataean monarch is called the “king of the Arabs” on numerous occasions; he and his subjects would appear on occasion as friends or enemies of the different political powers that appeared in the region, according to the circumstances.

This period was characterised by Nabataean expansionism, clashing with different local powers, the Hellenistic kings, the Hasmonaean Jewish monarchs and the Romans themselves, to gain control of the trading routes, and also by the policy of understanding that the Nabataean chiefs had with Rome to conserve their independence and control their own territories.

The second phase began after the death of Rabbel II and ended with the Roman occupation. In 106 CE, by order of the Emperor Trajan, the territory that belonged to the Nabataeans was turned into a Roman province by the governor of Syria. The ancient lands of the Nabataeans were administrated by a legate and the capital was changed from Petra to Bosra. The area became a border occupied by the military and Nabataean civilisation fell into gradual decline until it completely disappeared in the middle of the 4th century CE.

# CHRONOLOGY

## FIRST NOTICES

- 627 The Nabaiaat-Nabaiaati are mentioned in Neo-Assyrian sources.
- 586 Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquers Jerusalem. The Rechabites, a nomadic people very similar in their customs to the Nabataeans move northwards.
- 552 Nabonidus of Babylon destroys the Edomite kingdom.
- 332 Alexander conquers the areas of Syria and Palestine.
- 323 Alexander dies.
- 312 Antigonos Monophthalmos carry out an unsuccessful campaign against the Nabataeans. First historical mention of the Nabataeans in a report by Hieronymos of Cardia.
- 259 The Zenon Papyri talk of a certain “People of Rabbel” in Hawran.

## CLASSIC KINGDOM PERIOD AT PETRA

- 170-168 First reference to a Nabataean king called Aretas “Tyrant of the Arabs” (2nd Maccabees). The Nabataeans began expanding to the north of Edom.
- 145 Nabataean King Malichus would have reigned in this period (Josephus, Antiquities XIII 131), but there is no evidence to prove this.
- 128 The Seleucids lose Mesopotamia. The route between the Persian Gulf and the Euphrates, in the hand of the Parthians, falls into disuse in favour of the route between Egypt and the Red Sea.
- c. 120/110-96 Aretas II “Erotimus, King of the Arabs” king of the Nabatu.
- 100 The Hasmonaean King Alexander Jannaeus (-103/-76), invades Gaza, which was awaiting the help of the Nabataeans.
- c. 96 Obodas I ascends the throne of the Nabatu.
- 93-90 Nabataean victory over the Hasmonaeans. Annexation of Hawran.



-85-84 The Seleucid King Antiochus XIII dies in battle with the Nabataean troops. King Obodas I is deified following his death and buried in Avdat (Negev).

-85-84 King Rabbel I (?).

-84 The son of Obodas I, Aretas III "Philhellene" (who loves the Greeks), becomes king of the Nabatu.

c. 82 Nabataean victory over Alexander Jannaeus.

-67 Alliance with the Hasmonaean King Hyrcanus II against the Romans. Roman victory in Jordan.

-66 Pompey occupies Damascus through his legates Lollius and Metellus. The city becomes part of the Roman province of Syria and outside Nabataean control.

-64 Creation of the Roman province of Syria and taking of Jerusalem.

-62 Marcus Aemilius Scaurus leads a campaign against Petra. Aretas III pays the sum of 300 Talents to avoid an occupation. From that time on the Romans consider the Nabataeans to be their subjects.

- c. 62-59 Obodas II, king of the Nabatu.

-59 Malichus I.

-55 Roman incursions on Petra.

-50 Diodorus of Sicily mentions the Nabataeans in his history, using information from Hieronymus of Cardia.

-47 The Nabataean king sends cavalry to Alexandria to help Julius Caesar.

-40 Partians invade Syria and Palestine. Malichus is accused of sympathising with the invaders.

-31 Herod of Judea infringes a defeat of Malichus I, who had made a wrong decision at the time of the Parthian invasion.

-30 Obodas III.

-20 The Nabataeans take control of Hawran (Auranitis).

-9 The Nabataean king is assassinated. Aretas IV "Lover of his People" takes power even though he is not Obodas's son.

-6 Syllaeus, a minister of Obodas III is executed in Rome.

4 Death of Herod.

26 Herod Antipas divorces the daughter of Aretas IV. The Nabat-

aeon king invades the Syrian lands of Herod Philippus, Antipas's brother, in reprisal and defeats him.

40 Malichus II.

67 The Jewish revolt begins. The Nabataean king supports the Romans.

70 Rabbel II "Life-Giver and Saviour of his People" is king of the Nabatu. His mother Shaqilat/Shuqaylat II becomes regent during the first five years of the monarchy.

## ROMAN PROVINCE

106 After the death of Rabbel II, Cornelius Palma occupies Petra and annexes Nabataea to the empire. The province of Arabia is created with Bosra as its capital.

111-114 Construction of the Via Traiana Nova, joining Bosra and Aqaba.

131 Hadrian visits Petra.

272 Fall of Palmyra.

328 First complete inscription in Arabic with Nabataean script.

356 Last inscription in Nabataean Aramaic.

363 An earthquake destroys Petra.

## BYZANTINE PROVINCE

420-450 Forced conversion to Christianity in Petra and the Nabataean territories.

551 Earthquake in Petra.

629 Muslim conquest of the region that had previously belonged to the Nabataeans.

747 Another earthquake in Petra.

1114 Crusade constructions close to the ancient Nabataean capital.

1188 Saladin occupies Petra for Islam.

## REDISCOVERY OF PETRA

1812 Johann Ludwig Burckhardt rediscovers Petra for westerners.

1841 Edward Beer decodes the ancient Nabataean alphabet in Leipzig.

# NABATAEAN CHRONOLOGY

The Nabaiat-Nabaiati are mentioned in Neo-Assyrian sources. -627

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquers Jerusalem. -586

Nabonidus of Babylon destroys the Edomite kingdom. -552

Alexander conquers the areas of Syria and Palestine. -332  
Alexander dies. -323

Antigonos Monophthalmos carry out a campaign against the Nabataeans. -312

The Zenon Papyri talk of a certain "People of Rabbell" in Hawran. -259

-170/168 BC

ARETAS I

-145

MALICHUS ?

-120/110

ARETAS II

-96

OBODAS I

-85/84

RABEL I ?

-84

ARETAS III

-62 -59

OBODAS II

MALICHUS I

-30

OBODAS III

-9

0

ARETAS IV

40

MALICHUS II

70

RABEL II

106 AD

Cornelius Palma occupies Petra and annexes Nabataea to the empire. 106  
Construction of the Via Trilana Nova. 111-114

Hadrian visits Petra. 131

Fall of Palmyra. 272

First complete inscription in Arabic with Nabataean script. 328

Last inscription in Nabataean Azamaic. 356  
An earthquake destroys Petra. 363

Forced conversion to Christianity in Petra. 420-450

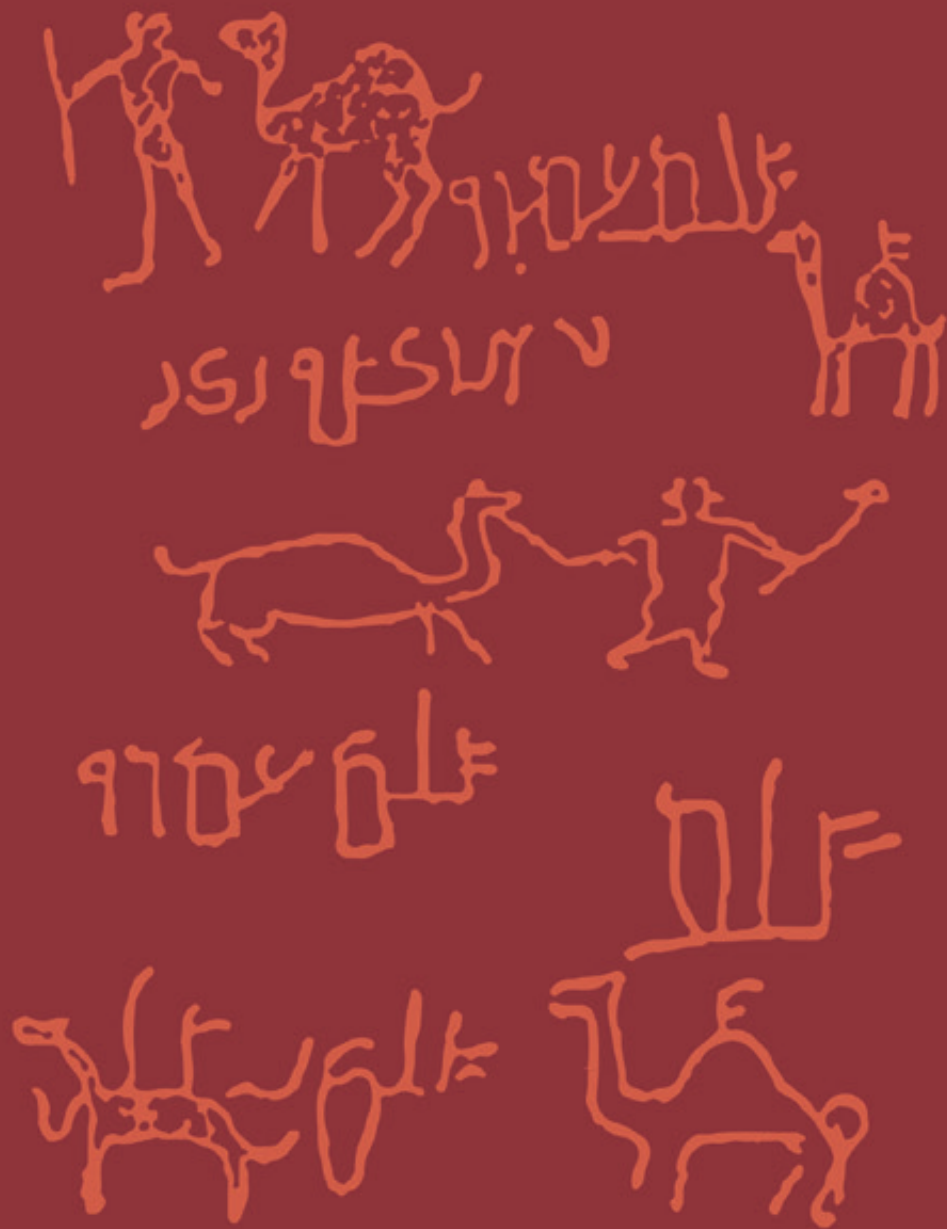
Earthquake in Petra. 551

Muslim conquest of the region. 629

Another earthquake in Petra. 747

Crusade constructions close to the ancient Nabataean capital. 1114

Saladin occupies Petra for Islam. 1188



**INSCRIPTIONS  
CAN STILL BE SEEN  
IN THE SOLID ROCK!  
IT IS OBVIOUS FROM THE  
CHARACTERS THAT THEY  
WERE DONE HURRIEDLY  
AND USING  
RUDIMENTARY TOOLS,  
SOME ENORMOUS AND  
OTHERS MINUSCULE...**

*JOHN BURCKHARDT,  
REDISCOVERER OF PETRA*

The Nabataeans carved their inscriptions in a local variety of the Aramaic language, which has been well-identified and described since the 19th century, and is known as “Nabataean Aramaic”. For them it was the language of texts, diplomacy, culture and religion. However, the scenario was considerably more complicated taking into account that in their daily life the population of the kingdom, or of the cultural area, spoke different languages depending on the specific place: northern Arab dialects, different variations on Aramaic and even Greek and Hebrew. This presents an important question for researchers that have to be answered: why did they use one language for writing and another for speaking?

A clue to the answer may be found by looking at the cultural environment of the area at that time. In fact, other nearby peoples such as the inhabitants of Palmyra in the Syrian desert or those of the sacred city of Hatra in northern Iraq, also used variants of Aramaic for engraving their monuments, although it is very possible that they, or at least a large proportion of the people who formed their societies, also used different dialects related to Arabic and other languages. This is because Aramaic had a long and prestigious history as the language of written communication, since it had been the lingua franca of the great empires in the Near East throughout the first millennium BCE.



**THE FACT THAT MANY NABATAEAN TEXTS WERE CARVED IN STONE HAD AN UNDOUBTED INFLUENCE ON THE FORM OF THE LETTERS AND THE CALLIGRAPHY. IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF AN INSCRIPTION CONSERVED IN ONE OF THE ROCK WALLS OF PETRA THE MARKS OF THE POINTED TOOL USED TO WRITE THE SIGNS CAN STILL BE SEEN.**



## ARAMAIC, THE GREAT LANGUAGE OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Aramaic is a Semitic language, the same as Arabic, Hebrew, ancient Akkadian and classical Ethiopian. This means that it shares many phonetic, grammatical, syntactic and lexical features with other languages of the family. In fact, the similarity between Semitic languages is very like that found between the Romance languages, such as French, Spanish and Italian, or among some of the Germanic languages such as German, Dutch and even English. This always enabled language exchange between the different Semitic peoples and the existence of some languages that could be used among them as instruments for communication, and this was precisely the case of Aramaic.

The Aramaic language has its origins in some of the nomadic tribes dwelling Upper Mesopotamia at the end of the second millennium BCE. However, the first known written testimonies did not appear until the 10th-8th centuries BCE when some insignificant states distributed throughout Syria and Mesopotamia used the Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet and adapted it to write Aramaic as a national language. At that time, the tiny kingdoms of Israel and Judah used the same system of writing for the first known texts in Hebrew.

The collapse of these states was rapid and, when they disappeared, Aramaic should really have faded into oblivion. However, different demographic, sociological and political circumstances led to the use of Aramaic as the lingua franca in the great Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires (8th-6th centuries BCE), and after them, the Achaemenid Persians (6th-4th centuries BCE). It was precisely during this last era that Aramaic spread beyond its original borders and ex-

tended into Egypt and as far as Asia Minor, at one point even reaching the Indian sub-continent. All of this was thanks to a process of standardisation that enabled many peoples to use the language as a common means of communication.

The conquests of Alexander the Great (who died in 323 BCE) led to the collapse of the Persian Empire, which was left fragmented on the rise of the Hellenic Dynasties along the Eastern Mediterranean and throughout the Near East. Greek began to establish itself as the administrative language in those lands, but Aramaic continued as the lingua franca for most of the population. This was partly due to the powerful memory of Imperial Aramaic, which had radiated out from the centres of power over the centuries.

The literary Aramaic served as a reference for everyone who used the language as a means of communication. The small states, tolerated by the new Hellenistic, Roman and Persian powers, developed their own prestigious variants of the language. Among those variants were Palmyrene and Hatran Aramaic, Nabataean, Old Syriac and Jewish Aramaic, which have been particularly well-conserved in inscriptions.

Although larger documents also exist in papyrus, parchment and metal, which enable us to place this period of the language, from approximately the end of the 3rd century BCE until the 3rd century CE. It is known by scholars as "Middle Aramaic". Situated in time between the age of the great empires and the Late Antiquity, this was the golden age of literature written in Aramaic.

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**The Aramaic used in the Nabataean inscriptions fits in perfectly with the dialects of the regions of Syria, Jordan and Palestine, which were different from those used in Mesopotamia and Persia. However Nabataean Aramaic has its own characteristics:**

- 1. A strong tendency to use archaisms.**
  - 2. The influence of Arabic, evident in the vocabulary, morphology and syntax.**
  - 3. Some Greek influences, especially in the names of positions in the state government and the army, and also in the names of some architectural elements.**
-

## FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH NABATAEAN SCRIPT

Inscriptions in Nabataean were already well-known in the Late Antiquity thanks to the account written in the mid-6th century CE by the Byzantine traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes. In his work *Christian Topography* he says that, during his travels through the Sinai, he found strange signs on the rocks written by the Israelites when they left Egypt and on their long journey across the desert. To support his **wrong** statement, Cosmas also indicated that the characters were still intelligible to Jews.

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*Wherefore, in that wilderness of Mount Sinai, one can see at all their halting-places, all the stones that have there been broken off from the mountains, inscribed with Hebrew letters, as I myself can testify, having travelled in these places. Certain Jews, too, who had read these inscriptions, informed me of their purport... The Israelites, who had but newly acquired the art of writing, continually practised it and filled a great multitude of stones with writing, so that, all those places are full of Hebrew inscriptions.*  
(Cosmas)

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Signs on the rocks of the Sinai.

Indicopleustes' curious work was widely distributed in 18th century Europe and ended up provoking tremendous interest in the inscriptions, which were wrongly accepted as being proto-Israelite in the scientific circles of the time. Such were the expectations for these possible biblical testimonies that in 1761 King Frederick V of Denmark commissioned the scholar Frederik Christian Von Haven to lead an expedition to Arabia with the aim of interpreting them. However, the results of that expedition were not what had been expected and after such great efforts it was only possible to copy twenty unintelligible texts.

In short, throughout the 18th century different theories emerged about the origin and nature of the inscriptions in Nabataean: among them was the contribution of Edward

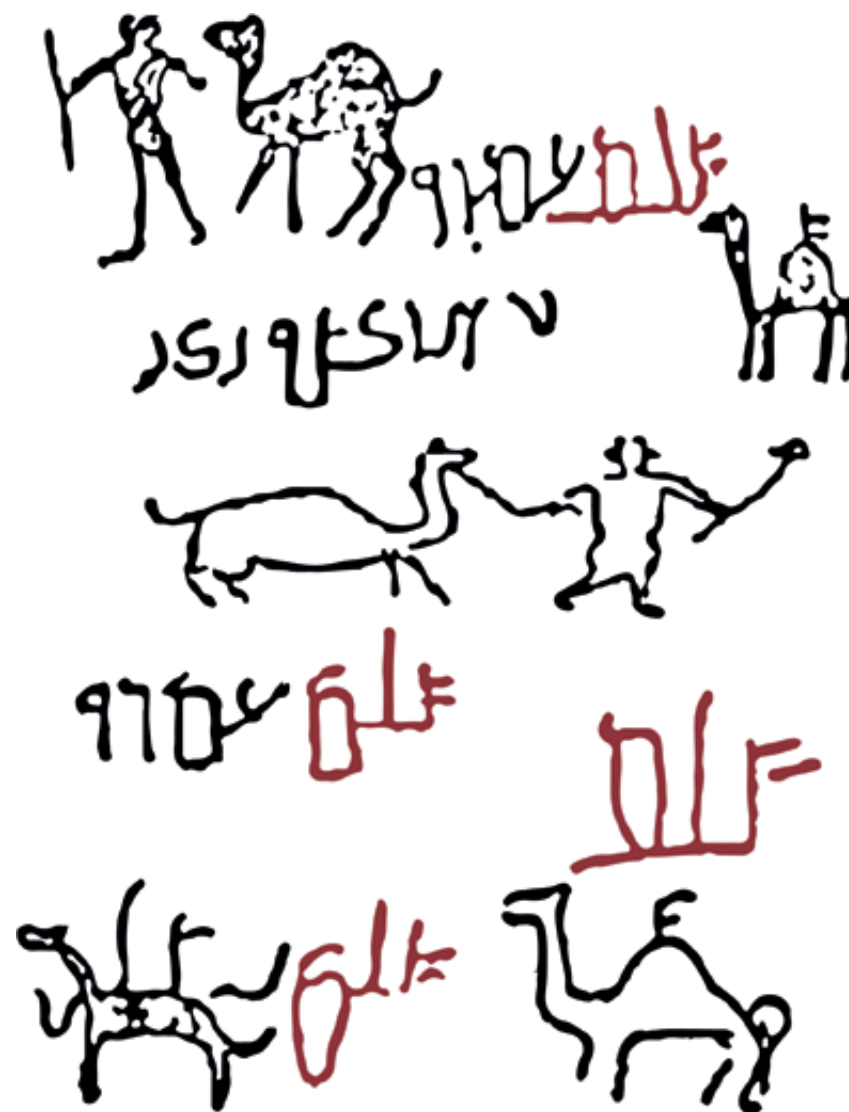
Wortley Montagu, a former British Consul in Constantinople. In 1766 he concluded that they could not be proto-Israelite after observing that they also contained figurative representations of humans, camels, horses and other animals, and that this would not have been permitted by Moses, who had just received the Ten Commandments!!

Wortley Montagu's greatest contribution for deciphering the texts was the first correct identification of a word written in Nabataean: "peace", which is repeated frequently in the texts, and in Nabataean would sound something like *shlam*. The conclusion of Wortley Montagu's study was that the texts in Nabataean script must have been written by pilgrims who, as a signature, left a record of their journey through Sinai from the 1st-4th centuries CE.



Detail of a graffito with figurative images and Nabataean script conserved in the Wadi Mukattab or “Valley of Inscriptions” in the Sinai Peninsula. The similarity of some of the characters to Hebrew script (see the text highlighted in the picture, מלך “peace” pronounced shlam, מלש) led to the wrong assumption that these inscriptions had been written by the ancient Israelites when they crossed the desert. In fact the text is also similar to the Arabic salaam, which has a related alphabet.

Below you can see different Nabataean graffiti as drawn by western explorers in the 19th century. In them the word “peace” (*shlam*) is repeated frequently.



## DECODING. CHARACTERISTICS OF NABATAEAN SCRIPT

In 1841, a young German epigrapher from the University of Leipzig named Edward Beer identified almost all the letters of the alphabet for the first time with correct reading of 148 copies of inscriptions, and recognised the similarity between the texts from the Sinai and those found in the ruins at Petra, the ancient Nabataean capital that was rediscovered in 1812 by the Swiss explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt. Later on, in the 1850s, contributions by Melchior de Vogüé and William Henry Waddington enabled the first steps to be taken towards establishing a more detailed typology of the different calligraphic styles. It was during this period that it was established as a calligraphic variant of the Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet, which had been adapted by the ancient Aramaeans at the beginning of the first millennium BCE.

The Nabataeans and the peoples under their cultural influence never had their own special alphabet. They simply used their own calligraphy which itself was derived from the cursive script developed from the monumental script in Canaanite-Phoenician characters during the period of the great empires. This cursive script was especially designed for writing on papyrus or parchment and was much less angular than that used on stone. It was accepted by the different peoples who used Aramaic as their language of communication.

**That is the reason why Nabataean script shares three essential characteristics with the Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet:**

- 1) It is written from right to left and not like the Latin or Greek alphabet, which goes from left to right.**
- 2) Only the consonant phonemes in the word appear. In other words there are no vowels.**
- 3) It continues to have the original number of 22 signs.**

## A COMMON PAST

Although it may seem strange, the letters that we use to write in English and other western languages are related to Nabataean. In fact, in the end all the alphabets originating in the Mediterranean area (such as Greek and Latin) and which spread from there to other continents, come from the design of the Canaanites and the Phoenicians. The big difference is that their alphabets were written from right to left and only contained consonants. The alphabets that have preserved these characteristics, such as Nabataean, Arabic and Hebrew are known as *abjad alphabets* and are the closest to our common ancestor.

Below you can see different systems of Aramaic alphabets together with the original signs that they were based on.



Phonetic Transcription	Proto-Sinaitic	Canaanite-Phoenician	Ancient Aramaic	Cursive Aramaic	Square Hasmonean	Palmyrene	Syriac	NABATAEAN
ʾ								
b								
g								
d								
h								
w								
z								
h								
t								
y								
k								
l								
m								
n								
s								
e								
p								
s								
q								
r								
š								
t								

### **Phonetic Transcription**

Phonetic transcription that experts and scholars tend to use to represent the sound of each consonant. The signs with a dot below them represent phonemes delivered more energetically than in English. The sign ʾ represents a glottal stop (like the t in “bottle” pronounced with a Cockney accent), and the ܐ represents a phoneme similar to ‘ah’ produced by stretching the larynx. Finally, ܫ represents the English “sh” sound as in “ship”.

### **Proto-Sinaitic**

This primitive alphabet emerged in the middle of the second millennium BCE. It was probably the system used by Semitic slaves working in the Sinai mines, inspired in the signs of Egyptian hieroglyphic script. As you can see this type of script represented specific objects which served to indicate a particular consonant.

### **Canaanite-Phoenician**

From the 11th century BCE, the Canaanites and the Phoenicians used the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, but they stylised the signs.

### **Ancient Aramaic**

The Aramaeans adapted the Canaanite alphabet in the 10th century BCE.

### **Cursive Aramaic**

During the age of the great empires there was a major change in Aramaic writing, which had originally been designed for carving into stone, wood, clay or bone. The use of ink and papyrus produced a new cursive calligraphy which was fully developed from the 5th century BCE.

### **Square Hasmonaean**

After the 3rd century BCE Jews began to use this stylized “square” form of the Cursive Aramaic alphabet used in the Persian Empire.













**Palmyrene:** Palmyra was an ancient city located in the Syrian desert. Due to its strategic location, it became a prosperous center of trade between the 2nd C. BCE and the 3rd CE. The written language used at Palmyra was a local dialect of Aramaic and was written using this local variant of the Imperial Aramaic script.

**Syriac:** It was used to write a dialect of the Aramaic language spoken in northern Mesopotamia, in the area where the modern nations of Syria, Turkey and Iraq intersect, and particularly around the city of Edessa. The earliest Syriac script is called Estrangela.

EVOLUTION BASED  
ON SIMPLIFICATION

The basic tendencies for the development of cursive Aramaic script during the Imperial Period (column 5) are the origin of later changes in the different Aramaic calligraphies, including Nabataean. First, in this cursive calligraphy some of the graphemes were *stylised* and the angular forms of Ara-

maic in column 4 disappeared. Others signs were *simplified* and reduced to simple lines. Finally, in some cases the graphemes were *modified* and closed or triangular forms were systematically eliminated. The result of these three changes (stylisation, simplification and modification) can be seen below.

			<p>In this picture can be seen three pictographic Proto-Sinaitic signs. From left to right, the first looks like a schematic image of a snake and was used to represent the n sound. The second was used to represent the z sound and looks like handcuffs or shackles. The third sign represented the r sound and is clearly a picture of a human head.</p>
			<p>Here can be seen the evolution that occurred with the most primitive Canaanite-Phoenician alphabet (11th-9th century BCE). Firstly, the n was reduced to three straight lines, the z became a single sign thanks to a joining line between the two previous parallels and the r was simplified to more essential lines.</p>
			<p>The Aramaeans adopted the Phoenician signs almost without modification, except turning the n to a vertical position (something that reminds us of our own Latin N) and in the case of the r there is a change in orientation due to the direction of the writing (right to left).</p>
			<p>In the age of the great empires, the creation of a cursive script continued the trends identified above. The n was <i>stylised</i> and the angles of a script originally designed for carving in stone, wood, metal or bone were removed. The z was <i>simplified</i> to a single vertical stroke (which was not present in the original!) and the r was <i>modified</i> to eliminate the closed, triangular form. All the other graphemes of the alphabet evolved according to these three trends.</p>
			<p>The signs represented in Nabataean script.</p>



**Aramaic cursive calligraphy from the Imperial Age: a letter on papyrus found in Elephantine (southern Egypt), dating from 408 BCE. On it, the stylised strokes that would give rise to later Aramaic graphemes, including Nabataean, can be seen.**

## NATIONAL CALLIGRAPHIES

The success of the cursive letter developed in the Persian Imperial period was so great that it continued to be used, with certain variations, in what we know of as the Hellenistic period. Its influence forms the basis of different calligraphic styles that emerged, following the death of Alexander the Great, in different independent states of the Middle East: this is the case of Hebrew, Palmyrene, Syriac and Nabataean scripts.

This example shows the similarity between Nabataean and Aramaic script of the Imperial Age. It is an inscription on a silver bowl found in Tell el-Maskhuta, Egypt, in a place where a group of Arabs from northern Arabia built a sanctuary to the Arab goddess han-llat during the time of the Persian Empire.



The text, which dates from the 5th century BCE says:

**Harbik bar Pasiri offered it to han-llat the goddess**  
 ('thl' tl'nhl brq yrsp rb kbrh)

If we compare this calligraphy to Nabataean we can see that there are enormous similarities, although this example was written several centuries before the first Nabataean text.

These national scripts show a clear dependence on the Imperial Aramaic cursive, and it was possible for two clearly related families to be established. To the west of the Euphrates river from the 3rd-1st century BCE a squarer type of script with separated letters was developed. The best example from this period and place is the national Judeo-Aramaic script of the Hasmonaean era (known as Hebrew square script), which already appeared completely formed at that time, although the Nabataean and Palmyrene scripts also belong to this area.



The city of Tadmor (Palmyra) in the Syrian desert owes its existence to the fact that it is in an oasis on an important trade route which has joined the Mediterranean and Syria with Mesopotamia since ancient times. In the first century CE, this city was already a prosperous marketplace with a solid link with Roman power. The remains of the monuments that can still be seen next to the modern city or in different museum collections, together with more than 3,000 inscriptions discovered, enable us to reconstruct the life and customs of the inhabitants of Palmyra. Palmyrene Aramaic uses calligraphy similar to that of Nabataean and Hebrew square script. There was one version for monuments and a simple version which did not vary greatly. This image shows an example of Palmyrene text in monumental script.





# EVOLUTION OF NABATAEAN CALLIGRAPHY

It is highly possible that the Nabataean model of calligraphy found on the most primitive inscriptions had some influence on national Jewish-Aramaic calligraphy. This is explained by the strong political and cultural influence of the Jewish state over Nabataea. In these primitive texts the letters are still separated and are slightly squared.

However, over time the Nabataean calligraphy continued to evolve towards a cursive form which looks more like Arabic or Syriac, with a predominance of rounded forms and stylised letters which are joined up.

See how the word king, *mlk* (pronounced more or less like *mlech*, with a Scottish ch sound as in *loch*) marked in both inscriptions (klm), is written in almost identical calligraphy.

Last line of an inscription found in a chamber close to the gorge at Petra, dated to 96 BCE.

חרתת מלך נבט

Aretas, king of the Nabatu.

Judeo-Aramaic inscription referring to the tomb of King Uzziah of Judah (cf. 2Kings 15). This is carved into a stone slab found in 1931 at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The piece appears to date from the 1st century CE.



- 1. Here were brought
- 2. The bones of Uzziah,
- 3. King of Judah.
- 4. And not open.

Example of the change in Nabataean calligraphy: inscription dated 265 CE (when the Romans already ruled the area) which was found in Umm el-Jimal, an archaeological site situated 70km north-east of Ammam, just to the south of the present border with Syria.



1. This is the funeral stone of Fakhru
2. Son of Shullay, master of Gadhima
3. King of the Tanukh

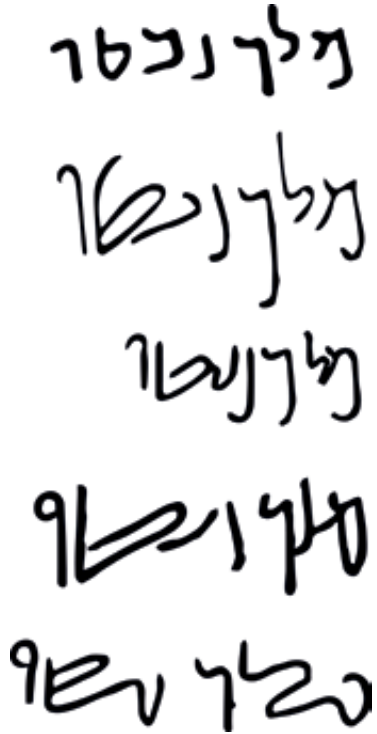
The term *mlk* “king” seems here more like Arabic or even Syriac, a Christian Aramaic dialect that looks similar to Arabic. Below is the word “king” in Syriac.



In the following illustration we can see how the Nabataean signs (centre) evolved into letters that are probably the origin of primitive Arabic writing (on the right). See how some of the letters, like the first, had two alternative forms which evolved independently. The letters marked with an asterisk (\*) are forms that were only used at the end of a word.

ʾ	Δ α 5 8 6 6 1	1
ב	↓ 2 2 2 2 2	2
ג	5 5 5 1 1 1	3
ד	λ λ λ	4
ה	γ γ γ	5
ה*	π π π π	6
ו	η η η η α	7
ז	γ γ	8
ח	1	9
ט	Η Η η η λ λ	10
י	6	11
י*	3 1 1	12
כ	9 9 9 9	13
כ*	5 5 5 5	14
ל	1 1	15
מ	5 5 5	16
מ*	5 5	17
נ	1 1 1	18
ס	5 5 5	19
ע	5 5 5 5	20
פ	9 9	21
פ*	5 5 5	22
ק	5 5 5 5	23
ר	1 1	24
ש	5 5 5	25
ת	5 5 5 5	26

By way of example, let us return to the words “King of the Nabatu” (wtbn klm) and look at the evolution in the following texts, all taken from Nabataean inscriptions. The first two examples belong to pieces that pre-date the Christian Era while the three last examples are dated to the middle and end of the 1st century CE and the beginning of the second.



One small but important detail is that in the previous pages it has been confirmed that Nabataean (like all *abjad* alphabets) was only written with consonants. However, in the last example, in the word Nabatu (wtbn) a w is used to represent the final u. How can this apparent contradiction be explained? It is because the Aramaeans thought up a system to represent vowels occasionally using consonants in order to facilitate the reading of the texts. They chose three letters (*alaph*, *waw* and *yod*, see the previous table): alaph (ʾ) was used to represent the sound a, the letter waw (w) was occasionally used as o/u and yod (y) as e/i).



וְשֶׁמֶן מִתְּהַב וְתוֹתוֹ נִכְלָה לָּהּ  
מִתְּהַב וְשֶׁמֶן עַל עֲוֹנוֹת שְׂחָתָהּ  
לֹא יִתְּנֶה שְׂחָתָהּ שֶׁנֶּחֱמָה וְלֹא יִתְּנֶה  
וְשֶׁמֶן יִתְּנֶה וְלֹא יִתְּנֶה וְשֶׁמֶן יִתְּנֶה  
שְׂחָתָהּ וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן  
וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן  
וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן  
וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן וְשֶׁמֶן

**THE KING IS SO  
DEMOCRATIC THAT, IN  
ADDITION TO SERVING  
HIMSELF, HE SOMETIMES  
SERVES THE REST HIMSELF  
IN HIS TURN. HE OFTEN  
RENDERS AN ACCOUNT  
OF HIS KINGSHIP IN THE  
POPULAR ASSEMBLY;  
AND SOMETIMES EVEN  
HIS MODE OF LIFE IS  
EXAMINED.**

*STRABO*

The texts that we have available for studying the Nabataean kings are scarce and not always very clear or generous in the information they offer. Part of it comes from Greek and Latin writers, but among them it is only the historian Flavius Josephus who refers to the monarchs in any detail and the information he provided was all related to Judaea. In the other cases the news are occasional and brief.

The inscriptions also offer information about some of the Nabataean kings. From them, other useful notices can be obtained which, as we will see, enables us to piece together the different part of the story. Finally we also have access to numismatic materials that can tell us some interesting aspects of the life and even the personality of these kings. The coins, in that they were produced at the heart of Nabataean power, tell us what the official discourse of the Nabataean monarchs was and how they saw themselves: on the coins appears the name and image of the monarchs and that of their consorts along with the formulas associated with a particular king, many of which are repeated in the inscriptions.

To give an example, an enormously important feature in the political language of the Nabataean kings were the representations of the monarchs on coins minted during each reign and specifically in the way in which the hair was shown. The kings took a great interest in this aspect of their appearance to the extent that an interesting stylistic evolution in the representations of later monarchs can be seen compared with the more realistic representations on the first coins.

## CLASSIFICATION OF THE NABATAEAN KINGS

Historians tend to classify the Nabataean kings in three different periods:

1) the **ancient period** or the first kings (from the middle of the 2nd century to the middle of the 1st century BCE) for which we have little information and few inscriptions,

2) the **period of splendour** (up to the year 40 CE) and

3) the **period of decline** (from 40 CE to the period of full Roman occupation at the beginning of the 2nd century CE).

### ANCIENT PERIOD

RABBEL (?)  
ARETAS I (168 BC)  
MALICHUS (?)  
OBODAS I (96 BCE)  
RABBEL I (85 BCE)  
ARETAS III (84 BCE)  
OBODAS II (62 BCE)

## THE FIRST KINGS (C. 169 BCE - 58 CE)

חרתת

### Aretas I, "Tyrant of the Arabs" (from approximately 168 BCE)

#### The Sheikh

Although it is almost certain that there were other Nabataean rulers before this monarch (the Zenon Papyri dating back to the 3rd century BCE mention the existence of a certain "City of Rabbel" in Hawran, southern Syria) the first king that we know of is Aretas I, "Tyrant of the Arabs", who is mentioned in chapter 5 of the second book of the Maccabees, written in Greek. The same text tells that Jason, the high priest of the Jews, requested political asylum from the Nabataean leader in 168 BCE, but it was turned down and Aretas I had him imprisoned.

The name Aretas comes from the Greek pronunciation of Harithath, his real name. It is also interesting to see that the Greek word "tyrannos" (tyrant) that appears in the passage indicates two things: first, that Nabataea was already independent in the 2nd century BC and its people were ruled by an autonomous leader. The name also suggests that Aretas I did not have the true name of a king but rather that of a sheikh, a tribal ruler.

In this seven-line inscription (now disappeared) the name Aretas can be partially made out with the title of king. It is under discussion whether this name pertains to Aretas I or to his successor Aretas II.

ינה אחר  
ואחר  
נתארו  
על חירדה  
יהי חת  
אלך  
נכטור

The text probably dates back to the 2nd century BCE. It was found in al-Khalasa/Halutza (the ancient Nabataean market city of Elusa situated on the Nabataean incense route between Petra and Gaza) and it is the oldest inscription that we know of in Nabataean script. In fact, none of the legible letters are yet "typically" Nabataean and the uneven, careless calligraphy is still very square and not yet cursive. The text refers to a dedication of a holy site made by Nothayru. To make it easier to examine the letters the proper names are marked in **maroon** and the titles in **sandstone**. The inscription says the following:

1. This is the place
2. made by
3. Nothayru (wrytn)  
←
4. for the life of
5. Aretas (tt[r]h),  
←
6. king (klm)  
←
7. of the Nabatu (wtbn).  
←



ארתא

**Aretas II “King of the Nabatu”**  
(from approximately 120 BCE)

#### The Prolific King

Josephus states that after the death of Aretas I in the middle of the 2nd century BCE, he was succeeded by Malichus (which in this case may be a Greek transcription of the Aramaic or Arabic word for “king”) but there is no evidence to prove this.

What is certain, however, is that a new monarch of the same name appeared on the scene around 120 BCE although if we recognise him in the above inscription he would already have been “king of the Nabatu”, appearing in Greek sources under the name of Erotimus. This monarch, who, according to late Roman sources, had up to 700 children, helped the inhabitants of Gaza when they were besieged by Alexander Jannaeus in the most glorious period of the Hasmonaean kingdom. Under Aretas II, the Nabataean kingdom expanded towards the north thanks to the fratricidal wars that brought down the Seleucid Empire in 129 BCE following the death of Antiochus VII Sidetes (138-129 BCE).

עבדא

**Obodas I**  
(from approximately 96 BCE)

#### The King-god

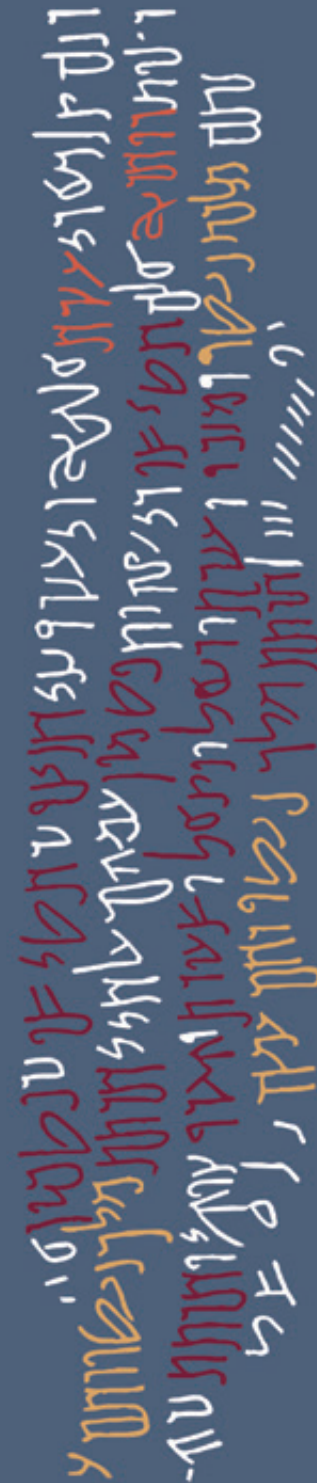
It is thanks to an inscription in Petra dedicated to the god Dushara that we know that Aretas II was succeeded by his son Obodas I (again, a Greek transcription of the original name Abdath) and that he was known by the same title as his father – “king of the Nabataeans”, or “king of the Arabs” in the Greek sources. As Josephus records, the military strength of the Nabataean forces during his reign was clear ambush to the soldiers of Alexander Jannaeus at the east of the Sea of Galilee next to the Golan Heights, which was carried out with troops mounted on camels. That victory led to the Nabataeans taking power of twelve localities in the lands of Moab and Negev.

After his death Obodas was deified, and a holy site was established in Petra in his honour. In the Negev desert, one of the camps on the ancient incense and spice route from Arabia was named after him, making it a sacred place that still carries his name (in Hebrew, *Ein Avdat*, the Spring of Obodas).



This inscription can be found in a chapel carved into the rocks of Petra. It is dated to the year 29 of Aretas IV (20 CE), and talks about the worship by an entire family of the deified King Obodas. The names of the gods are highlighted in **orange**, the titles in **sandstone** and the names of people in **maroon**. It is interesting to see how the members of the reigning monarch's family are listed.

1. This is the image (*salma*) of the god Obodas (*Abdath alaha*), made by Hunaynu son of Hutayshu son of Petammon,
2. which is next to that of Dutara, the god of Hutayshu, who is in the terrace of Petmon, his ancestor. For the life of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, who loves his people,
3. ... his sister, queen of the Nabatu, and Malichus, Obodas, Rabbel, Phasiel, Shaudath and Hagiru, her sons and Aretas son of Hagiru...
4. ...29 of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, who loves his people. Yes, Peace!



𐤊𐤁𐤁𐤏𐤋

**Rabbel I**  
(approximately 85/ 84 BCE)

#### The Short-lived King

During the reign of the Seleucid King Antiochus XII Dionysus (88-84 BCE) a series of military offensives were launched against the Nabataeans. In the second campaign, Antiochus carried out an attack to the south of the Dead Sea, in the middle of the desert, but the Nabataeans crushed it and the Greek king died of his battle wounds. This occurred in 85 BCE, and victory of the Seleucids was absolute, although it also seems that the Nabataean king also died. A passage written by Stephanus of Byzantium mentions the Arab King Rabilas, probably Rabbel I.

This text is a copy of the original, found at the foot of statue in honour of a king named Rabbel (the names are marked in **red** and the royal titles in **sandstone**). Unfortunately the right hand part has been completely destroyed and so we cannot find out the relationship that this person had with the next Nabataean monarch mentioned. However, the final line leads us to think that it was erected by his son (whose name is highlighted in the last line). The archaic nature of the letters which are beautifully carved makes us think that it refers to Rabbel I.



This is what the inscription says:

1. (Is this the statue) of Rabbel king of the Nabatu,
2. (...) king of the Nabatu, erected by,
3. (...) son of Hayyamnanay the Great, and restored,
4. in the month of Kislev, that is Shamra
5. 18 of Aretas the king.



𐤀𐤓𐤕𐤍𐤁𐤏𐤕

### Aretas III, Philhellenes (84 - 62/ 60 BCE)

#### Imitator of the Greeks

During his reign the Nabataean kingdom expanded to what are now southern Syria, Jordan and northern Arabia. In fact, Josephus mentions the occupation of Damascus by the troops of Aretas III, although this was very short-lived. Nabataean soldiers left the city in around 70 BCE before the invasion of the Armenian King Tigranes II The Great (140-55 BCE). In any case, the occupation of the city, considered to be one of the main points of the route that linked India with the Mediterranean, shows the king's concern to control trading in the area. In fact, Aretas occupied the city at the first opportunity and that was when Tigranes weakened his hold on Damascus to take on the Roman troops threatening to lay siege to his own capital (69 BCE).

Although his own power came into conflict with the weakened Greek monarchy in Syria, Aretas III gave himself the title of "Lover of the Greeks" (*Philhellenes*), and this appears in Greek on the coins that he had minted during his reign. In fact, he was the first monarch to mint a truly "Nabataean" currency. His desire to become assimilated in Greek culture and an attempt to forget his nomadic and Semitic past began a new period in the Nabataean kingdom, and so was voluntarily open to the influence of Greek culture in Petra.

His position in the conflict for the throne of Judaea between Hyrcanus II and his brother Aristobulus (67 BCE) was the beginning of a new era in Aretas's reign and it coincided with the final establishment of Roman power in the area. The Nabataean king took Hyrcanus's side and allowed him to take refuge in Petra on the promise of the return of cities that had been seized by the Hasmonaeans. Aretas, supported by Hyrcanus, laid siege to Jerusalem with 50,000 men, but his opponent Aristobulus allied with the Romans and managed to get Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, a general of Pompey the Great and governor of Syria, to make the Nabataean king withdraw, suffering a devastating defeat at the hands of Aristobulus's troops as he returned to Petra. Despite the fact that Aretas had nominally submitted to the Romans, they had no hesitation in descending on Petra whenever they had an excuse although the siege was lifted at a cost of 300 silver talents and the recognition of Roman power over the Nabataeans. From that time on the Nabataean king became a Roman subject.

The description that coins give us of Aretas III is interesting. They all show a realist portrait of the monarch wearing the royal headband with his abundant head of hair divided in two. His thick lips, eagle-shaped nose and other features are reminiscent of images of the Hellenistic monarchs of the lost Seleucid dynasty.



ח נ י

**Obodas II**  
(from approximately 62/60 – 59 BCE)

#### **The Forgotten King**

The short-lived existence of this king was uncertain but a recent discovery of some silver coins belonging to his kingdom were very different from the first ones minted by his predecessor since we can see typical Nabataean signs on them, such as writing. The name of the first King Obodas, the great hero of the dynasty, appears repeated on different occasions throughout the history of the Nabataeans, including in personal names such as Abdabdat or “servant of Obodas”.



## PERIOD OF SPLENDOUR

MALICHUS I (59BCE)

OBODAS III (30 BCE)

...

ARETAS IV (9 BCE)

## THE GOLDEN AGE KINGS (59 BCE - 70 CE)



מלכוס

**Malichus I**  
(59-30 BCE)

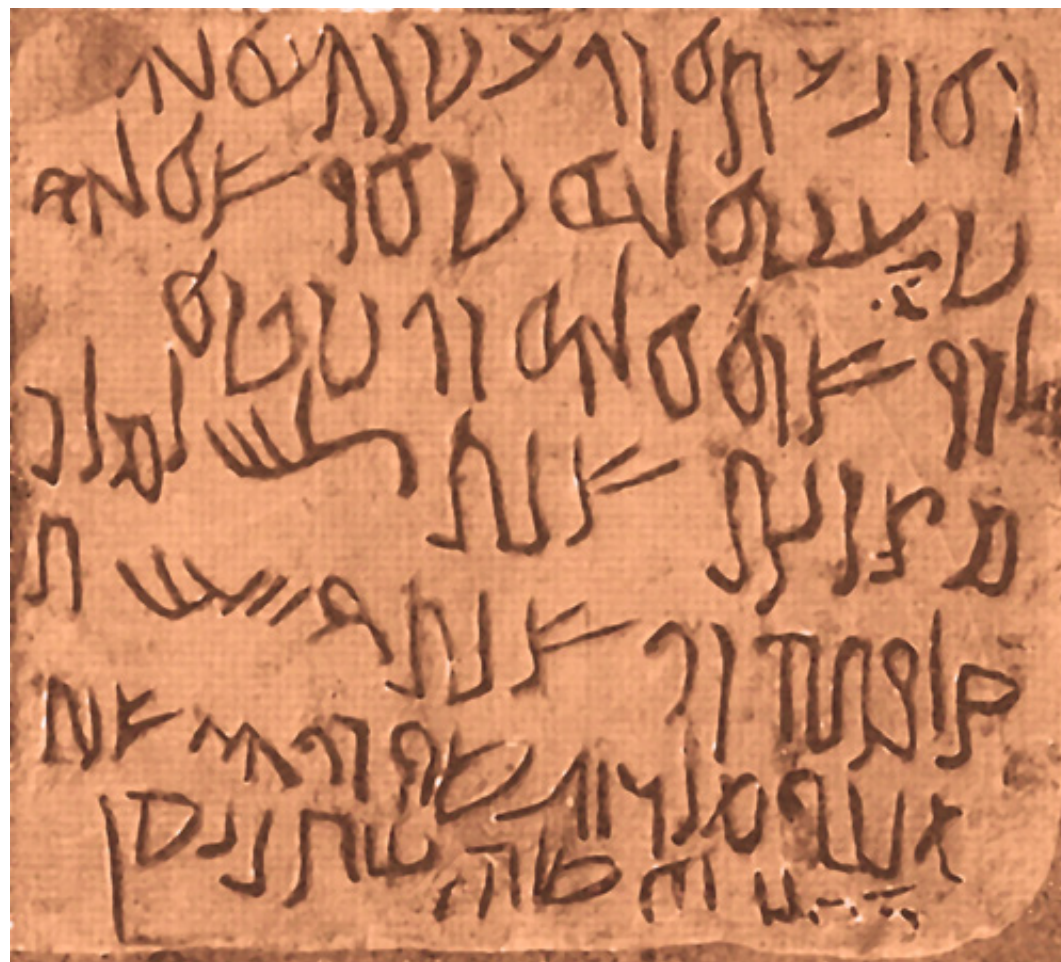
### The Defeated King

What we do know is that the next king was Malichus I (again, the Greek transcription of his true Nabataean name, which would have been Malikho or Maliku), who appears on the coins with a head of long hair. He is famous for his support for the Roman Empire as demonstrated in his backing of Caesar's troops during the war of Alexandria.

The Parthian invasion of Syria-Palestine, which began in 40 BCE, led to Malichus being accused of being a sympathiser with Rome's enemy. This resulted in a heavy fine and the loss of several territories which were given instead to Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. It also led to a drastic change in the politic circumstances of the region.

The following decade from 40 to 30 BCE was no better under the rule of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. Under this new regime, Malichus lost part of his land in Jordan. Disagreements between Herod and Malichus, provoked at the instigation of Anthony and Cleopatra, led both monarchs into a war that ended disastrously for the Nabataeans in 31 BCE. One year later Malichus died.

On this small block of stone there is an interesting seven-line inscription that talks about a sacred room or *cella* that would have formed part of a holy site of the god Dushara. The text shows that the Nabataeans were also present in Egypt as it talks of a place called Daphne situated in the eastern part of the Nile Delta. It is dated to 35 BCE, the 18th year of Cleopatra's reign, and chronologically coincides with the 26th year of the Nabataean King Malichus I. The people's names are marked in **maroon** the gods in **orange** and the place names in **sandstone**.



1. This is the sacred chamber (*rab'ata*) that Wahballahi
2. son of Abdalga son of Awsallahi
3. made for the god Dushara which is in Daphne
4. in Egypt. 18th year of Queen
5. Cleopatra, which is the 26th year
6. of Malichus king of the Nabatu, which is year
7. 2 of Atlah. In the month of April (*Nisan*).

The calligraphy is particularly interesting since it is highly evolved for such an early time. This leads us to think that it is probably a copy of the lost original.



ה נ י

**Obodas III**  
(30 BCE - 9 BCE)

### The Lazy King

What the new monarch inherited is evidence of the political decline of the Nabataean state at that time. The king was handed down more than a few problems, among which were the intrigues of his minister Syllaeus (original name Shullay) in whom he indolently delegated all of his power (according to Strabo) to the point where Syllaeus wanted to take over the throne himself. However, during his time some of the most important Nabataean constructions that we know of were made.

Following the defeats of Obodas by Herod, the borders of the kingdom shrank and no longer included areas of southern Syria that had been added during the year 20 BCE.

During this time was the failed expedition of Aelius Gallus to Arabia in search of trade routes. The Romans blamed the bad advice of Syllaeus for the failure, although they took no measures against him (his execution in 6 BCE is not related to this event) or against the monarch, who continued to reign until his assassination in 9 BCE.

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*Another cause of the failure of the expedition was the fact of King Obodas not paying much attention to public affairs, and especially to those relative to war, as is the custom with all Arabian kings, but placed everything in the power of Syllaeus the minister. His whole conduct in command of the army was perfidious, and his object was, as I suppose, to examine as a spy the state of the country, and to destroy, in concert with the Romans, certain cities and tribes; and when the Romans should be consumed by famine, fatigue, and disease, and by all the evils which he had treacherously contrived, to declare himself master of the whole country ... Gallus, setting out again from Leuke-Come on his return with his army, and through the treachery of his guide, traversed such tracts of country, that the army was obliged to carry water with them upon camels. After a march of many days, therefore, he came to the territory of Aretas, who was related to Obodas. Aretas received him in a friendly manner, and offered presents. But by the treachery of Syllaeus, Gallus was conducted by a difficult road through the country; for he occupied thirty days in passing through it. It afforded barley, a few palm trees, and butter instead of oil.*  
(Strabo)

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The coins show a changing image of Obodas III according to the date. During the first two years of his reign, in line with numismatic information, he is shown as a short-haired king. However, in the third year he appears with long, thick hair hanging to shoulder level. We also know that although Obodas III had a daughter, he had no male descendents.





𐤀𐤓𐤕𐤓𐤕

## Aretas IV “He who Loves his People” (9 BCE – 40 CE)

### The King of Longevity

The lack of an heir to Obodas III was a great problem for the dynasty. Josephus comments that he was replaced by someone called Aeneas, who did not have the right to the throne, and who took the dynastic name of Aretas to legitimise his position. Following initial opposition from the emperor, Aretas IV was finally confirmed as king by Augustus. In all likelihood the first years of his reign were marked by a fight for power between the supporters of the new king and his detractors, among whom was Syllaeus who wanted the throne for himself.

Described in the texts as a king “who loves his people” (in Nabataean Aramaic *rahem amme*, and in Greek *Philopatris*), the understanding between Aretas IV and the Romans was absolute to the point that when the Jews rose up against Rome in 4 BCE he sent a detachment of infantry and cavalry to support the legate Varus and help him crush the revolt. The New Testament offers other news about the king. We know that his daughter Phasaelis married the tetrarch Herod Antipas. When in 26 CE Herod reject-

ed her so that he could marry his brother’s wife, Herodias, the mother of Salome (Matthew 14:3-6), Aretas invaded the lands of his former son-in-law and occupied the areas of the West Bank, the River Jordan and the western banks of the Dead Sea. During that period the vast expanse to the south of Arnon and the Negev lands were controlled by Nabataean troops. The same thing happened with the Moab lands and could also be true for Damascus if what chapter 11 of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians says is true:

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***At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me.***

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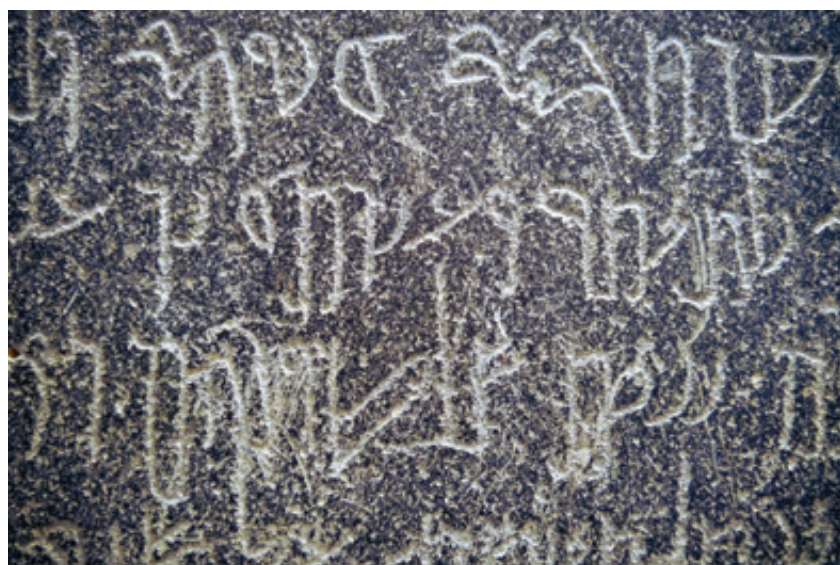


As was the case in all the states at that time, the Nabataean kingdom had a large number of civil servants and courtiers, and there are some references to them in the inscriptions.

In terms of power, the most important figure after the king, apart from the queen (*malka*), was certainly the prime minister or vizir (in Nabataean he was called *akh malka* "brother to the king" and in Greek *epitropos*). We know of at least two vizirs: the famous Syllaeus, mentioned previously, and Uneishu, chief minister to Queen Shaqilath (or Shuqaylat), who managed the lands of the kingdom during the first few years of the last Nabataean monarch Rabbel II.

The progressive expansion of the king's territories also meant great developments in the kingdom's administrative system. Texts mention the task of the governor (*es(t)ratega*, a Greek name used also for generals) or planner of certain areas together with the commander of the military camps in them (*rab mashrita*). Other minor jobs in the Nabataean government that are mentioned in the inscriptions seem to be those of administrator or inspector (*mesaar*) and supervisor of the territories (*kayyala*).

This inscription, conserved in two almost identical copies in the Louvre and the Vatican, belongs to the tomb of a family of provincial governors in the region of Madabah during the reign of Aretas IV. In the transcription, the people's names are shown in maroon, geographical names in orange and the government positions in sandstone. The image below shows a fragment of the inscription, which is highlighted in the copy that follows.



1. This is the tomb and the two sepulchral monuments
2. (that are placed) on what Abdabadat, the governor (*esratega*, 'gtrs') made
3. for Itaybel the governor (*esratega*, 'gtrs') his father, and for Itaybel,
4. camp commander (*rab mashrita*, 'tyrsm br) in Lahitu, and Abadta son of Abdabdath
5. the governor mentioned, at the seat government where they practiced
6. in two periods of time, for thirty six years, in the reign of Aretas
7. king of the Nabatu, who loves his people. The work mentioned
8. was carried out in his forty-sixth year.



There are also inscriptions from the time of Aretas that tell about the presence of Nabataean traders in the main port of Puteoli (now Pozzuoli) in Italy. What the coins from the age of this king show is very interesting, as there is an evolution from the short-haired first editions to different styles of curls that show a constant change in hairstyle, clearly for the purpose of propaganda. Aretas IV was not only married to Queen Shaqilath/Shuqaylat, who is represented beautifully on the coins, but he was also the husband of Huldu, one of the daughters of Obodas.



Funeral inscriptions give us a good deal of information about the history and life of the Nabataeans. The inscription presented here, which was found in Hegra (Saudi Arabia), is the oldest dated one known.

As you can see in the photograph, the piece was seriously damaged in the last century. However, the date of Aretas's reign (the 9th year) and the complete title of the monarch (in maroon, lines 4 and 5) can be made out. The tomb must have been that of a powerful figure in the kingdom as the sumptuousness of the mausoleum and the beauty of the text suggest. Luckily we have a transcription of the text that was made before the piece was damaged and so we know the whole message of the inscription.



והטא דו ערענע אגער  
סלפאלע אגערעס וסוהאזון נכמשים  
הכומפאט ערמס וסוהאזון ימרים  
גור צו ימרים וסוהאזון נכמשים  
סוהאזון נכמשים  
הכומפאט ערמס וסוהאזון נכמשים  
והטא דו ערענע אגער  
גור צו ימרים וסוהאזון נכמשים  
סוהאזון נכמשים

1. This is the tomb made by Aydu son of Kuhaylu son of
2. Alkasi for himself, for his son, for his descendants and for whom may present in his hand
3. a legitimate script from Aydu, valid for him and for those who have permission to be buried in it from
4. Aydu during his lifetime. In the month of Nisan of the ninth year of Aretas king
5. of the Nabatu, who loves his people. Let Dushara, Manawatu and Qaysha curse
6. anyone who sells this tomb or sells (part of it) or mortgages it, gives it away,
7. rents it or writes anything on it, or buries anyone in it,,
8. except those inscribed above. This tomb and its inscriptions are inviolable,
9. according to the nature of inviolability between the Nabatu and the Salamu forever.

## PERIOD OF DECLINE

MALICHUS II (40 CE)  
RABBEL II (70 CE)

## THE END OF THE KINGDOM (40 BCE - 106 BCE)



97/50

**Malichus II**  
(40 to 70 BCE)

### **Decline**

Malichus, the son of Aretas IV and his first wife Huldu, also known as "queen" (*malkta*), helped the Roman army led by Vespasian during the first Jewish revolution in the year 67 BCE by sending 5,000 horsemen and 1,000 infantrymen.

During Malichus's reign, Nabataean trade began to decline as a result of the changes to the routes made by the Romans, who preferred to transport goods from Arabia along the Egyptian route. The king controlled the region to the south of the Hawran Mountains in southern Syria, making Bosra the most important city in the region and the second Nabataean capital after Petra.

Just like his predecessors he was known as "king of the Nabatu", and the coins minted with the image of Malichus II show him with his beautiful consort Shaqilath/Shuqaylat.

We know the names of some of the high commanders of the army, such as the general of the infantry (referred to by the original Greek term *stratega*), the chief of a unit of the troops (*kiliarkh*, also taken from the Greek) and the head of the cavalry (*rab parrashaya*), which formed an extremely important tactical corps in the war strategy carried out by the Nabataeans.

In this beautiful commemorative inscription found in Petra and conserved today in the museum of the Amman Citadel, the last of these figures is mentioned. The first few lines no longer exist and so the reading is incomplete. For those who want to identify the names and titles, the former are marked in **maroon** and the latter in **sandstone**.



נִשְׂאֵהוּ בְּנִיחַ  
 דִּיּוֹדוֹסְדָנְטִי אֵלֶּה  
 עַל חַיֵּי חֹרֶת  
 אֶרְאֵה גִדְרֵ מַלְכָּה  
 צִנְרֵ מֶלֶךְ נִסְרֵ  
 וְדָרְוֵ בְּנֵי אֵי  
 אֶתְרֵ אֵלֶּה

1. ... built by
2. ... Diodorus head of the cavalry (rab parrashaya, 'yšrp br),
3. ... for the life of Aretas
4. ... and Hagiru the queen (malkta, 'tklm)
5. ... Malichus king of the Nabatu
- 6 ... of his sons
- 7 ... Year 18



The inscriptions, coins, artistic representations and certain legal documents give us information that allows us to confirm that women enjoyed great power and prestige in Nabataean society. In terms of politics, we can imagine the role that the women close to the throne held. Thanks to the texts, we know the names and even the faces of many of the Nabataean queens whose images, shown next to that of their husbands, carried the same weight which would seem to indicate the extent to which their power was shared. On the coins, the female figures sometimes appear accompanied by elements of flora and fauna: eagles, wheat sheaves, different fruits and other symbols related to strength and prosperity, as if to suggest that these qualities came from the women as a source for their people.

In some cases, the queen actually led political life and occupied the throne. This is the

case of Shaqilath, who was regent until her son Rabbel II was old enough to ascend the throne. Sometimes the children of the monarch were married to other kings to create or expand alliances. A famous case is that of the daughter of Aretas IV who was married to Herod Antipas.

Some of the women's tombs show that they occupied high positions in Nabataean society. They had the right to inherit and name heirs, they had control over their properties and were considered fully able to take legal actions without having to depend on men.

Women also played an active part in religious rites. They could visit the temples, take part in the ceremonies offer sacrifices and chant during the rituals. All of this seems to indicate that there were women priests in the temples.



Coin showing Queen  
Shaqilath



567

**Rabbel II, "Giver of Life and Saviour of his People"**  
(70 - 106 BCE)

**The Last King**

The last Nabataean king, known in Greek as "Giver of Life and Saviour of his People" must have been very young when he ascended the throne as his mother, Shaqilath, effectively held power for the first 5 years of his reign. We know almost nothing about his governance, since the inscriptions and the historians tell us little. His consorts were the queens Gamilath and Hagiru and he managed his realm on horseback between the kingdom's two capital cities – the Nabataean Petra and the Greek-Roman Bosra.

The final years of the Nabataean monarchy were marked by decline after the Romans took control of the trading routes via the Egyptian route. In 106 CE Rabbel II died. Cornelius Palma, the Roman governor of Syria, peacefully took over Petra and included the lands of the Nabataeans in the Roman Empire in the name of Trajan, creating a new province – Arabia – with Bosra as its capital. Petra was reduced to a secondary position but received the honorary title of imperial metropolis. Historians wonder whether after Rabbel II a short-lived, puppet King called Malichus III came to throne, but there is no solid proof.

On the coins issued during the reign of Rabbel II, the king appears with

This text from Petra was photographed by Gustaf Dalman at the beginning of the 20th century. It is in a poor state of conservation but it is undoubtedly one of the most valuable pieces in terms of the information it gives. The inscription, which is currently held in a small museum in Jerusalem, is commemorative. Although we do not know its exact date it is from the era of Rabbel II and gives very complete information about the dynastic line of the king, descendent of Aretas IV through Malichus. It also gives us the name of his consorts ("his sisters") and some of his children. The names of people are marked in maroon and the dynastic titles in sandstone.



Handwritten transcription of the Nabatean inscription in Arabic script, with names in maroon and titles in sandstone.

1. ...
2. ... Abdalga,
3. son of Abdalga ... and his sons
4. Wahballahi by Rabbel ... and Wahballahi
5. ... god of ... In Nahabta, for the life of
6. (Rabbel) the king, king of the Nabatu, who let live and saved his people,
7. and for the lives of Gamilat and Hagiru, his sisters, queens of the Nabatu, son of Malichus
8. (the king), king of the Nabatu, son of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, "who loves his people",
9. ... Qashma, son of Shaudath his sister, queen of the Nabatu
10. ... sons of Rabbel and Gamilath and Hagiru
11. ...of Qashma
12. Nabatu, who let live and saved...

DATING OF THE TEXTS

In Palmyra or Hatra the so-called Seleucid era was used (which began 12 years before the death of Alexander the Great and is calculated to add 311 years and 11 months to our Christian or Common Era).

Nabataean inscriptions used local chronology showing only the year of the contemporary governor in the text. In these cases the date shown should be interpreted in the context of a universal calculation taking other historical events as references. On rare occasions, the Seleucid era is used in Nabataean inscriptions. Following the Roman conquest, the use of the “year of the Province” was extended. This is calculated by adding 106 (the Christian year in which the Nabataean kingdom was finally incorporated into the Roman Empire) to year that appears on the inscription.

NUMERICAL SYSTEM

The Nabataeans used a simpler system than we do, made up of just six numerals which were partly inspired by the Phoenician numbers.

1	𐤁 𐤂 𐤃
4	𐤄 𐤅
5	𐤆
10	𐤇 𐤈 𐤉
20	𐤊 𐤋 𐤌
100	𐤍



The number 18 that appears in the first text also appears in this inscription, dated to 8-7 BCE (1-1-1-1-1-1-1-10 tnš). However, here the presentation is different from in the previous text.



## DIVISION OF THE YEAR

The Nabataeans used the same method for dividing the year as other cultures in the area, with Babylonian names for the solar months. This nomenclature has survived in the Jewish calendar and also in the solar months of the Arabs:

1. TISHRI, (OCTOBER)
2. (?) (NOVEMBER)
3. KISLEW OR SHAMRA, (DECEMBER)
4. TEBETH, (JANUARY)
5. SHUBBAT, (FEBRUARY)
6. ADAR, (MARCH)
7. NISAN, (APRIL)
8. IYYAR, (MAY)
9. SIWWAN, (JUNE)
10. (?) (JULY)
11. AB, (AUGUST)
12. ELUL, (SEPTEMBER)

The way of writing the numbers and their combinations to form other numbers was open to a certain degree of flexibility, as we can see in the following five examples.



The first text comes from one of the most ancient Nabataean inscriptions known. The number should be read as "18 of Aretas" (ttrhl 1-1-1-1-1-1-1-10). The lack of further information for the calculation of the eighteenth year of the king means that we cannot calculate the exact date, which would have been between 100 and 80 CE.



The second example shows that the year is "43 of Aretas" (read it from right to left, ttrhl 1-1-1-20-20), the year 34 CE.



The third text (l'brl 3-20) corresponds to the year 23 of Rabbel II; in other words 93 CE. Unlike the previous texts the last two are exceptional in that they are dated according to the Seleucid era.



The fourth example should be read as "year 280" (20-20-20-20-100-2 tnš).



The fifth is "year 321" (1-20-100-3 tnš).



**NOBODY KNOWS WHOM  
THESE PEOPLE WORSHIP!  
HOWEVER, I WAS ABLE TO  
SEE A STATUE OF THEIR  
GOD THAT WAS LIKE A  
SQUARE STONE.**

*MAXIMUS OF TYRE,  
2ND CENTURY BCE*

# SOURCES FOR STUDYING NABATAEAN RELIGION

We know something about the religious life of the Nabataeans thanks to a series of sources of varying importance. Among them, the most specific information is given in the inscriptions, both in Nabataean Aramaic script and in Greek. Particularly interesting are the names that appear in the texts, which are enormously helpful in identifying the different gods that made up the Nabataean pantheon.

Today, names such as Mary, Shlomo, Abderrahman, Paul and Jonah, allow us to work out the religion of the people who bore those names. In the same way, among the Nabataeans the type of name they had also revealed aspects of their beliefs or their families' beliefs. Studies of the names on the inscriptions therefore enable us to know about some details about Nabataean religion.

Religion-inspired Nabataean names are not much different from those that we find in other Semitic cultures in the area and, in fact, they are fairly reminiscent of some Arabic and Hebrew names today. As a general rule, many of them are composed of two elements, although the order may vary;

- 1) the name of a god or goddess or an allusion to one, and
- 2) something that qualifies the person or the god mentioned.

For example, here there are six names of people that appear on different inscriptions from different periods. The name of the god, or reference to it, is marked in maroon.

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Wahb-alahi:** or “donation of – my god”. This is a generic allusion to the name of the god. This name, which is sometimes simplified to Wahbu or Wahba, is found on the Aramaic inscriptions of other cultures at the same time and in the same area.

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Shaad-alahi:** “he was propitious – my god”. The verb shaad, which makes up the first part of the name, is related to the fact of receiving good fortune from the god.

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Itay-Bel:** “He exists - Bell” This name works as an invocation of the deity and the epithet ‘Bel’, which is of Akkadian origin, is mentioned. In principle ‘Bel’ (master, lord) could be applied to different gods. In the Palmyra Oasis an impressive temple dedicated to that god has been conserved, showing that he was worshipped widely by many different peoples in the area.

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Qos-netan:** “Qaws - gave. The carrier of this name was an adorer of the god Qaws – an ancient Edomite deity which was gradually assimilated with other figures such as Apollo. It is the same type as the Hebrew (Netan-Yahu, “Yahweh gave”), although in the second case the name of another god appears.

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Abd-Manawatu:** “Servant of - Manawatu”, the goddess of destiny. Compare this name and the next with other modern Arabic names such as Abdallah (Abd-Allah, “Servant of God”) or Abderrahman (Abd-ar-Rahman, “Servant of the Merciful”).

𐤌𐤓𐤁𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤏

**Abd-Abdath:** “Servant of - Obodas”, the deified Nabataean king. He was worshipped by his people and then had another site of worship in Negev.

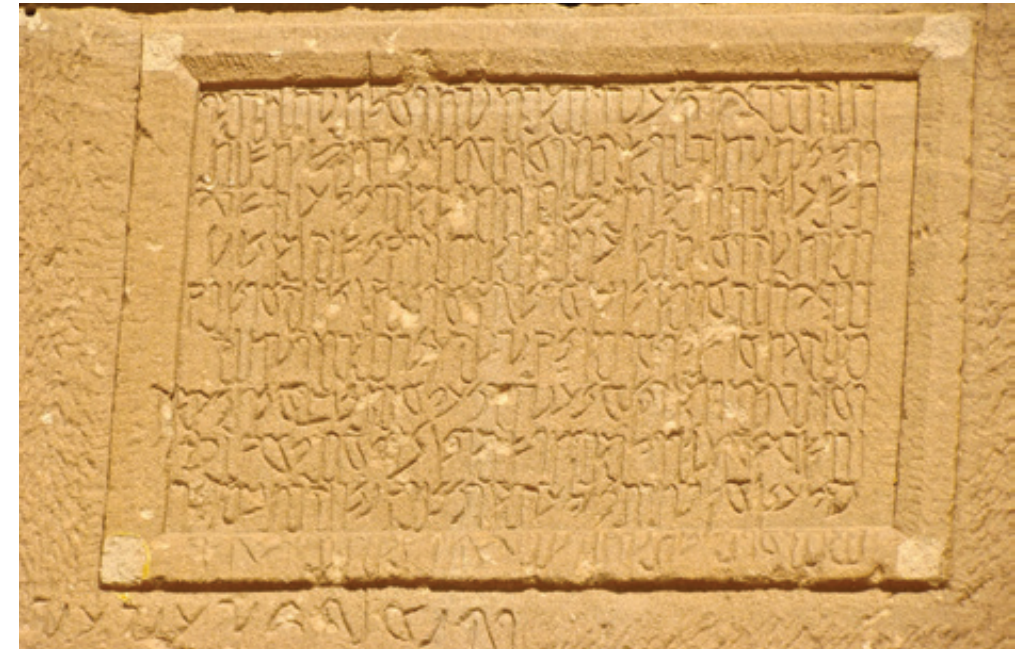
We also have other direct sources of information such as the coins, archaeology (discoveries of which enable us to identify specific sites of worship, like temples and their spatial distribution, tombs and physical characteristics as well as the holy pools, basins and other religious elements). In the artistic field iconographic material is valuable. There are numerous representations of deities although it is often difficult to identify them. It is also complicated to establish the relations between a specific ornamental motif and a particular religious idea or concept. But thanks to the images we know how the Nabataean gods changed over time as a result of the process of syncretism that took place in Nabataean culture (in other words the assimilation of the religious ideas and beliefs of others as if they were their own).

One extremely interesting set of sources is formed by the historical documents written in Greek, Latin, Syriac and Arabic. Although it is true that literary material should be used with caution, it is also true that without these texts it would be much more difficult to reconstruct the religious life of the Nabataeans at various times.

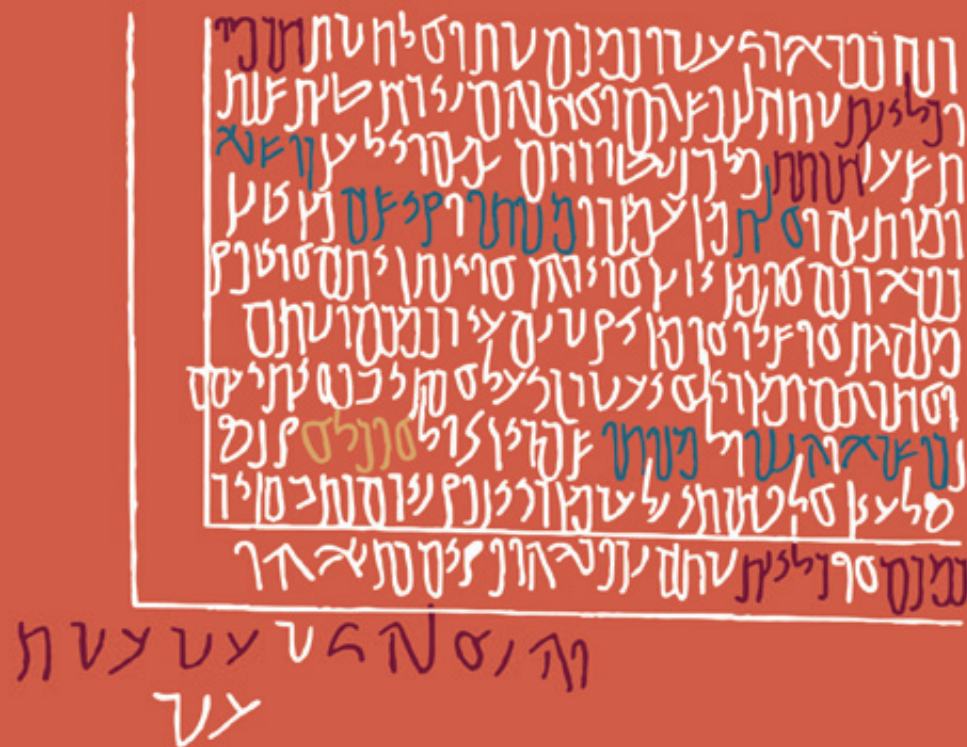
Among the most important Greek writers, as we have already mentioned, are Diodorus, Siculus, and especially Flavius Josephus. Also, the anonymous work entitled *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* (end of the 1st century CE) offers major references to religious life. Among the Latin authors to highlight are Pliny the Elder and Apuleius, of the 1st and 2nd centuries CE respectively, and these are followed by the Christian writers Tertullian (2nd-3rd centuries), Porphyry and Arnobius (3rd century), and Jerome (4th-5th centuries). The most important Syriac sources are the works of Isaac of Antioch and a treatise known as the *Doctrine of Addai*. Finally among the Arab writers Hisham ben al-Kalbi (9th century), with his *Book of Idols*, and Abdelmalik ben Hisham, of the same period are especially significant.

Even when the information offered by literary sources is partial and intermittent or written to fulfil other purposes, the descriptions and fragments give a vivid picture of some specific cases. Using the descriptions and information from other sources we can get an idea, more or less, of what religious life must have been like for the Nabataeans.

The inscriptions give us a mosaic of dates of Nabataean religious beliefs. This tomb inscription is conserved in Hegra (Saudi Arabia) and dates back to the 9th year of Aretas IV, the first year of the Christian Era. In its lines we can make out some interesting information relating to religion. To make it easier we have marked the names of people in maroon, the gods in blue and the significant terms in sandstone.







The translation of the text is as follows:

1. This is the tomb made by Kamkam, son of Wailath, daughter of Haramu
2. and Kulaybat, his daughter, for themselves and their posterity in the month of Tebeth, the year
3. nine of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, who loves his people. Curse Dushara
4. and his wife, Allat of Amnad, and Manawatu and Qaysha, on he who sells
5. this tomb, or who sells part of it, mortgages, gives away or sacks
6. from it a body or bones, or buries in it anyone who is not Kamkam, his daughter
7. and her descendents. Who does not do as written above shall become a debtor
8. of Dushara, Hubalu and Manawatu for 5 *shamds*, and for the *afkala* a fine
9. of one thousand drachmas of Aretas, except he who shows in his hand a manuscript by the hand
10. of Kamkam or Kulaybat his daughter in respect of this tomb, if the writing is valid.

-Wahbalahi son of Abdabdath made it.-

The first striking thing about this text is the names of the people mentioned in it: together with the typically religious names such as the stone-masons or copyists that appear at the end of the inscription (Wahbalahi, Abdabdat), which we talked about earlier, there are some others related to nature, such as the owner of the tomb, Kamkam (“Cancamum Tree” – an aromatic plant similar to myrrh that grows in the Arabian deserts). There are also some that are clearly from tribal roots: in fact the daughter of Kamkam was called Kulaybat or “little bitch” – obviously not a name we would give to our own daughters but one that was very common among the desert Arabs in the same way that the names of other animals such as Aqrabu “scorpion” or Arnabu “rabbit” were used.

It is important to see that the inscription shows how the same family could have members with different types of name; in fact, as we can see in the first line of the inscription, the mother of Kamkam was called Wailath (which can be translated roughly as “fruit of the woman who takes refuge in the god X” and his grandfather was Haramu (roughly “fruit of the dedication to the god X”).

In lines 3 and 4, however, a series of gods are mentioned as guardians of the tomb:

- 1) Dushara, the main god of the Nabataeans and his wife (literally “His throne”, *mawtbeh*), the Sun goddess Harisha,
- 2) Allat, one of the great Arab gods, in his avocation of the Sanctuary of Amnad and
- 3) Manawatu/Manotu, the goddess of destiny, together with Qaysha (literally “the husband”), who is also mentioned in line 8. Five gods in all.

Curiously, the way that the gods are pacified is economic: on the one hand by offering them 5 *shamd* directly in the concept of a debt (we do not know exactly what a *shamd* was, but it is clear that the offender had to pay one for each of the guardian gods) and on the other, by paying 1000 drachmas “minted during the reign of King Aretas” to a figure called *afkal*, who was probably an important exorcist priest specialising in the rituals needed to drive out divine curses and demonic influences. The institution of *afkal* originates from Mesopotamia (in Sumerian there was *ab-gal* and in Akkadian, *apkallu*), and is also mentioned in the surrounding cultures, such as that of Palmyra.

In any case, the study of Nabataean religion is a highly complex affair and involves a mix of different problems. The questions that need answering if we want to begin to understand the religious system are the following, at least:

- 1) What were the original Nabataean beliefs and practices?
- 2) How far was the “Nabataean religion” a hybrid or mix of different local sets of beliefs?
- 3) How far did its syncretism really reach?



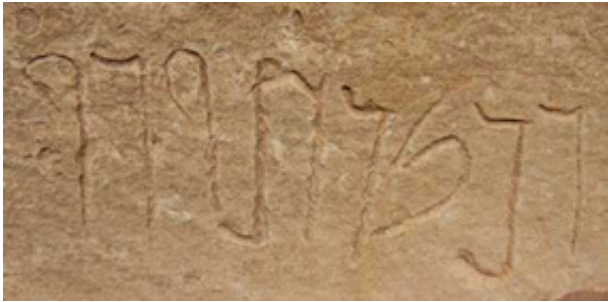
# NABATAEAN BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

It is clear that the Nabataean beliefs displayed many common elements with the Semitic religions that surrounded them, especially those of the pre-Islamic Arabs. Added to this was the deliberate and considerable inclusion of Greek-Roman and even Mesopotamian and Egyptian religious elements, enabling the Nabataean religious system to be placed in the midst of a colourful and complicated panorama that was typical of the Hellenistic Near East of the time. Again, we can find some specific details about the religious and devotional practices of the Nabataeans thanks to the inscriptions. We know from them, for example, that a common characteristic of Nabataean devotions was the erection of altars, stelae and holy sites in honour of a certain god.

The practice of inscribing names as memorials appears in all the cultures in the area of the Nabataeans. As a devotional work, the name of one or more loved one was inscribed next to the name of a god, as if the person wanted to leave a record that was as eternal as the stone itself. Together with these “memorial” inscriptions are those containing the formula “May X be remembered before the god Y!” or simply “May X be remembered!” All of this would appear to suggest that magic played a very important role in Nabataean religion practice.

There is also evidence from the inscriptions of the existence of religious-type private associations, known as *marzaha* in Aramaic, whose purpose was to organise funeral banquets or banquets in honour of gods and ancestors which could have been celebrated annually. These societies existed in Palmyra and other cultures in the area. They must have played an important part in the religious life of the Nabataeans, especially in the city of Petra.

This inscription, which is preserved on a rock wall in Petra is an example of a brief memorial message. Inscriptions containing messages of blessing with the name of a person are the most numerous to be conserved in Nabataean script – almost 90% of the total.



“May Hudu be remembered!”  
(wdwh rykd)  
←

This type of formula can vary, but the most common are:

- dkhir* N (“May N be remembered!”)  
N *shlam* (“N, peace!”)
- brikh* N (“May N be blessed!”)
- N *b-tab* (“N in well-being!”)

# THE PRIESTHOOD

Although we know very little about Nabataean priesthood in terms of the world of people dedicated to the service of the gods, there is no doubt about the fact that priests and priestesses existed. It is also certain that their tasks must have been very well structured. Some of the religious aspects of Nabataean temples can be reconstructed thanks to the information contained on some of the inscriptions and our knowledge of pre-Islamic Arab religions and the beliefs in the surrounding areas, such as the Jewish faith at the time of the Second Temple, the Palmyrene religion in Syria and the Hatrean religion in northern Iraq.

In terms of their importance, the temples would have been of two different types: those with priests and those without them. The priests themselves were also of different types or categories. There was the *kahen*, who was probably concerned with the oracles, the *afkal*, mentioned above, who was in charge of acts of appeasement and exorcisms and the *kumor*, who specialised in sacrifices. Other figures related to the temples were the interpreter of dreams (*pator*) and the examiner of sacrificed victims (*mbaqquer*). We also know that the temples had other figures such as the guardian, known in the Nabataean language as “he who belongs to the house” (*baytaya*). The temple was frequently referred to as “the house” (*bayta*) of the god.



This image shows a copy of an inscription found in the Sinai and it translates as follows (the names of the people are in maroon, the god in blue and the word *kahen*, or priest, in sandstone):

**“Peace! Umayyu son of Harishu, priest of Uzzaya”.**

The goddess Uzzaya is none other than al-Uzza, well known in pre-Islamic Arabia and worshipped by the Nabataeans.

## GODS AND GODDESSES

The list of Nabataean gods reflects a plural, integrated and syncretic religious system which was a product of the social amalgamation of the different groups that coexisted at the heart of the Nabataean kingdom. This is one of the reasons why it is sometimes difficult to identify the gods because the information we have access to is not always clear.

Even today, the question remains as to how the system of gods used by the Nabataeans was structured. Some researchers have spoken of the existence of a “pantheon”, or a kind of hierarchical pyramid with a supreme god at the top, while others prefer to describe an egalitarian “assembly” of gods. Whatever the true situation, both models already appeared in the ancient Semitic religions, such as the case of Ugaritic, and the pre-Islamic Arab religions also bear witness to them. In fact, while in Mecca a hierarchic pantheon of gods was worshipped, there were also nomadic and sedentary Arab societies who imagined the gods as an assembly.

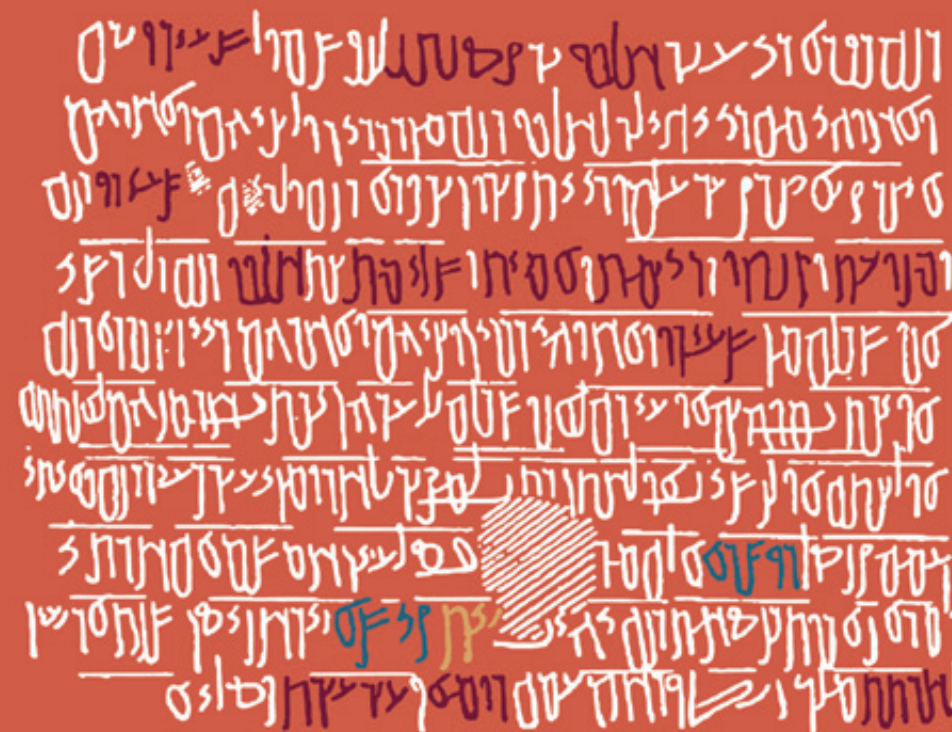
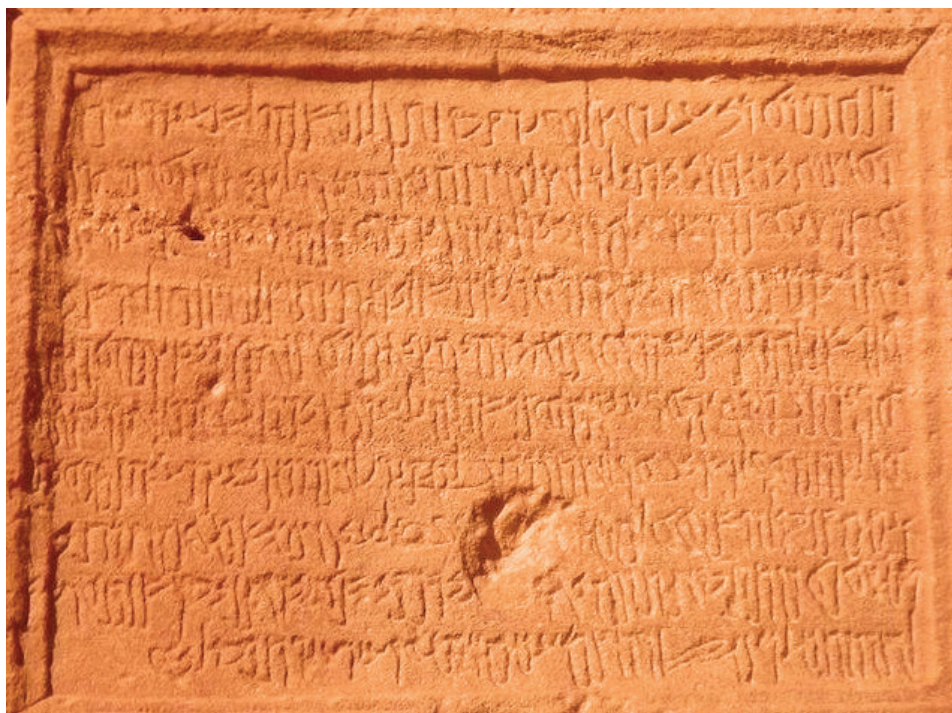
In the case of the Nabataeans, the thought of a purely hierarchical structure of gods, or a “pantheon” is difficult given what we currently know. Everything seems to point to the fact that the list of Nabataean gods evolved: as time went by some of them were deposed by others and yet more were added. However, it is clear that in the inscriptions there is a kind of grading in terms of the importance of the gods that are mentioned, and this would seem to support a certain type of overriding pantheon.

It is possible that, in the beginning, the Nabataeans had only two gods, one male and one female, and that they had different names according to the place or the tribe. To this original system, a series of gods and goddesses were progressively added, some of whom were very little known. This is the case of male figures such as Hotayshu, Asharu (who had a temple in southern Syria) and Pakeidas, known only in the Greek inscriptions. As mentioned previously, in Nabataean

Aramaic only the consonants of words were written, meaning that in some cases we do not know how the names of the gods were pronounced, such as Trhy (or Tdhy). Added to these were also the familiar deities, the protectors (this is the case of the Arab god Shay al-Qawm) and the semi-divine beings, who complemented the Nabataean religious system. Here, we will talk about the main Nabataean gods and goddesses.

For example, the funeral inscriptions in the Hegra region talk about different forms of a divine triad made up of Dushara, Manawatu y Qaysha, while in other areas the main god, Dushara, is associated with “all the gods” (*alahaya kulhom*). These two uses of the association of the name of Dushara could be a reflection of the existence of local pantheons that varied according to the geographical regional and tribal groups.

This text, which is conserved in a tomb in Hegra, mentions Dushara and the temple of the god Qaysha, husband of Manawatu.



1. This is the tomb made by Halafu son of Qosnetan for himself and for Shaidu his son,
2. his brothers, the males borne to this Halafu and his posterity,
3. with hereditary title forever. That they should be buried in this tomb...this Shaidu,
4. Manuath, Sanamu, Ribamath, Umayath and Shalimath, daughters of this Halafu. It is not permitted
5. that anyone among Shaidu, his brothers, his sons and his posterity, should sell this tomb,
6. write a donation or other thing to anyone, unless one of them writes for his wife,
7. his daughters, his stepfather or his brother-in-law, in a writing that is exclusively for burial. Whoever produces different work shall become
8. a debtor of Dushara, the god of our lord, of five hundred silver drachmas of Aretas,
9. and of our lord, according to the copy of this script, that is deposited in the temple (bayt) of Qaysha. In the month of Nisan, the year forty of
10. Aretas, king of the Nabatu, who loves his people. Ruma and Ab-dabadath, sculptors.



دشرا ٩٦

## Dushara

We know for certain that the Nabataeans described Dushara as their main god. In the Greco-Latin tradition he was known as *Dusares*.

***Each province and city has its own god: Syria has As-tarte, Arabia has Dusares, the Nordics have Belenus, Africa has Caelestis... (Tertullian)***

The etymology of Dushara may be explained by the composed formula of the Arabic *Dhu sh-Sharah*, or “the one of Sharah”, the name of a god associated with the mountain situated to the south-east of Petra. If this is true, Dushara would originally have been a local god associated with the heavens or to a mountain from which spring waters emerged. There is also a theory that relates Dushara to the forests instead of the mountains, leading to a completely different idea of the god. In the latter case he would have been related to the planetary deity known among the Nabataeans as Kutbay, as also attested in a number of inscriptions. In any case, it was possibly for political reasons, that is, the relationship with the royal dynasty, that would end up making this minor divinity (at the beginning he was worshipped in the form of a baetylus, a cubic stone on a pedestal) the supreme god of the Nabataeans.

Some of the inscriptions show the name of Dushara with an associated title, such as “Dushara, the god of Madrasa”; in other words the god of the mountain to the south of Siq or the Petra gorge. Sometimes he is also referred to simply as “Lord of the Temple”. There is another frequent reference to “his throne” (*mawtbeh* or *mothbeh*), a name which has been interpreted by some as a reference to his wife, a goddess named Harisha who could be related to Sun worship.

Over time some of the non-Nabataean gods were assimilated with Dushara. Through Greco-Roman influence he ended up being identified with Zeus, the supreme god of the Greeks, and with the Sun god (Helios) and Dionysus. Political opportunities led to his identification with Aara, the local god of Bosra, which was to become the second city of the Nabataean kingdom.

This stele, which is also conserved in a Greek version, was erected in honour of Dushara-Aara, god of Bosra. In the reproduction of the text, we have shown the name of the god in **sandstone**, while the name of the person who dedicated the stele appears in **maroon**.

1. Stele
2. made by
3. Mashekhu
4. son of Awi-
5. da for Du-
6. shara.

It is also worth pointing out that a stele was a site of worship in the form of a long stone erected vertically on the ground. In Aramaic it was called masgeda or mashgeda and that name was transferred to the Arabic masjid to denominate a mosque, the Moslem place of worship.



𐤁𐤋𐤅

## Allat

This goddess, named Allat or Allath (literally, “goddess”), is one of the best known figures in the pre-Islamic Arab religion, and she is almost omnipresent throughout the Middle East during this period. Muhammad himself spoke of her popularity. In fact, verse 91 of Chapter 53 of the Quran talks of three goddesses, the “daughters of Allah” who were worshipped by the pre-Islamic Arabs:

*Have you considered Allat and Al-Uzza  
and Manat, the third?...  
(Quran)*

The fact that they were worshipped in such an extensive areas (from Mesopotamia to Arabia) by people of different cultures and religious systems is a problem when it comes to identifying the features that make up the figure of Allat, since they change according to the region in which she was worshipped.

In some places she was a Moon-goddess and was associated with the sign of the Moon in its fourth or waning phase (the same as in the posterior Islamic tradition). However, in other places she was seen as a Sun goddess. In Sinai she was identified with Venus.

Some scholars think that Allat was the supreme goddess of Petra, where Aphrodite has sometimes also been identified with her, as in the Temple of the Winged Lions. The motherhood of the gods has also been attributed to her. However, in Palmyra and in southern Syria this motherhood was also related to other goddesses.

In any case, the worship of this goddess appears throughout the Nabataean region. Apart from Petra there is evidence that she was worshipped in Hegra (northern Saudi Arabia), Hawran (southern Syria), and even in the Wadi Ramm desert.

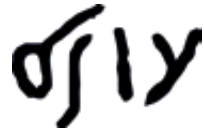
The most famous example of a stone stele is that found in the “Temple of the Winged Lions” of Petra, an “eye-idol” in the form of a block or baetylus (see the quote at the beginning of this section). As the inscription says, it was erected thanks to the devotion of a person who identifies himself in the text.



𐤁𐤋𐤅 𐤇𐤓𐤓𐤓 𐤓𐤓𐤓𐤓 𐤓𐤓𐤓𐤓

**“The goddess of Hayyan, son of Nayibath”**

As you can see, the calligraphy in this piece is of an excellent quality. The words are separated by dots making them easy to read (.tbyn.rp.nyh.thl'). Many authors think that this “goddess of Hayyan” refers precisely to Allat or Uzzaya.



## Uzzaya

This goddess, whose name means “the strongest one”, is in fact al-Uzza who is mentioned in the Quran. Her Arabic name is also used in the Nabataean inscriptions.

Uzzaya (or al-Uzza) appears in the inscriptions in Petra. In some of them it can be interpreted as being Dushara’s wife in the local religion of the city.

She shares many common features with Allat since she was also considered to be the principal goddess of the city and was also frequently identified with Aphrodite, as was Allat.

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***These were worshipping idols and prostrating to the Morning Star and Aphrodite, whom they also called Chabar in their own language, which means “great” (kabir). This so-called stone, however, is the head of Aphrodite, whom they prostrated to, and whom they also called Chabar. On it until now a shadow of an engraving is appearing to the ones who observe very carefully.  
(John of Damascus)***

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It is curious to see that the identification of Uzzaya/al-Uzza with Aphrodite is present even in central Arabia. In fact, some of the Greek writers state that in the sanctuary of Mecca – the Kaabah – an image of Aphrodite was conserved. Like Allat, she was also related to Venus in Sinai which was an enormously popular place among the semi-nomadic Arab tribes.

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***In Elusa (a city in the Negev) ...  
Venus is worshipped on account of Lucifer  
to whom the Saracen nation is devoted  
(St. Jerome)***

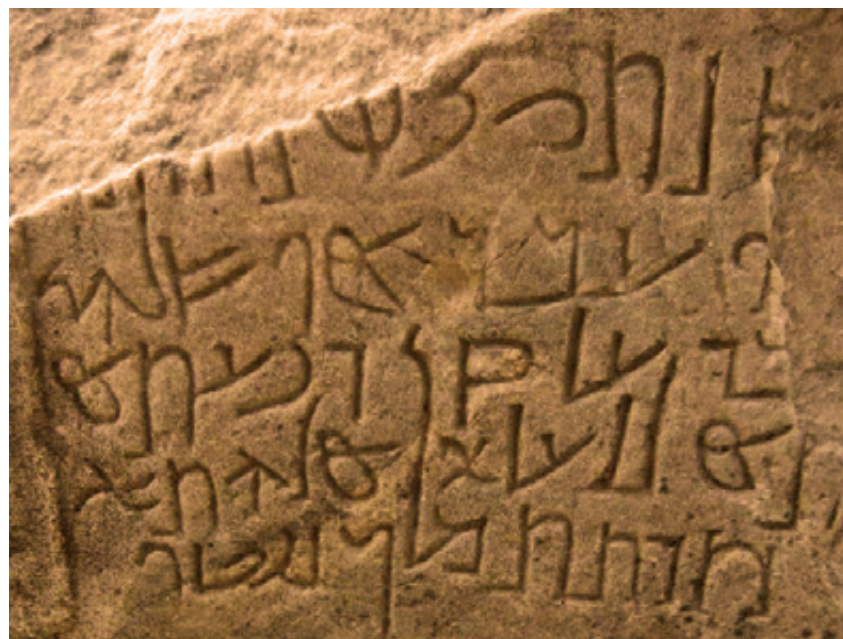
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It is precisely this confusion with Allat that makes it difficult to get a precise image of Uzzaya. It is highly probable that although the later Islamic tradition shows them as separate goddesses, in the eyes of the Nabataeans they were originally a single goddess.

As John Healey, one of the greatest scholars of the Nabataean religion, says, separate cults probably developed according to the region: in Petra there was Uzzaya while in Hawran in southern Syria and in Wadi Ramm the name of Allat was dominant. However, having found an inscription in Bosra (the capital of Hawran) that talks of al-Uzza as “the goddess of Bosra” (*allahat Bosra*) it would seem that her sphere of worship extended throughout the Nabataean lands, making her the principal goddess of their religion.



This text forms part of an inscription in the Nabataean and Greek languages in honour of the goddess Uzzaya/al-Uzza (in blue). Although part of the piece no longer exists it is still possible to read the date: the year 9 CE. The names of people are marked in maroon.



1. ...In the year 18 (of Aretas)...
2. ...and made by Awshalahi...
3. ...son of Azqan, the sanctuary...
4. ...for al-Uzza the goddess ...
5. ...Aretas, king of the Nabatu ...



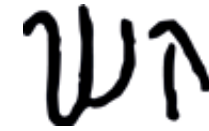


## Manawatu

The goddess Manawatu or Manotu was mainly situated in the Nabataean territory of northern Arabia. In fact among the Arabs she was known as Manat, “fate, portion”.

Manawatu is mentioned in the funeral inscriptions of Hegra and surrounding areas, in a list of gods that is normally headed by the supreme god Dushara. In these inscriptions she is placed next to her husband Qaysha, a name that means “lord, husband”, and which is probably identified with Hubalu, the god of fortune-telling.

In the Quran, the goddess Manat is associated with Allat and al-Uzza, making a triad of the daughters of Allah. Worship of her was controlled by the Quraysh tribe in Mecca.



## Hubalu

Hubal is the name given in Arabic sources for the god known by the Nabataeans as Hubalu, as it appears in a unique inscription from Hegra (the tomb of Kamkam, in the image above) dated to 1 CE, which shows a direct relationship with the god Dushara. The god Hubal was worshipped in the Kaabah of Mecca up until the days of Muhammad. According to Ibn al-Kalbi (9th century CE), Hubal was the main god of the pantheon in that city:

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***The Quraysh had also several idols in and around the Kaabah. The greatest of these was Hubal. It was, I was told, of red agate, in the form of a man with the right hand broken off. It came into the possession of Quraysh in this condition, and they, therefore, made for it a hand of gold (...) It stood inside the Kaabah. In front of it were seven divination arrows. (Ibn al-Kalbi)***

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The origin of Hubal is uncertain. It would seem that he was imported during a late period to Mecca from Nabataea, to where he would have come from Mesopotamia or Syria. This male god, as described by the historian Ibn al-Kalbi, was related to practices of divination as indicated by the “seven divination arrows” that were deposited in front of his statue in the temple of Kaabah.

As we said when talking about Manawatu, the name Qaysha that appears in the inscriptions in northern Arabia could be another reference to Hubalu. If this is the case, in the Nabataean city of Hegra Hubalu would have had a temple where he would be associated with this goddess of fate as her husband.

The image shows the Nabataean script for the name 'Kutbay'. It consists of a series of stylized, interconnected characters in a cursive script, typical of the Nabataean alphabet.

### Kutbay

This goddess also known as Kutba, al-Kutba and al-Kutbay, was discovered relatively late on, in the mid-20th century. It would seem that she embodied the virtues of learning, fortune-telling and trade, and she was the Nabataean assimilation of the planetary god represented in the figure of Mercury. She appears in inscriptions from different geographical areas such as Petra, Egypt and Hawran and is sometimes related to Uzzaya or Dushara. We also know of her existence in areas such as Syria and Mesopotamia thanks to information from Syrian sources that talk about a goddess adored by the Arabs who went by the name of Kutbay. In the north-west area of the Sinai she gained a certain degree of recognition as seen by the temple dedicated to her at Qasr Awit.

The image shows the Nabataean script for the name 'Belshamayn'. It features a more complex arrangement of characters, including some that resemble the Greek letter 'beta' (β), which is characteristic of the Nabataean script's evolution.

### Belshamayn

The god Belshamayn (which can also be read as Belshamen, Belshamin or Baalshamin), “master of heaven”, is one of the most well-known in Semitic religions. The origins of this Syrian god can be found in the pantheon of Ugarit, from the second millennium BCE, in which the god Baalu appears as lord of storms and fertility.

Over time his importance increased in Syria and Mesopotamia, until he came to be identified with Zeus himself in the Greco-Roman period. We have evidence of the importance of Belshamayn in Palmyra (Syria), Hatra and Edessa (Mesopotamia), and also among the sedentary groups in Hawran, very probably as a result of the relationship that he had with fertility of the crops, something he would have inherited from the ancient god Baalu. In some cases he was seen as the partner of Allat, since she was also worshipped in some of the abovementioned regions.

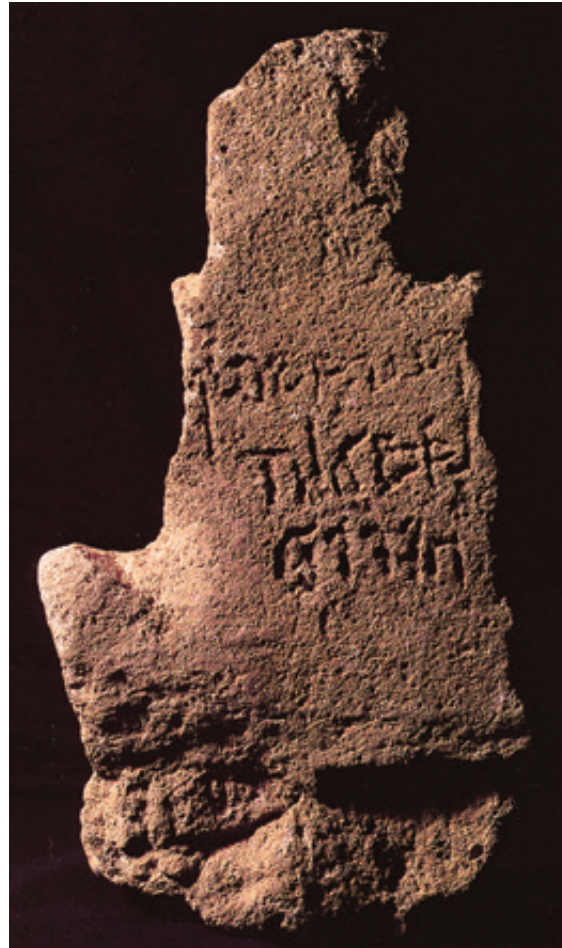
The popularity of Belshamayn in Hawran was significant. In fact, at the beginning of the first century BCE there was a temple dedicated to him in Sii which became a major pilgrimage destination. In Salkhad, also in Hawran, an altar was dedicated to him in the second half of the 1st century CE. His presence as an official god in these places (he also appears in inscriptions in his honour in Bosra and the Wadi Musa, at the gates to Petra) did not prevent him from being considered as a foreign god in the rest of Nabataean territory.

𐤒𐤓

Qos

This god, who appears as Qos or Qaws in the inscriptions, was the supreme god of the ancient Edomites who lived in the territories where the Nabataeans established their capital. Worship of Qaws endured among them, experiencing a series of changes that led him to be identified with other gods such as Apollo.

The inscriptions show many personal names that carry the name of this god and suggest that his main place of worship was Tannur, where he was considered the principal deity. Some researchers have said that he was even identified with Dushara in the form of Zeus-Hadad, while others assign to him the role of consort to the goddess Isis. In any case, he seems to have been a god of storms.



In this stele found in Khirbet et-Tannur the Edomite god Qos is mentioned.

𐤒𐤓𐤌𐤕𐤍  
 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓  
 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓

1. (Stele that) Qosmlek made
2. For Qos, god of
3. Hurwa

While the name of the person who made the stele (in maroon) and the god (in blue) are not difficult to identify, the name in the last line (in sandstone) is open to interpretation: some think that it is a proper name (Huru). If that is the case, the final 'a' may be an abbreviation of *ummana* ("the craftsman"). Another possibility is that it is the same of an unidentified place.

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**Isis**

The Egyptian goddess Isis, mother of Osiris, who was well-known throughout the length and breadth of the Roman Empire, was introduced into Nabataean territories as a result of their contact with the Romans and the Egyptians.

The name *Isi* appears in Nabataean inscriptions located in an area some distance away from the centre of Petra, specifically in an outcrop where only a limited number of faithful could meet at any one time. This suggests that Isis's followers in Petra were few and she was probably a lesser god compared with some of the other deities of the city of Petra.



**This text conserved in Umm el-Jimal (southern Syria) belongs to a funeral inscription carved in a block of basalt. The Greek name of the deceased means "Servant of Isis", showing the strong Greco-Roman cultural influence in the area**

שנה טובה

**(I)sidoulos, of the Ruhu tribe**



𐤀𐤌𐤐𐤂𐤓𐤕

## Atargatis

Worship of the goddess of prosperity and good fortune, called Atargatis (probably *Ataraata* or *Atargata* in Aramaic), like Isis, was restricted to a minority group among the Nabataeans and was probably limited to groups of visiting Syrians. There is much evidence that she was worshipped in Khirbet Tannur.

Unfortunately we know little about the Nabataean calendar: we know virtually nothing about the dates of their festivals and we do not have an exact idea about how they divided up the week or whether some days were more important than others.

Even though it does not contain inscriptions, the zodiac discovered in the 1930s at the ruins of Khirbet at-Tannur (2nd century BCE – 4th/6th CE), some 70 km north of Petra, gives us some information about how the year was organised among the Nabataeans. The piece shows an image of a winged Nike holding a crown on which there are zodiac signs around a bust of a goddess (Allat or Atargatis?).



The astrological signs are divided into two groups. On the left side (from the reader's view) from top to bottom and anti-clockwise there are: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo and Virgo. On the right hand side from top to bottom clockwise are: Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces. This organisation suggests a division into two semesters and could mean that there were two new year celebrations, one in the spring and another in the autumn. This would explain why there were two large annual festivals in Petra.

This sundial was found in Hegra and it dates back to the 1st Century CE. The division into 12 portions, separated by 11 lines, shows that Nabataeans had a day with 12 daylight hours. The inscription on the bottom probably refers to the owner.



Manasseh bar Natan. Peace! (mlš ntn rb 'šnm)

נפתל ~ ייטש דנס  
פנפס ענוו 99797  
שדש 97979797  
97979797979797  
גדמ 9797979797  
שנח 9797979797  
סניס ר עז 9797979797

THE DOORS AND FAÇADES  
ARE SCULPTED ON THE  
STONE AND THERE IS  
NOTHING CONSTRUCTED.  
EVERYTHING IS BUT INTO  
THE ROCK LIKE A GROTTO.

AL-NUWAYRI,  
13TH CENTURY CE

The architectural work of the Nabataeans is uniquely spectacular with respect to other ancient monuments and also thanks to the unusual natural environment in which they are conserved. In fact, some classical authors such as the mediaeval Arab travellers or the Romantic explorers share words of admiration in their descriptions of the ruins preserved in the desert. That is precisely the reason why many people travel to Petra and other sites in the ancient Nabataean lands: to experience the thrill of seeing the unique combination of nature and human labour.

In Nabataean constructions, what particularly stand out, as a result of their state of conservation, are the religious monuments and tombs. Petra continues to be one of the places with the richest architectural legacies in the world, and it is fundamental for imagining what the Nabataean kingdom must have been at the height of its glory and how the Nabataean people must have lived. Architectural remains also exist in other places, but sadly we do not know about all of them since excavations have not taken place in all the sites where they may be found or simply because they have not survived the passage of time. However, thanks to information from the inscriptions we know that there were other temples and architectural sites in other places, apart from those we have already mentioned.

Thanks to the inscriptions and comparisons with other works that have survived in the surrounding cultures, we know something about the significance that the surviving buildings had for the Nabataeans.



## TEMPLES

The architectural features of the Nabataean temples also appear in other religious buildings of the same time and area, and so it is not difficult to decipher their structure and purpose. We can reconstruct certain religious aspects of the Nabataean temples thanks to the information we have in the inscriptions, our knowledge of religions in pre-Islamic Arabia and comparison with the cultures of the surrounding areas, such as Judaism in the age of the Second Temple, Palmyra in Syria and the Hatrean kingdom in northern Iraq.

## THE STRUCTURE OF RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

To get an idea of what these buildings would have been like at the time of their greatest glory, we need to think of the Nabataean temples. Hewn from the blocks of stone, they were religious complexes that housed one or more images of gods in their most sacred spaces for the purpose of worship. This model of construction imitated the classical canons, with concessions to local religious art and practices. That is what the structures are often reminiscent of Greco-Roman models.

The place that contained the venerated images of the gods was therefore the most important in the building. Technically it is called *podium*, and constituted the centre of worship on the site. The room in which the *podium* was found was a covered space surrounded by a wall with columns. Next to the temple there was an unroofed and well-defined sacred space with the technical name of *temenos*. This open space included different interior installations and was already present in Greek and Roman religious buildings, and so it is not surprising that the Hellenised cultures of the East imitated the style. In fact two of the most famous examples of *temenos* occupy a considerable area: that of the Temple of Jerusalem, now disappeared, and the great temple of Bel in Palmyra, which was almost completely intact. Until 2015 in the temples, like the tombs, there were chambers for holy banquets known as *triclinia*, and these also contained various installations such as cult-chambers. We will talk more about these in the section on tombs.

This photograph is dated to the beginning of the 20th century and shows a curious Nabataean altar built in honour of the god Gada (Fortune) found in Suweida, in southern Syria.



In the upper and lower part of the photograph there are two inscriptions. From them we know the names of the people who dedicated this work to Gada.

𐤁𐤁𐤓 𐤔𐤁𐤋 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓  
𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓 𐤕𐤓𐤕𐤓

**Badr and Saadel, sons of Witru, who love Gada. Peace!  
Qusayu, son of Hanel, the sculptor. Peace!**



This old photograph shows a statue pedestal in the form of an altar found in Sii (southern Syria). The structure is dated to the year 33 of Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great (30 CE). The letter type of the inscriptions found in the areas surrounding Bosra with a squarer and more angular calligraphy, contrasts with the elegance of the texts from Petra. In the transcription the names of people appear in maroon.



ܣܢܬܬܝܠܝܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܢܐ  
 ܕܦܝܠܝܦ ܕܥܒܕܐ ܕܬܪܘ ܕܥܡܐ  
 ܕܒܘܕܐ ܕܩܫܝܘ ܕܫܘܕܝܐ  
 ܕܗܢܐ ܕܡܫܐܕ ܕܡܘܢܐ ܕܥܡܐ  
 ܕܥܡܐ ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ  
 ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ  
 ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ ܕܡܢܐ

1. In the year 33 of our lord (*marana*)
  2. Philip. Abdu, Taru (?) son of
  3. Budar, Qasiyu son of Shuday,
  4. Hana'el son of Masak'el, Muna son of
  5. Garmu. Pedestal-altar (*bumos*) of the statue of Galishu
  6. son of Banatu.
- Manam son of Asbo, the craftsman (*ummana*) Peace!

## THE GREAT TEMPLES OF PETRA

In the heart of Petra, several temple sites have been excavated. Of all of them the most important is the temple which today is known as **Qasr al-Bint** ("the palace of the daughter"), which was probably built at the beginning of the 1st century CE. Access to this square building, which was built on a raised platform, was via the main avenue of the city along which processions took place as part of the religious activity of the temple. The wall of the interior courtyard, the *temenos*, was decorated with statues of kings and gods and contained stone benches and doorways to other buildings. The site contained different inscriptions in Nabataean, Greek and Latin. The temple faced north towards the mountains. The marble statue of the god of the temple (perhaps the god Dushara) would have been found in the central cell at the rear of the building.

Another important temple in Petra is the **Temple of the Winged Lions**, so-called

because of the sculptures that are preserved within it. This temple also connected with the main street in Petra and was dedicated to the worship of Allat. It was built in the first four months of the 1st century CE as evidenced by two inscriptions related to the temple and was finally destroyed by an earthquake in 363 CE. The site was later used in the Christian Era.

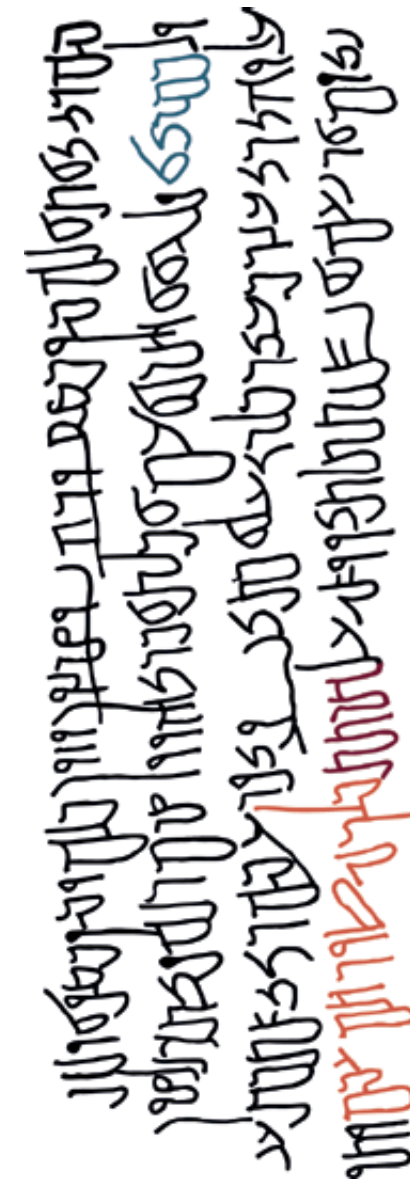
As well as these two, there is also another building known today as the **"great Temple"** located in the most southerly part of Petra, just beside the lower market of the city. The building was decorated with worked stone pillars and elephant-headed volutes. There was a monumental entrance with columns interior staircases leading to a courtyard and a central building with a complex hydraulic system surrounded by corridors.



This block of white marble, broken on the left side, was found in the Temple of the Winged Lions of Petra. It contains a four-line inscription dated to 28 CE (the 37th year of King Aretas IV) and offers details of some of the aspects of the process for the offerings made in the temple. In fact, it is the only evidence we have of this type for the Nabataeans. At the beginning of line 2, the priests are mentioned (in blue). At the end of the text the name of the monarch appears along with his title (in maroon and orange respectively). The style of calligraphy in this inscription is elegant with large letters, and the characters are joined fancifully, reflecting a new taste for joined, a continuous script which is more reminiscent of Arabic.



1. What came to it in silver, gold, offerings, food and coins of silver and bronze...
2. And to the priests (*kumrayya*) the other half with food, as if they were before this one; so they will be divided...
3. Against he who does anything different from all that is written above. And he will pay what is found to be against him...
4. The fourth day of Ab, year thirty-six of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, who loves his people...



## TEMPLES OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL

There were also many temples outside the capital. In fact, while some of them can still be visited today, thanks to the inscriptions we also know of the existence of others that have since disappeared. This is the case of a temple in Bosra in honour of Dushara, another in honour of Allat and Belshamayn in Salkhad and the temple of Qaysha in Hegra.

To the north of Petra, on a mountain of some 300 metres, is the temple of **Khirbet at-Tannur**, with around 40 square metres of floor area. Inside there is a courtyard, an altar and banqueting halls (*triclinia*) on the north and south sides. Some 183 km south of Amman is the temple of **Khirbet adh-Dharih**, which must have been a stop on the trade route or pilgrimage route that led to the temple of Tannur. This site has preserved a sacred area with two courtyards, in one of which is the small temple building which conserves the **podium** for the god.

## SITES OF WORSHIP

The natural mountains, valleys and rocky areas around the city of Petra were converted into sites that formed an essential part of the Nabataeans' religious practice of worshipping different gods. Others were created within the city using constructions techniques similar to those of the Greeks and Romans.

## PROCESSIONAL ROUTES

Certain major streets in Petra have been identified as "processional ways" in the same way as the well-known holy routes used by the Romans. In the Nabataean capital these streets, designed for religious processions, formed part of a clear urban plan and connected the city with the surrounding mountains, with the royal tombs carved into the surface of the rock and the high places. Some of them were natural tracks that were taken advantage of for this particular purpose. The best known is the Siq, the famous gorge at the entrance of Petra which leads to the centre of the city. The tomb facilities, religious representations and the inscriptions found there indicate that it was a "processional way" that fulfilled the purpose of connecting different religious sites such as those in the temples. Another type of processional way was that which led to the high places that surrounded the city.

## THE HIGH PLACES

The high places constitute ancient religious places used by the Semites in prominent places, especially in the hills and mountains. In Petra they were places for major sacrificial ceremonies following the procession. At least two are known of: **al-Madhbah** and **ad-Dayr**. The former is 200 metres above the city on a rock converted into an altar, which at the time would also have had a representation of a god. On the site a basin with a drain has been conserved which would have been used for draining the blood of the sacrificed animal or the libations that too place in honour of the god. The wide space in front of the altar also had various different functions, from the ritual preparation of the victims of appeasement to a space for accommodating the priests' assistants as well as providing a place for the king on special occasions.

**Ad-Dayr** is a sanctuary located on a hilltop above Petra. The procession would have reached the altar by way of a path hewn from the rock.

## TOMBS

**Apart from being one of best architectural testimonies to be conserved in Nabataean society, the tombs are especially valuable for researchers. First, because some of them contain sepulchral inscriptions which always provide extremely useful first hand evidence written by those whose names appear in them. Also, because their structure reveals valuable information about the beliefs and organisation of the Nabataean kingdom and society. There are a large number of tombs, especially in the areas of Petra and Hegra, although also in other places such as the remains in Ruwafa or Jabal Ithlib, in Saudi Arabia.**

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF BURIAL

There are different types of burials in the Petra area. In fact, up to eight different types of façade have been identified: from simple, strongly local models to grand structures in the Greco-Roman style. The latter tend to be found in the larger sites and they contain many of architectural features. A common element among all of them, however, is the funeral chamber which is accessed from the porticoes in the central part of the façades.

As a general rule, most of the Nabataean tombs had a single square funeral chamber with different types of burial, so the interior distribution of the tombs could vary. Whereas in some tombs there was a large number of sepulchres, others were more family-orientated and had fewer funeral elements, ossuaries and second burial tombs. The sepulchres could also be individual or collective, designed for several corpses.

A typical element of Nabataean tombs is the funeral monument, in the form of a plaque or pyramid (*nfesh*, *nafsha*), which was placed at the entrance and sometimes bore the name of the deceased. This example was found in Sii and contains a bilingual inscription in Greek and Aramaic. The type of lettering is similar to that of the pedestal-altar which appears above.



In Greek:

**The monument of Tanenos, son of Annelos.**

In Nabataean Aramaic:

1. For Tanninu son of Hann'el, the funeral monument (*nafsha*).
2. Huru, son of Ubayshath, the craftsman (*ummana*).

It is not always easy to come to a correct interpretation of the function of the architectural elements that can still be seen today in the tombs of Petra. This is because almost none of the funeral inscriptions have been conserved. There are different theories about this: some think that the inscriptions never existed, simply because they were not necessary – everyone knew the name of the owner of the structure and that name would have appeared in the funeral register and filed in a safe place in the city. This should not be surprising. The classical authors had already written that the Nabataean legal system was highly evolved and well organised. In one of the passages of his *Geography* Strabo tells of how the stoic philosopher Athenodorus (died 7 CE) was in admiration of the system:

***Athenodorus, who had been in the city of the Petraeans, used to describe their government with admiration, for he said that he found both many Romans and many other foreigners sojourning there, and that he saw that the foreigners often engaged in lawsuits.***  
(Strabo)

Other researchers maintain that the funeral texts could have been painted on the rock and not carved as in Hegra, and they were therefore lost over time.

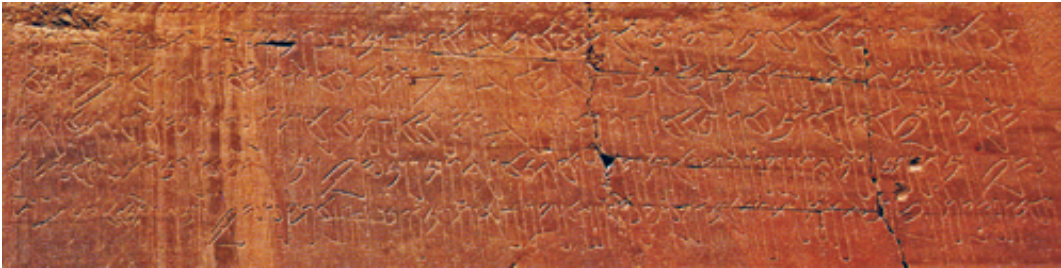
Another place where a good number of Nabataean tombs have been conserved is Hegra (today known as Madain Salih), in northeast Saudi Arabia. In addition to the architectural value of the remains, the inscriptions that appear on the façades of many burial sites are of particular interest and some of them have already been presented. These texts confirm the idea that there was a strong relationship between religion and the legal property of the tomb itself. Apart from that, although the tombs in Hegra are similar to those in Petra there are some interesting differences in the installations that formed part of the funeral site. Also, while in Petra there were statues with human figures, this type of representation never existed in Hegra, where sphinxes, serpents and eagles were common, as well as others figures from the animal, plant and semi-mythological worlds.



Among the Nabataean inscriptions conserved in Petra there is one particularly important text, both in terms of its execution and its content. This undated text is conserved together with the monument on which it appears, known as “the tomb of the Turkman” *qabr at-Turkman*, also known as the “Turkmaniyyah Tomb”. The type of lettering on this piece is one of the best examples of Nabataean script – developed, elegant and artistic. It is highly probable that the owner, who is not mentioned in the text, would have lived in the second half of the 1st century CE or the beginning of the 2nd.

Despite the lack of information about the date and the owner, the inscription itself is extremely detailed in describing the architectural elements that make up the property. In fact, this text is one of the most informative in that respect. The repeated mention of documents related to the tomb, with out indicating the place where they were kept, leads us to think that there was a local secure register that was known and accessible by all the inhabitants of the city.

To make it easier to identify the terms, the architectural elements are marked in blue, the gods in maroon and the legal institutions in orange.



1. This tomb (*qabra*), the large funeral chamber (*sriha rabba*) in it, the small funeral chamber (*sriha z'ira*) in its interior, the sepulchral rooms (*battay maqbrin*), the work of the niches (*giwahin?*),
2. the atrium (*karka*) that there is before them, as well as the porticoes (*arkwata*) and the rooms (*battayya*) that are in it, the enclosures (*gannayya*), the banquet garden (*gannat smakha*), the water cisterns (*berwat mayya*), the façade (?) (*sahwta*), the walls (*turayya*)
3. and the rest of all the foundation of these places are consecrated (*hrem*). It was prohibited by Dushara, the god of our lord, and his Throne (*Mawtbeh*) Harisha, and all the gods (*alahaya kulhom*),
4. according to that written in the documents of consecration (*štaray harmin*). Because the command of Dushara and his Throne (*Mawtbeh*), and all the gods (*alahayya kulhom*), with respect to what is in the consecration documents (*šatray harmayya*) must be done. That it should not be altered
5. nor removed any of what is in them and in this tomb be buried (*qabra*) no man except he who is written in the burial contract in these consecration documents (*šatray harmayya*), forever.



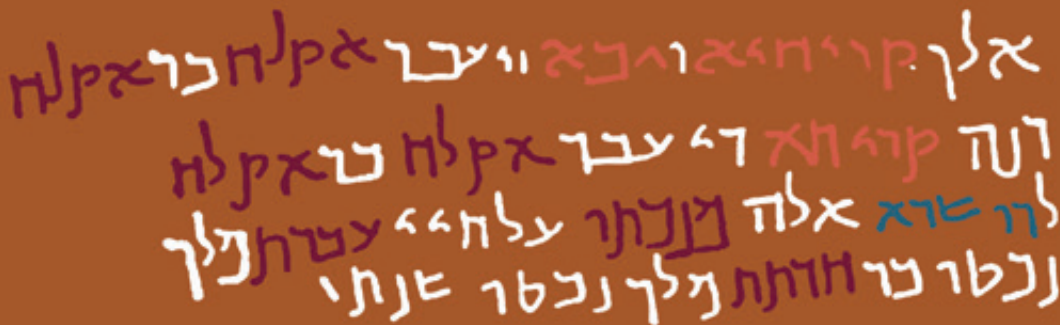
THE SACREDNESS  
OF THE TOMB

Looking at the inscription of the Turkmani-yah Tomb, one of the most interesting things to see is that the burial property was considered to be sacred by the Nabataeans. In fact, an Aramaic word used to define this kind of property (and which was pronounced something like *hrem*) is the same as the word used in Arabic to designate sacred places in Islam (*haram*), or the most untouchable place in the house – the harem (*harim*) of the women. The same word appears in the inscriptions of Hegra. The tombs were conceived of as sacred places which therefore somehow belonged to the gods. This seems to have been confirmed in a recent discovery of incense, altars and bones of animal sacrifices in the entrances of some of the burial sites in Petra.

One funeral custom that was well documented in the inscriptions and directly related to the tombs was the practice of having funeral banquets in honour of the deceased in spaces that were specially designed for that purpose, and technically known as *triklinion*

or *triclinium*. These rooms were inspired in Greek and Roman practices where the guests reclined on cushions around three sides of a low table. The open side was the entrance and also the place where the food was brought in. It is highly probable that the banquet was accompanied by singing, music and dances. It seems that there were two types of halls for funeral banquets in Petra: open air spaces (called *gannat smakha* or "banquet garden"), outside the funeral buildings and others that were covered with a high roof. Although not certain, this could be the meaning of the Aramaic term *sriha* in some of the inscriptions. This would explain the presence of the wells and cisterns that are sometimes mentioned in the texts. In any case, the ritual feasts, which were organised as meetings of confraternities (*marzeha*), must have been a regular practice among the Nabataeans. Strabo wrote that the meetings took place in groups of 13, although some sites in Petra suggest that, at least on certain occasions, they were much more multitudinous.

This text, known as the "inscription of Aslah" is one of the most ancient Nabataean texts known. It is conserved in a banquet room or *triclinium* and dated to the 1st year of Obodas I (that is, 96 BCE). To make it easier to examine the inscription we have highlighted the architectural elements in orange, the names of people in maroon and the name of the god Dushara in blue.



- 1. These are the chambers (*srihayya*) and the cistern (*gubba*) made by Aslah son of Aslah.
- 2. This is the chamber (*sriha*) made by Aslah son of Aslah
- 3. for Dushara, god of the Manbatu, for the life of Obodas, king
- 4. of the Nabatu, son of Aretas, king of the Nabatu, year 1.

וְנִזְכָּר שֶׁכִּי עַד הַיּוֹם  
הַזֶּה הָיוּ הָעַרְבִים  
וְהַיִּדִּישִׁים אֲדָמָה  
וְעַד הַיּוֹם אֲדָמָה  
וְעַד הַיּוֹם אֲדָמָה  
וְעַד הַיּוֹם אֲדָמָה  
וְעַד הַיּוֹם אֲדָמָה

**THEY USED TO ROAM  
FREELY IN THESE LANDS  
BEFORE THE ROMANS  
TOOK THEM OVER.**

*STRABO*

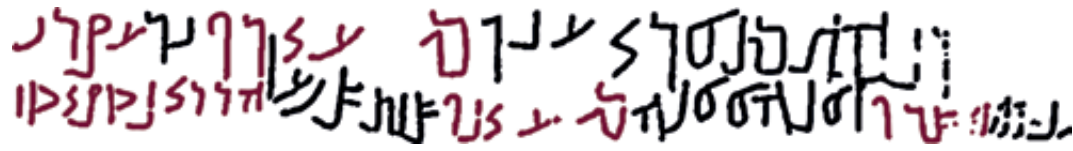
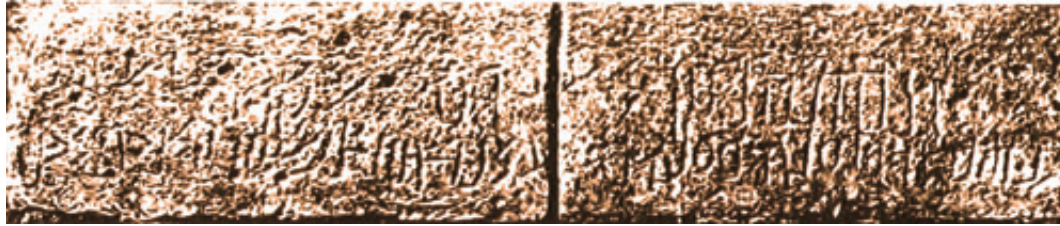
In the year 106 Rabbel II, the last Nabataean king, died and with his death the Nabataean lands were finally annexed to Rome, and became one more province of the Empire, known as Arabia Petraea. In the same year, the “first year of the Province” – the governor of Syria, Aulus Cornelius Palma – took over the heart of the kingdom on the orders of the Emperor Trajan. The Legio III Cyrenaica transferred from Egypt to Petra and the Legio VI Ferrata established itself in Bosra. A few years later the same emperor ordered the construction of the Via Traiana, which joined the Syrian border and the Red Sea. The ancient Nabataean capital was therefore gradually turned into a provincial town without any apparent conflict with the Roman powers. It would seem that the very presence of the Roman legionnaires was more than enough to persuade the Nabataeans that conflict would certainly not be in their interests.





In the organisation of the new territory, the administrative centre was the market city of Bosra, which was named *Nova Traiana Bosra*. The city was one of the most important points on the trading caravan route that connected the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the lands beyond the Roman borders, known as Arabia *Felix*. So although Petra continued to be relatively important, Bosra became the capital and the seat of the Roman provincial governor and the barracks of the legion giving it certain cultural prominence. In fact, at the end of the 3rd century CE, it produced two philosophers of a certain reputation called Callinicus and Genethlios. The city therefore became the natural gateway to Arabia for the diffusion of Roman culture and nascent Christianity.

Petra was renamed *Petra Hadriana*, following a visit by the Emperor Hadrian in 131 BCE. Over time it became an important Christian centre, and in 325 CE the city was home to one of the bishops who attended the First Council of Nicaea. In the 4th century, the Roman province of Arabia was divided into two separate provinces: Arabia, with Bosra as its capital, and the so-called Palaestina Tertia, with Petra as its centre. However, in 363 CE a violent earthquake left Petra in a catastrophic state and this sped up its abandonment and gradual lapse into oblivion.



This old photograph by Littman shows an inscription that was reused on the wall of a church in Dayr al-Mashquq, in southern Syria. You can see on it that, although the customs remained, the Roman emperor was now the lord of the Nabatu. As usual, we have marked the people's names in red to make them easier to interpret.

1. This is the altar for the fire made by Mugayru, son of Aqrab
2. In the house of Ashadu the god, god of Muinu, in the year seven of Hadrian Caesar (rsyqsnyrdh).

Given that Hadrian came to the throne in 117 BCE, the inscriptions dates to the year 123, some 17 years after the fall of the Nabataean kingdom.

The latest discoveries show that Greek became the administrative language. Meanwhile, Arabic was also gaining ground over Nabataean Aramaic in the inscriptions. In fact, the last Nabataean inscription which came from Hegra is dated 356 CE. Little by little, the descendants of the ancient Nabataeans were assimilated into a new culture and social environment, and forgot their origins. The contribution that their own culture and religion had brought to Middle Eastern civilisation passed into the hands of the people occupying their former areas of influence.

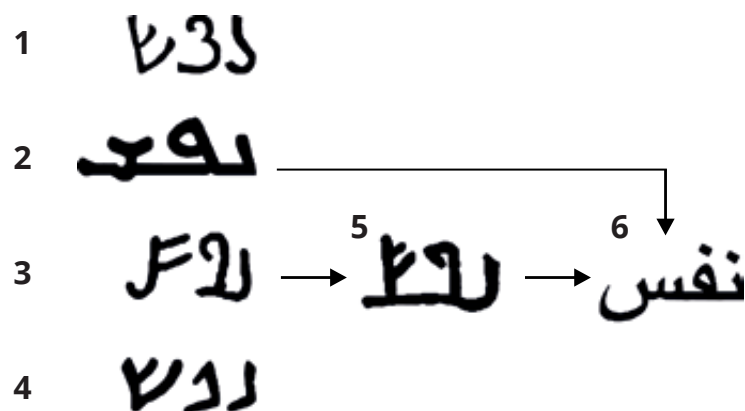
However, if there was one lasting feature of the Nabataeans, it was their writing, which survived thanks to the use of the old alphabet by the Arabs to compose texts that were partially or totally written in Arabic. In fact, having its origins in the Phoenician alphabet, modern Arabic script is a strange link in a long chain. The letters are curved rather than straight and they are joined together as if they form a single organism that is the word.

Both of these features can be understood thanks to Nabataean calligraphy, which explains all their peculiarities. That is because Arabic owes some of its most basic features to Nabataean. Looking at a text written in Arabic, you can get a glimpse of something of the glory that lit up that remote desert kingdom of Nabataea.

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN NABATAEAN AND ARABIC SCRIPTS

Reproductions of the word *nefesh*, *nfesh* "soul, life breath" (špn) in the different "sister" calligraphies that emerged during the same period and the same area.

- 1) Palmyrene script, used in the oasis of Palmyra in Syria.
- 2) Syriac *estrangela* script, from the city of Edessa in Mesopotamia, which was used by the Christians throughout the Middle East.
- 3) Nabataean script.
- 4) Jewish script.



Nabataean script evolved towards a calligraphy of joined letters (5), the same as Syriac (2). The experts consider that either of these two styles may have been possible precedents for the Arabic script, (6, nafs, šfn).

## FROM NABATAEAN TO ARABIC

As we have seen already in this book, the Greek writers such as Josephus, tended to call the Nabataeans "Arabs". However, this should not confuse us. We need to try to understand the exact meaning of the word "Arab" in the context of the time, as it is quite possible that the Greeks and Romans, in their role as observers, tended to simplify what must have been a very heterogeneous society of Nabataeans, in which other groups that were both ethnically and linguistically different existed alongside the Arabs.

A very interesting problem, and one that is as yet unresolved, is what the true proportion of groups or peoples of Arab tribal origin was within the Nabataean kingdom. In fact, groups of Arabs formed part of the tribal confederation of the Nabataean kingdom. We should remember that:

- 1) it is very probable that the languages spoken by some of the Nabataeans were related to northern Arabic dialects,
- 2) some Nabataean names that appeared in the inscriptions can be explained thanks to Arabic and
- 3) there is not doubt about Nabataean connections with the Arabs, not only in terms of trading but also political relations that existed between the Nabataeans and north-western Arabia.

For example, the Arab city of Madain Salih (in Arabic "the cities of Salih") located 110 km to the south east of Tayma, was known in the age of the Nabataeans as Hegra. We have mentioned this city several times in this book because it was the biggest Nabataean centre of the southern trading route.

Many Nabataean texts are full of words, grammatical forms and Arab names that give an unmistakeable taste to the Aramaic language found in the inscriptions, especially the later ones.

We should also remember that, before the arrival of Islam, there were many Arab groups in the northernmost regions of the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria and even in parts of western Persia. So the Arabs formed an integrating part of the human mosaic that has marked the history of the Middle East since ancient times. They were often organised in tribes and, although they came from the Arabian Peninsula, they were in contact with non-Arab peoples and cultures for political and trading reasons. In some areas, such as the Syrian plains, they even had a significant social influence.

Inscription photographed in 1979 on a rock some five kilometres to the north of Ein Avdat, in Negev. It contains a text in honour of the Nabataean king Obodas (probably Obodas I) who was deified after his death.

Dated between the years 89 and 126 CE, the inscription is written in typically Nabataean script and contains two lines in pre-classical Arabic, showing how that language was used by part of Nabataean society. The lines in Arabic (lines 4 and 5) are shown in **orange** and the names of people in **maroon**.



נְנִישְׁמִיכָא פְּרִיחַ עֲבֹדָא לְאִסְרִי  
כִּי נִתְּנָה לִּי מִלְּפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְנִתְּנָה לִּי מִלְּפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְנִתְּנָה לִּי מִלְּפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְנִתְּנָה לִּי מִלְּפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְנִתְּנָה לִּי מִלְּפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים

The text in Arabic is not easy to interpret and there is no consensus among the experts even today. A tentative translation would be as follows:

1. May he be remembered for good he who reads before the god Obodas and be remembered
2. he who wrote...
3. Garmallahi son of Taymallahi, a statue before the god Obodas
4. Because He acts without benefit or favour, and if death calls us, do not
5. let him cry for me. And if I come to the watering hole of this place, let not calamity loom over us.
6. Garmallahi wrote it by his hand.



The subject of Arab identity, the origins of which are difficult to detect and define, represents an interesting area of research that is closely related to our findings in the inscriptions, and literary and historical texts of the time. All of them show that, over a long period, the term "Arab" must have had a very generic meaning, in the same way that the term "Aramaic" had in the past.

At the beginning "Arab" was used to refer vaguely to a way of life of nomadic or semi-nomadic people. That is the sense it had for the Greek and Roman writers that we have referred to. However, from the 3rd and 4th centuries, the same word changed in meaning and was only used to refer well-defined tribal groups with military strength and economic resources, who occupied a specific area and used a dialect of Arabic which would eventually have its own alphabet. Little by little, the Arabs would become enriched with their own literature and a history shared with the Roman, Byzantine and Persian Empires, depending on the lands in which they settled.

Above we mentioned that the last known Nabataean inscription is dated to the year 356. However, the inscription of an-Namara, written 28 years previously, is the first text to be written completely in Arabic using Nabataean script.

The inscription of an-Namara is very important because it is a testimony in stone to what really happened during the 4th century CE: the Nabataean socio-political and cultural regime disappeared and a new situation emerged, this time thoroughly Arabic.

We should remember that there are many differences between the inscription in honour of Obodas and that of an-Namara. There are at least two centuries between them, in which a new identity gradually began to emerge. Garmallahi, who wrote the first text 'by his own hand', never experienced the Arab identity that would be flaunted by the proud King Imru I-Qays, in whose honour the second inscription was written proclaiming him "king of the Arabs".

The idea that the Arabs of the 4th century CE were the continuation and genuine representatives of the Nabataean kingdom is somewhat difficult to sustain today. The Nabatu were in fact made up of different tribal groups from a number of different places and the Arabs were just a branch of that complex society.





In 64 BCE Syria was conquered by Pompey the Great and the Roman presence was established in the area. The new rulers would soon understand that the route through Syria, Palestine and the north of the Arabian Peninsula was of enormous strategic importance against the fearful force of the Parthian Empire.

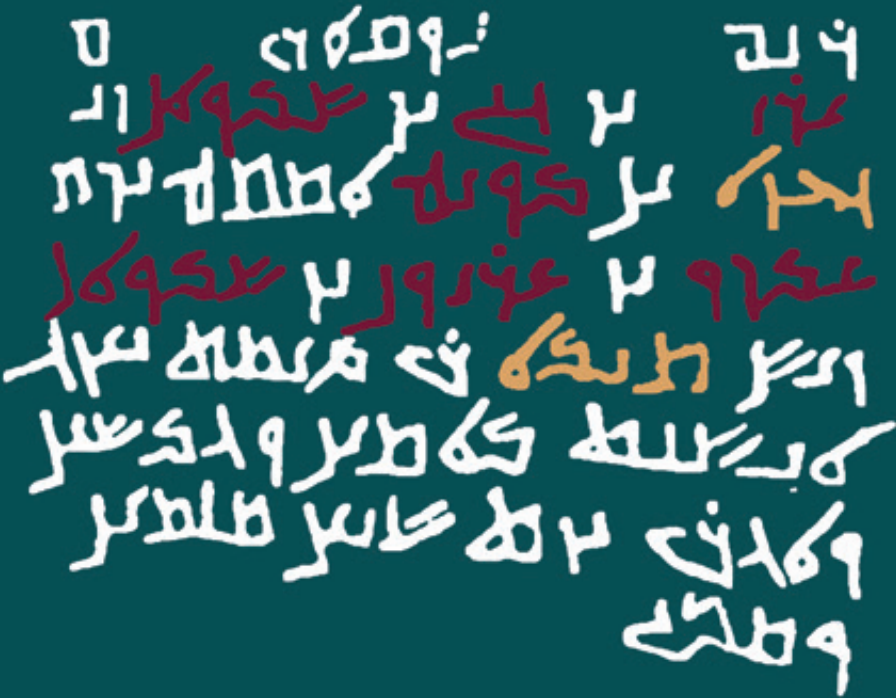
These lands had been a point of contact and exchange for numerous cultures. The improvement of the roads by the Romans opened up new channels through which the Arabs would have access to a whole series of new elements in terms of language, economy and culture. Among these points of contact, there were also religious influences promoted by the monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, which would end up sharing the same space with the polytheistic cultures. In the specific case of Christianity, the first contact with the Arabs took place as a result of the presence of Jesus' followers in Damascus and in the Nabataean region of Hawran – the “Arabia” to which Saint Paul retired seeking the refuge and calm that he needed, as he himself commented in a letter in Galatians:

***I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. (1:17)***

It is no accident that the propagation of the Gospel in the Nabataean area took place very rapidly, compared with its slow diffusion in regions such as Antioch. In a document from the year 315, written by an uneducated Arab called Aurelius Malchus, the completely new geographical denomination ‘New Arabia’ can be seen. The appearance of New Arabia and the disappearance of the old Roman province of Arabia meant the emergence of a new geographical, political and linguistic reality: the Byzantine Arabia.

A few years later, in 330 CE, Emperor Constantine the Great changed the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, rebuilding it and hailing it as the New Rome. At that time Petra was a Christian city and already had its own martyrs as a result of the Diocletian persecution. However, the growing Christian society was still unable to prevent the worship of the old gods there. Petra would even become a place of refuge for Christian heretics and other different individuals who had come up against the religious or political powers, which were sometimes the same thing. But the earthquake of the year 363 destroyed half of the city. The end was quick and the once powerful and prosperous city of Petra, which had been struggling against slow economic decline, could not withstand the final consequences of the disaster. Evening had fallen on a flourishing and unique past in the history of humanity and culture: the end of the Nabataean civilisation.

This text from Hegra is the last known inscription in Nabataean script and dates back to the year 251 of the Province (356/7 CE). It belongs to a tomb and is interesting both for its script, which contains many elements that are reminiscent of Arabic, and also for the names that appear within it. Some of the names (highlighted in maroon in the image) seem to suggest that the deceased was of Jewish origin. The place names are highlighted in sandstone.



1. This is the fu[neral] monument (na[fsha]) ....
2. Ady(on) son of Hannay son of Shemuel, head
3. of Hegra on behalf of Munah his wife, daughter of
4. Amru son of Adyon son of Shmuel,
5. head of Tayma, who died in the month of
6. Ab in the year two hundred and fifty-
7. one, aged thirty-
8. eight.



Having come to the end of this book you will have seen, as we mentioned in the introduction, that it was not intended for experts in the history or language of the Nabataeans, but for anyone interested in the subject and in finding out what it is like to work on these ancient texts. Our modest contribution is the result of a proposal made by the members of the MEDINA project when we started working together, and is based on the conviction that, with a little help, the inscriptions can be enjoyed not only by the specialists but also by those who are curious and want to learn about them.

Consequently this book should be seen from that perspective, which is undoubtedly new in the field of ancient epigraphy. We have tried to avoid anything that would make reading the texts difficult or cumbersome, keeping the data and the different theories related to a specific event or interpretation to a minimum. We have not included footnotes, specialised transcriptions or specific bibliographical references in order to make the reading of this book more enjoyable.

It is possible that readers will want to know more about the different subjects dealt with through the Nabataean inscriptions, and if that is the case then we will feel we have done a good job. These last pages are for those of you who do want to know more. We suggest a number of books which we believe could be useful or, at least, interesting to look through. There is an incredible large number of literary and scientific works about the Nabataeans, with many excellent books, both in terms of information and analysis of the language, culture, history and religion of this people.

For a contextualisation within a wider panorama of Aramaic, Sebastian Brook's *The Hidden Pearl* (Rome: Trans Word Film 2001) is very useful, especially Volume I. It gives simple explanations of the history of the Aramaic language and writings, including Nabataean, and is illustrated with maps, graphs and pictures. For those who read French we recommend the work of Jean Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen*, published in Paris in 1930. Even though there have been other more recent publications on the subject, it remains a classic reference and one of the most influential works on the study of the language of the Nabataean texts. It is divided into two volumes: the first is a study of the texts and the second includes a selection of the inscriptions, illustrated with some beautiful etchings, and a glossary.



Lovers of the classics will find the works of the Orientalists fascinating. Working in the second half of the 19th and the first years of the 20th centuries they include Rudolf Ernst Brünnow, Alfred von Domaszewski, Enno Littmann, Julius Euting and Georges Albert Cook, among many others. As an example, we recommend you take a look at Enno Littmann's publications: pages 85-95 of his book *Semitic Inscriptions, Part IV of the Publications of an American Archeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900* (New York: Century 1904) and *Nabatean Inscriptions from the Southern Hawran*, which was published as part of the series *Publications of the Princeton University Archeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-1905 and 1909* (Brill: Leiden 1914). The etchings and explanations of the author will transport you to the golden age of the explorers of Nabataean territories.

Among the more recent publications we recommend two works by John F. Healey, one of the most illustrious specialists in Nabataean language and culture: pages 52-121 of *Aramaic Inscriptions & Documents of the Roman Period (Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions IV*, New York: Oxford University Press 2004), where he presents a series of Nabataean texts, and his book *The Religion of the Nabataeans: A Conspectus* (Leiden: Brill 2001), to which we could add the work of Peter Alpass, *The Religious Life of Nabataea* (Leiden: Brill 2013). There are also a good number of interesting details about Nabataean language and writings in an article by W. C. A. MacDonald on the subject, on pages 37-56 of the book edited by Glenn Markoe, *Petra Rediscovered. The lost City of the Nabataeans* (London: Thames & Hudson 2003). For anything related to architecture, you can consult the book by Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Petra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990).

There are several websites on the subject of Nabataean language and culture. *Nabataea* ([www.nabataea.net](http://www.nabataea.net)) by Dan Gibson and *The Bulletin of Nabataean Studies*, a freely accessible web site with updates and an extensive bibliography (<http://www.auac.ch/bns/>) are particularly helpful. A useful aid for studying the language is the *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (<http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/>), a database of Aramaic texts with a large range of resources.

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