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Religion and the Nomadic Lifestyle: The Nabateans

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If you have visited a Middle Eastern country, you likely have seen them, their skin leathery from the sun, leading their flocks to fertile pasture. Off in the distance, perhaps you noticed their tents dotting the hills, serving as temporary shelter from the elements. Nomads, “indigenous people who under[take] regular, cyclical migrations in order to pursue pastoralism,” are a prominent feature of Middle Eastern life today, and they were a significant presence in the past as well (Donner 1989: 75). Their influence on Near Eastern society has been profound. Transient and often evasive figures whose mobile lifestyle creates around them a mysterious, romantic aura, they have had a considerable impact on economic, social, political, and religious spheres of life in the Near East.

“Nomadic life” may entail a “rhythmic, even predictable nature of movement in response to seasonal changes in pasture” and a “lack of a permanent, fixed habitation, and regular contact with settled people, especially villagers, in the course of their annual migratory cycle” (75). Nomads’

lives need to be portable, but within this portability there is great diversity in terms of lifestyle. In fact, “contemporary observation demonstrates that there are varieties of mobile pastoralism. Many households may combine it with agriculture or hunting or fishing, and those who spend the summer in tents may return to solid houses in winter” (West 2002: 449). Indeed, if we think of “nomadic” and “sedentary” as the opposing ends of a lifestyle spectrum, many modern groups fall somewhere in between (Donner 1989: 75).

This wide spectrum of lifestyles was likewise manifested among nomadic peoples living in the ancient world. It is now understood that certain nomadic groups of late antiquity experienced changes in their lifestyles, at times falling closer to the “nomadic” end of the spectrum and at times closer to the “sedentary” end. Scholars also recognize that relations between nomads and settled peoples were far more variegated than earlier thought; for example, the two often depended on each other for economic sustenance. Indeed, the understanding of the relationship between nomads and settled peoples as one of constant tension and competition between “the desert and the sown” is now considered far too simplistic. Nomads’ travels and interactions with other peoples within the ancient world brought them into contact with a variety of cultures and traditions, leading to an exchange of traditions and styles that affected every aspect of life, including how they interacted with the gods. This chapter focuses on these religious aspects of life among the Nabatean peoples.

The Nabateans were a Semitic people on the Arabian Peninsula during the Greco-Roman period. Their lifestyle as caravaneers, and the remarkable beauty of their capital city of Petra, have stirred scholarly interest and imagination. Two features of Nabatean existence have received particular attention: their nomadic lifestyle as traders, on the one hand, and their religious behaviour, on the other, especially as reflected in the archaeological data that continue to be uncovered at Petra. For the most part, however, scholarship has focused on these issues separately.

This study proposes bringing these two foci together by addressing the following question: “How is the mobile lifestyle of the Nabateans reflected in their religious behaviours?” We begin our exploration by discussing what is known about the Nabateans and their origins from ancient writers and from archaeological remains. Using these same resources, we will then describe artifacts and activities associated with Nabatean interactions with their gods. Here I highlight the ways in which their nomadic—more accurately, semi-nomadic—lifestyle affected their religious behaviours and is reflected in those behaviours.

Nabateans

As Jane Taylor (2002) suggests, the origins of the Nabateans “remain as hazy as a desert sandstorm” (14). The consensus among scholars is that they were Arabs whose earliest settlements were in southern Jordan and Palestine. There are a variety of theories, however, regarding their geographic origins prior to arrival in Jordan and Palestine. Some scholars argue that they came from southwest of the Arabian Peninsula, from modern-day Yemen. The problem with this is that the Nabatean language, script, and deities are not like those from southern Arabia (14; Graf 1992: 970).¹ A second theory is that they come from the east coast of the Arabian peninsula, opposite Bahrain. They did seem to trade in this area, but whether they actually originated there is another matter. A more persuasive theory is that the Nabateans came from the northwest, today’s Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia. Nabateans have several gods in common with ancient peoples from this region, and the root consonants of their tribal name (*nbtw*) are found in early Semitic languages from this area (Taylor 2002: 14).²

The identification of the Greco-Roman Nabateans (*Nabatu* in their Aramaic inscriptions) with the earlier Ishmaelite tribe of the Nebaioth mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 25:13, 28:9, 36:3; I Chronicles 1:29; Isaiah 60:7) has been rejected on linguistic grounds.³ While their origins remain uncertain, it is known that by 312 BCE the Nabatean centre was Petra. It was from this city that they fended off an attack by Antigonous the One-Eyed, one of Alexander the Great’s commanders (Diod., *Bib. Hist.* 19, 95.4–6). The Nabatean kingdom reached the height of its prosperity under King Aretas IV, who reigned from 9 BCE to 40 CE (Goren 2000: 55).

Generally there were close and amicable interactions between Nabatean kings and Judean leaders, though at times tensions did arise (see Kasher 1988). Conflicts with Alexander Jannaeus and struggles with members of the Herodian dynasty arose, usually due to Nabateans’ ambitions to expand their territory. But Judean immigrants lived quite peacefully, it appears, in the Nabatean city of Hegra. Babatha’s archive, stashed away in the caves above En Geddi during the Bar Kochba revolt under Hadrian, suggests that this Judean family lived happily (except for inter-family conflicts!) within Nabatean lands.⁴ Herod the Great’s mother, Cypros, was most likely of Nabatean descent.⁵ In 65 BCE, Petra served as a refuge for the boy Herod when his father, Antipater, sent his half-Nabatean children there for safety, “thus giving the young Herod and his

future adversaries a first-hand view of each other” (Taylor 2002: 52). In many ways, the client-kingdom of Nabatea under Aretas IV and that of Judea under Herod the Great underwent parallel developments (Graf 1992: 972). Both were significantly impacted by Greco-Roman culture, as is reflected in each kingdom’s art and architecture.

Scholars of early Christianity know the Nabateans from their appearance in narratives connected with the death of John the Baptist. In *Antiquities* (18.109–29), Josephus describes how Nabatean King Aretas IV’s daughter, Herod Antipas’ wife, is coldly cast aside by Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, after he becomes smitten with Emperor Tiberius’s niece Herodias while visiting the royal family in Rome. A further complicating detail was that Herodias was married to one of Antipas’ half-brothers. According to Josephus, Antipas divorced his Nabatean wife, to whom he had long been married, and married Herodias. His actions enraged Aretas, and he incurred public wrath as well, because Jewish law forbade a man to marry his brother’s wife while the brother was alive (Leviticus 20:21; 18:16). Gospel accounts do not mention the Nabatean wife, but instead tell about John the Baptist’s condemnation of this marriage, for which he was incarcerated (Matthew 14:3–11; Mark 6:17–29; Luke 3:18–21). In the gospel accounts, Herodias encourages her daughter by her previous marriage to dance before Antipas and receive as a reward from the king the head of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:6–12 and parallels). Elsewhere in the New Testament, Nabateans are mentioned in the account of Paul’s escape from Damascus: the ethnarch of King Aretas IV guarded the city in order to catch Paul, but the latter was let down in a basket through a window and thereby avoided capture (2 Corinthians 11:32–33).

The Nabateans’ central source of income, as mentioned above, was trade, and this activity brought them remarkable wealth. By the late fourth century BCE, Nabateans were established traders of incense and spices from South Arabia and India, and of silks, cottons, and balsam (for medicinal use) from the Jordan Valley near Jericho. Incense had many uses in the Roman world, such as for medicine, worship, and funerals (requiring frankincense); hence the price of incense tended to increase. For those involved in the incense trade, this meant considerable wealth. The money was shared in a number of ways: the traders, of course, received part, as did the producers of the incense and those who took taxes as the caravaneers travelled through their lands (Taylor 2002: 26; Pliny, *NH* 12.32.63–65). Bitumen, extracted from the Dead Sea, was sold to Egyptians for their embalming, as well as for waterproofing boats and pottery.

In the Hellenistic period, the Nabateans controlled the incense route from the northern Hejaz through Edom into the Judean Negev; they also controlled a stretch of Red Sea coast and some offshore islands.⁶ While Nabateans may have faced enemies more sophisticated than they in warfare, none of their adversaries could compete with them when it came to knowledge of, and survival in, the desert. Nabateans had developed exceptional skills in finding, collecting, and managing water in their extremely arid environment. Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily, who wrote in the late first century BCE, describes how the Nabateans used the desert as a “refuge” and “fortress”—they alone were able to cross it “since they . . . prepared subterranean reservoirs,” filled them with rain water, and then “close[d] the openings, making them even with the rest of the ground, and they leave signs that are known to themselves but are unrecognizable by others” (Diod., *Bib. Hist.* 19.94.6–8, trans. Russel M. Greer 1954).

By the second century BCE, the Nabateans had gained the monopoly of frankincense and myrrh from South Arabia and had established several settlements along the caravan routes between the Hejaz and Damascus and between Petra and Gaza.⁷ Nabatean camel caravans left the Hejaz and entered south of modern-day Jordan, crossing long stretches of desert. Gaza was the main port for shipping materials to Europe, and to get there they needed to cross the Negev. But in order to protect their cargoes from first the Greeks, then the Judeans, and then the Romans, the Nabateans chose the most challenging routes through the Negev. Using wadis and hidden valleys to zigzag their way up steep precipices, they established fortresses and observation points at strategic spots, each with a cistern that would be guarded. They set up caravanserais in areas that had enough water to supply a large number of camels and riders (Taylor 2002: 26). Goren (2000) notes that Petra–Oboda–Gaza was the central artery through which trade was conducted (55). At Oboda, the “largest military camp of all was established,” because it was open and required careful protection (Taylor 2002: 26).

By the second century BCE, Nabateans occupied the coastal areas of the Red Sea. Diodorus describes how Nabateans attacked merchant ships of Ptolemaic Egypt and that they were caught and punished for these acts of piracy (Diod., *Bib. Hist.* 3.43.4–5). They likely attacked in order to protect their trade interests, since Ptolemaic traders were sending Arabian materials across the Red Sea directly into Egypt, circumventing the overland Nabatean trade routes and thereby avoiding paying taxes to the Nabateans (Taylor 2002: 38). Nabatean trading extended to the west coast

of Italy, near Naples, and to other points along sea routes to Europe. Nabatean merchants set up places of worship and trading bases at Alexandria and Rhodes as well as at Puteoli on the west coast of Italy, near Naples (70).

If we consider Nabatean life to be on a continuum, with “nomadic” and “sedentary” at opposing ends, early Nabatean life (in the fourth century BCE) is best described as very close to the “nomadic” pole. Diodorus, drawing on fourth-century BCE historian Hieronymus of Cardia (one of Alexander the Great’s officers), describes how the Nabateans “lead a life of brigandage” (Diod., *Bib. Hist.* 2.48.2, trans. Oldfather 1961). He reports that they “live in the open air, claiming as native land a wilderness that has neither rivers nor abundant springs from which it is possible for a hostile army to obtain water. It is their custom neither to plant grain, set out any fruit-bearing tree, use wine, nor construct any house; and if anyone is found acting contrary to this, death is his penalty”; also, “some of them raise camels, others sheep, pasturing them in the desert” (19.94.2–4, trans. Greer 1954).

Nabatean life did not remain fully nomadic, however. Strabo indicates that by the middle of the first century BCE, Nabateans were living a much more settled lifestyle. They lived in villages, drank wine in banquet rituals, and became masters of agriculture in desert regions (Strabo, *Geog.* 16.4.21–26). Indeed, it was their abilities in water management that enabled them to cultivate areas not previously used for agricultural purposes (Richardson 1996a: 64). Their lifestyle is best described at this time, and thereafter, as semi-nomadic. They engaged in agricultural activities as well as international trade for their economic sustenance; but as John Healey points out, “there is the possibility . . . that tents continued to be a popular type of housing even in the period when the Nabateans were building elaborate temples and tombs” (Healey 2001: 27). Nabatean urban centres, where they lived mostly on a part-time basis, included, among others, Petra, Bostra, Canatha (Qanawat), Dionysias (Suweida), et-Tannur, Mampsis (Kurnub), Avdat (Obodas), and Nissana (Richardson 1996a: 63).

Religious Behaviour Reflecting Mobile Lifestyle

There are significant challenges to understanding Nabatean ritual behaviour in general, let alone analyzing how this behaviour was affected by their itineracy. There is, for example, no extant account of any aspect of Nabatean rituals written by a Nabatean, and there is no written account of Nabatean mythology. As Gawlikowski (1990) points out: “Les données

sur les cultes nabatéens proprement dits sont disparates et sommaires, entachées parfois d'incompréhensions, et réservent de nombreuses incertitudes" (2661).

What is known with certainty is that Dushara (Dusares in Greek) was their central deity. He was identified with Zeus/Jupiter and at times also with Dionysos and Ares (Negev 1987: 287; Starcky 1966: col. 986). Allat was the dominant goddess of the pantheon; other goddesses included Manawatu and al-Uzza. Additional male gods worshipped by the Nabateans included al-Kutba and Shaialqaum (Negev 1987: 287).

By contrast, there is abundant epigraphical and archaeological evidence. Thousands of Nabatean inscriptions (in Greek and Aramaic) and graffiti provide insight into Nabatean practices relating to the gods. The remains of temples, open-air sacrifice areas, and representations of deities are also helpful.⁸

Portable Betyls and Evidence for "Road Cults"

The use of betyls, or standing stones, as representations of their deities, is characteristic of the Nabateans. The term "betyl" is used widely by scholars for a sacred stone or a stone slab that represents a deity.⁹ It is derived from the Greek word *baitulia*, which in turn is related to the Semitic *beth-el*, which means "dwelling/house/temple of god/El" (Wenning 2001: 80). Nabateans used shaped slabs of stone, or stelae, often rectangular, sometimes carved in relief, sometimes free-standing. Most of the gods represented at Petra are in the form of betyls carved into sandstone cliffs. This, says Taylor, reflects "a modest recognition of the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable" (Taylor 2002: 122). Two terms are found for betyls in Nabatean inscriptions: *nsb* and *msb*'; both terms are "related to the Semitic root *ysb* and describe an erected/standing stone/stela," and there is no indication in betyl types or shapes of "any difference between the two terms" (Wenning 2001: 80).

In the worship and representation of their gods, Nabateans observed "aniconism," which means that "rather than using figural images as objects of worship, symbolic forms such as standing stones are taken as the representations of the deity" (79). They shared this practice with many of their West Semitic neighbours.¹⁰ The Israelite prohibition of graven images is well known; in Genesis 28:22, for example, Jacob is described as setting up a "stone, which... shall be God's house." Taylor (2002) points out that the betyl "was for [Nabateans] the very abode of the god's presence, and so an object of great sanctity" (122). This "rectangular

anonymity” for deities was long practised by the Nabateans; their great god Dushara and their two chief goddesses Allat and al-Uzza, as well as several lesser gods, were represented as betyls. The most common betyls are in the shape of a rectangle, usually with “a smooth surface; its width is half, or less than half, its height. Reliefs are cut either into the rock or into free-standing portable stones,” with heights that range from 1.17 m to 9 cm (Patrich 1990: 76).

The Nabateans’ roving lifestyle likely prompted the creation of portable betyls. Certain betyls were made small enough to carry from place to place in a pocket or purse. These ranged in height from 60 cm to fewer than 10 cm (83). Indeed, Wenning notes:

Grooves in the floor in many niches lead us to believe that portable betyls were used. We can assume that these betyls may have been kept in tents or houses as tutelary deities of the family and were put in the niches for special occasions. Some other, larger monuments have holes or slots in the top to insert betyls, including the cultic platform of the Qasr adh-Dharih... and three bases from Puteoli with a few betyls in situ. (2001: 86)

Portable stelae have also been found in the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra, a structure completed c. 27–28 CE (Patrich 1990: 97).

Some of the rectangular stelae, or betyls, bear schematic representations of eyes and a nose. These have been found at Petra, ‘Ain-Shellaleh, and Mada’in Saleh (82). So far, twenty-seven eye betyls are known (Wenning 2001: 83). At Petra, portable betyls of this type have also been discovered (Patrich 1990: 83). At the path up to Jabal al-Khubtha at Petra, there is a niche and an accompanying votive inscription: “These are the betyls of Al-Uzza and of the Lord of the House, made by Wahballahi, the caravan-leader, son of Zaidan” (Dalman 1912: 96–98, 171 no. 85, in Wenning 2001: 80). Wenning suggests that even though grooves in the floor of the niche are not found, nonetheless that niche may have been filled with a portable betyl (81).

Nabateans could move these portable betyls from place to place within their settled community (e.g., from tent to sacred niche); moreover, they could take the stones with them as they journeyed along the trade routes or moved from one pasture to another with their flocks. The betyls could travel with the Nabateans, perhaps serving as symbols of divine protection along the way, as concrete assurance that their gods accompanied them as they travelled.

Standing stones have been discovered in the Negev and Sinai deserts, in places where Nabateans lived and travelled (Avner 1999–2000: 97). Uzi Avner notes that “in the area of ’Uvda Valley alone, *ca.* 40 km north of Eilat, I have documented more than 2000 standing stones,” most of which were “located at the back of dwelling tent camp remains” (97–98). These stones are usually only 20 to 40 cm high and are “always natural, unhewn stones, carefully selected by shape and size.” Most seem to “represent groups of different deities, based on their varying, repeating arrangements” (98, 101). The higher stone in a group likely represents the more prestigious deity, with narrower stones representing gods, and broad ones goddesses (98, 101).

Interestingly, Avner also has found standing stones set up at the side of ancient roads, independent of a specific campsite. These stones, Avner intriguingly suggests, “appear to be connected with a road cult and may have been used for prayer by people traveling with caravans.”¹¹ The establishment of such a “road cult” seems a logical and natural activity for a travelling people. As Avner states: “The crude standing stones eloquently express the abstract, aniconic perception of gods. The stone served as an abode for the god’s spirit, and *signifies its presence*” (110, my emphasis). Surely the dangers of travel, which included everything from the threat of brigandage to exposure to the elements, would have compelled Nabateans on occasion to pause along their journeys to erect a standing stone in order to solicit the protection of their deities.

The Use of Stone in Betyls and Nepheshes

Stone is solid, stable, and permanent. These qualities stand in direct contrast with features normally associated with the lifestyle of nomads and semi-nomads. Indeed, one could argue that the characteristics of stone represent the exact opposite of the transient life of a people frequently on the move. As Mircea Eliade (1970) has written, “above all, stone *is*” (216). Eliade points out that rock shows the human “something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity: an absolute mode of being,” and that the nature of stones made them useful symbols of that “something beyond” sought in devotion (216). In the “grandeur... hardness... shape and... colour” of stone or rock, humans were “faced with a reality and a force that belong to some world other than the profane” (216).

Nabateans also used stones to memorialize the dead. The *nephesh* is “shaped like an obeliskoid pilaster or a pointed cone, often with a

blossom/pinecone or a stylized crown at the top” (Wenning 2001: 87). It is usually placed on a base on which the name of the dead person is inscribed. The Semitic word *nephesh*, meaning “life,” “personality,” or “soul,” is found in certain Nabatean inscriptions.¹² The Nabatean *nepheshes* are “in bas-relief, roughly carved or engraved into rock faces,” and are found both inside and outside tombs—though some are found quite apart from tombs (Wenning 2001: 87). Patrich (1990) warns:

We . . . must make a distinction between a rock-cut relief intended as an idol and one intended as a memorial marker for the dead, a *nefesh*. The *nefesh* might be found inside the burial chamber itself or, alternatively, unconnected with a tomb; at Petra, the *nefesh* resembles a pointed or concave cone, ending in a sort of spout or blossom—a shape totally different from that of the stelae idols. The difference is further attested to by the identifying inscriptions that occasionally accompany them. (70)¹³

Nepheshes have been discovered along the rock walls of the Siq, the gorge through which the main road entering the city of Petra passes. Sometimes they are grouped together; three *nepheshes* carved into the smoothed wall of a quarry “probably commemorate masons who suffered fatal accidents” while doing their job (Wenning 2001: 87).

For the nomadic Nabateans, it was perhaps the motionlessness of stones, and their permanent, stable qualities, that had particular appeal. The permanence of stone was so different from their quotidian lives out on the fields—herding camels and flocks of sheep, constantly seeking out fertile fields on which their animals would graze. A stone memorial could serve as a solid, long-lasting reminder of a departed person. In its natural, unhewn state, the standing stone expressed “the abstract, aniconic perception of gods” (Avner 1999–2000: 110). Perhaps in its stillness and solidity, a stone was considered by the transient Nabateans the perfect symbol of the “otherness” of their deities.

An Exchange of Architecture and Style

Itinerant Nabateans introduced Nabatean temples to areas beyond their territory. For example, there is a temple of Dushara at Daphne in Egypt, mentioned in an inscription dated to 34 BCE from Tell esh-Shuqafiyyeh (R.N. Jones 1988: 47–57). This temple was likely established by traveling Nabatean merchants. Temples were also established in Puteoli, Italy, by Nabatean traders. An inscription at Puteoli records the restoration of “the former sanctuaries . . . made in the 8th year [51 BCE] of Malichus,

king of the Nabateans.” The renovated temple was dedicated “for the life of Aretas, king of the Nabateans, and of Huldu his wife, queen of the Nabataeans, and of their children, in the month Ab [August], the 14th [AD 5] of his reign” (Taylor 2002: 70). This evidence reveals that Nabateans on the move did not forget who they were, nor did they abandon their religious practices. They wished to worship their deities in a familiar setting and so took it upon themselves to establish sacred places beyond their own territory.

But we also find non-Nabatean deities *within* Nabatean territory. There is evidence, for example, of an Isis cult “having existed among the Nabateans in general and at Petra specifically” (Patrich 1990: 105). Features of Isis iconography were carved into the imposing structure of the Khazneh, or treasury, located at the end of the Siq at Petra.¹⁴ I am not suggesting that Nabatean contact with non-Nabatean artistic expressions and deities could come to pass only because of Nabatean travel: certainly, in many ways, Greco-Roman culture came to *them*. Isis may have been introduced to Petra by foreigners, perhaps Egyptians, who visited Petra; but it is equally possible that Nabatean traders encountered and became devotees of the Isis cult on their travels and then introduced the cult to the Nabatean milieu when they returned.¹⁵

In the Lower Temenos (the sacred lower terrace) of the Petra Great Temple, which is the largest free-standing structure in central Petra, some remarkable capitals have been discovered. They are shaped in the Ionic tradition, but instead of the usual curved volutes there are Asian (or Indian) elephant heads.¹⁶ These heads are “sculpted from limestone and covered with a light plaster film, their wrinkled skins, their provocative eyes, their small well-defined veined ears, their tusk openings (no tusks have been recovered), and their curving trunks are remarkable in that each elephant face has a character, a personality of its own” (Joukowsky 2002: 245). These carvings are usually dated to the first century BCE or the early first century CE (245). These are Indian, or Asian, elephants—a species that is smaller on average than the African elephant and that has smaller ears and a convex back (as opposed to concave) (Scullard 1974: 23–24). Nabateans may not have needed to travel to India to encounter elephants, as elephants were used by Julius Caesar against the Pompeians in 46 BCE and by Pompey in state ceremonies until 81 CE. Thus they were known in the Mediterranean area. Since Nabateans did trade in Indian spices, however, perhaps the use of elephant heads as capitals was a deliberate use of an Indian symbol with which they had direct experience.

It may also be that the Nabateans' mobile lifestyle brought them into contact with anthropomorphic ways of depicting their deities, and that they on occasion adapted these styles to create their own artistic religious expressions. As Taylor (2002: 17) rightly says: "Their rare gift was to learn from the skills of others, and to transform disparate ideas into something uniquely their own." In Wadi Farasa in Petra, one can find an abstract rectangular *betyl* of Dushara (40 by 20 centimetres) cut in bas relief into the rock; above it is a human head inside a circular medallion (30 centimetres wide by 37.5 high). It is difficult to know with certainty whom this represents because of the erosion of facial features and body contours; most probably, though, it is the Greek god Dionysus, with whom Dushara was often identified.¹⁷

This combination of non-figurative and anthropomorphic styles probably indicates that the artist intended to identify precisely the deity that the stele represented by means of figurative iconography (Patrich 1990: 107). The use of both styles is found elsewhere in Nabatean artwork. For example, the medallion and block relief in the "Eagle Gully" (Wadi Dfêleh) at Petra, which can be dated to the reign of Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE), depicts the image of an eagle above the more traditional stele (108, illust. 34). Patrich suggests that in these works of art, "we are witness to the artisan's dilemma: he was caught between two worlds, between two polar iconographic conceptions of how to represent the deity: the figurative conception prevalent in the cultural centers of the period and the traditional *betylic* conception" (109). The artist decided to compromise and combine the two styles, a judicious move "that introduced the new without abandoning the old" (109).

According to Taylor (2002: 123), such a combination "indicates that abstract representations of Nabatean deities existed side by side with anthropomorphic images of the assimilated gods; the one was not superseded by the other." Indeed, Patrich tells us, "we can hardly speak in terms of a linear development over time from rude *betylic* representation to anthropomorphism" (1990: 106). Taylor (2002: 122) argues that only after Rome incorporated Nabataea into its empire do "we find anthropomorphic images of Nabataean gods. Until then, the closest the Nabataeans came to representing their gods in their own image was to adorn a small handful of their rectangular *betyls* with schematized facial features," which essentially included a straight line for a nose, squares or ovals or the shape of a four-pointed star for eyes, and sometimes an oval mouth.¹⁸

In 106 CE, upon the death of the last king of the Nabateans, Rabel II, Nabatean independence ended and the kingdom was incorporated into the

Roman Empire as *Provincia Arabia*. Many cities in the area began to mint coins, and the “usual practice was to show the head of the reigning emperor on the obverse of the coin and that of a city god or some other religious symbol on the reverse” (Patrich 1990: 70). While most of the gods are depicted anthropomorphically, “the coins of Adraa, Bostra, Charachmoba, and Medaba (all four of which had been within the boundaries of the original Nabatean kingdom) show an anthropomorphic scheme for the city gods but a stele for the ancient Nabatean god Dusares” (70). The intriguing reality that the older Nabatean non-figurative tradition had not been phased out completely is reflected in these coins. For example, the coin from the city of Bostra at the time of Caracalla, in 209–210 CE, displays three betyls of Dusares:

Three stelae stand on a raised platform that is reached from a staircase. A number of flattened objects rest on top of the central stele; the number is not constant on the coins, and instances of one, three, four or seven such objects are known. There is only one such object on top of the lateral stelae. All three stelae are elongated and slightly rounded at the top. The inscription . . . “Dusares the god” explains the meaning of the representation of the coin . . . It is possible to distinguish two human figures standing on the platform, on either side of the stela. They are presumably engaged in some sort of ritual activity, possibly the blood libation mentioned in the Suidas *Lexicon* or some other ritual connected with the Dusares cult . . . [This coin and others like it] are proof of the continuing undiminished validity of the ancient non-figurative tradition. (Patrich 1990: 73–74)¹⁹

As Nabateans encountered first the Seleucid and Ptolemaic worlds, and then the Roman world, their cultic expressions underwent certain changes: “new features are assimilated and integrated, some traditional features are set aside or go out of fashion” (Healey 2001: 15). Yet as noted, the Nabatean tradition of depicting their deities in non-figurative form continued even during periods when Roman influence on art and architecture was strong (e.g., during the reign of Obodas III [30–9 BCE] and Aretas IV [9 BCE–40 CE]) and after they lost their political independence in 106 CE.

Why Did the Aniconic Tradition Persist?

It may be that Nabateans continued to assert their ancient, non-figurative tradition precisely *because of* their itinerant lifestyle. Fred Donner (1989: 78) contends that nomadic groups “tend to be socially and culturally isolated” despite their mobile lifestyles. He points out that nomads are exposed to new ideas and customs during the months when they are in close contact with settled communities or even living among them:

But unlike their sedentary neighbors, nomads also spend part of the year—maybe the greater part of it, in some cases—in search of pasture, in a setting that for those months not only isolates them from almost all contact with outsiders but also places them in the sole companionship of others like themselves, in small groups among whom long familiarity and the exigencies of life reinforce their time-honored values and customary ways of doing things. (1989: 79)

Donner suggests that the implication of this is that nomads are “culturally conservative, that is, slow to change their ways” (79). Perhaps when certain Nabateans left sedentary communities, where they were temporarily dwelling, to travel together along the trade route, or to live in tents together as they searched for fertile pastures in which to graze their flocks, their ancient tribal tradition of worship using non-figurative forms, such as betyls, was reinforced and reaffirmed. They would, then, return to the sedentary community with a renewed commitment to traditional customs. This could explain why archaeologists have discovered non-figurative and figurative artistic expressions in artifacts that date to the same period instead of discerning a linear development from one style to the other.

Ritualized Travel as a Religious Practice among Nabateans

Among Nabatean archaeological sites, Petra, Dhiban, Obodas (Avdat), et-Tannur, and Si‘a are the most important cult centres, and at each are found remnants of Nabatean temples (Richardson 1996a: 65). Two styles of temple architecture have been identified among Nabatean archaeological remnants: the square type; and the three-room *adyton* type (Hachlili 1975: 95–106). Examples of the latter, also known as the “Syrian temple” form, are found only in the Transjordan, as at Qasr el-Bint, the main temple at Petra. The three parts include a sanctum, a *sanctissimum*, and an *adyton*.²⁰ The former type, of which there are more examples, is a square form with a small, free-standing sanctum; this architecture is found in the Hauran, Leja, and the Transjordan, as at the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra.²¹ I focus my discussion here on the square type.

A typical characteristic of this temple type is, as Rachel Hachlili (1975) notes, immediately obvious: the square within the square (96). An inner square temple *cella* is surrounded by external walls or rows of pillars, forming a sort of corridor, or *temenos*, around the sanctum itself. Ernst Knauf (1986) suggests that this temple type facilitated the Nabatean observation of the *tawaf*, the Arabic cultic act of “circumambulation,” or walking around the holy place.²² Indeed, Knauf contends that the facilitation of circumambulation around the Nabatean altar or cult-*podia* could be

the *raison d'être* of this temple type (77). The ritual of walking around the sacred is observed most prominently today when Muslims circumambulate the Ka'bah during the *hajj* pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca. The *Qur'an* states that Abraham instituted the pilgrimage to the shrine of the Ka'bah after he and his son Ishmael were commanded to build it (*Q.* 22:26–29; 2:125–27), but this is almost certainly a rite that was observed by pre-Islamic Arabs in their polytheistic worship (Ayoub 2002: 366).²³

Knauf (1986) suggests that the Nabateans engaged in a ritual of circumambulation, thus engaging in the same practice as their nomadic or semi-nomadic Arab neighbours (77; see also Mettinger 1995: 66–67; Healey 2001: 163). This argument is based on archaeological evidence alone; to my knowledge, there is no description of Nabatean engagement in this ritual—though, as stated above, we lack literary descriptions of *any* Nabatean rituals. Scholars, therefore, must deduce interpretations from the available archaeological sources. That Nabateans shared with pre-Islamic Arabs the practice of representing their deities with stone blocks (betyls), as well as the evidence from the square-form temple for worshipping their deities, lends some support to the suggestion that Nabateans also may have undertaken the cultic practice of circumambulation. As a behaviour that in its essence involves ritualized *travel* around a sacred spot, circumambulation would seem a particularly appropriate—indeed, natural—activity in which nomads and semi-nomads might engage.

Figurines Reflecting Itineracy

Figurines in the shape of camels, horses, and riders on horseback have been found at many Nabatean sites. The horses are shown wearing an elaborate harness and saddle; the camels are depicted with harness, saddle, saddlebag, water gourd, shield, and sword.²⁴ Who or what do these figurines represent? While some scholars interpret the statues as representing deities, Patrich (1990) reasonably suggests that “they may simply be ordinary horsemen and cameleers, or heroic, but not divine, nomadic figures” (1990: 113, esp. n160). These figurines, it should be noted, are depicted with all the items necessary for—and presumably typically used by—regular Nabateans engaging in a trek through the desert (i.e., a container for carrying water and weapons for protection against marauders).

Some of these figurines may have served as votive offerings to Nabatean deities. An inscription from Puteoli supports this suggestion. The inscription, apparently set up by two Nabatean merchants, was established to commemorate an answered prayer. Their offerings were presented in gratitude to their god: “These are two camels offered by Zaidu,

son of Taimu, and Adelze, son of Haniu, to the god Dushara who heard us. In the 20th year of the reign of Aretas, king of the Nabateans, who loves his people” (Taylor 2002: 70).²⁵ This inscription reflects a situation in which two Nabateans, far from home, offered thanks to their god by offering camel figurines — perhaps for protection along their journey. Whether or not they are meant to represent heroic or ordinary cameleers, or deities, these figurines clearly reflect the Nabatean itinerant lifestyle.

The Etymology of “Dushara”

As noted, the central Nabatean deity was Dushara. Untangling the meaning and origins of this name is a rather complicated task. In fact, this “name” is not a name, but an epithet or descriptive title that associates the god with a particular geographical location (Healey 2001: 23, 86). Semitic peoples often called their deities by epithets rather than by proper names.²⁶

According to Healey (2001), it is “a widely held view . . . that Dushara’s name is to be explained on the basis of a putative Arabic word, meaning ‘the one of (i.e., ‘Lord of’) the Shara(t) mountain range” (87).²⁷ Many places, near Mecca and elsewhere, were called by this name; but it was especially associated in antiquity — and still is in modern times — with the impressive mountains near Petra (Gawlikowski 1990: 2663).²⁸ This mountain range is “well documented in the Arab geographers as the name of a region of southern Jordan corresponding more or less to ancient Edom . . . This region had, according to some sources, its capital at Udhruh east of Petra” (Healey 2001: 87). If this interpretation is correct, then perhaps this is one of the areas in which the nomadic Nabateans wandered with their flocks.

Healey offers an additional interpretation, however: he suggests that while “Shara” can refer to “road, tract of land, mountain,” it can also mean “colocynth, spreading plant.” He tentatively suggests that this reflects an identity of Dushara as a vegetation god. He notes that “I am inclined to suspect a meaning along the lines of ‘He of the vegetation’” (Healey 2001: 88). Since one of the Nabateans’ primary concerns was finding fertile pastures on which to graze their sheep, Healey’s suggestion of a link between Dushara and vegetation seems plausible. He laments that one of the major issues in Nabatean religion “is the identification of the nature and characteristics of Dushara, the main god. When the Nabateans worshipped Dushara, were they worshipping a god of the vegetation, of the sun, of the storm, of the nomadic life or what?” (2001: 93). There is no certain answer to this question; that said, it is significant that both options reflect aspects of a mobile existence.

Conclusion

The Nabatean lifestyle, especially after the fourth century BCE, fell somewhere between the poles of “nomadic” and “sedentary.” Nabateans had close interactions with, and sometimes lived in, sedentary communities and cities. Many of them periodically left these dwellings to travel, sometimes because of their involvement with (indeed, their dominance of) the lucrative trade routes of the Arabian Peninsula, and sometimes because they had to lead their flocks of grazing animals to new pastures. As they travelled, Nabateans encountered new customs and traditions associated with honouring the gods. This led to an exchange of traditions and styles that left an imprint on the lands into which the Nabateans travelled; it also impacted Nabatean architecture, art, and symbols. In turn, Nabateans made an impact on the cultic landscape of non-Nabatean territory by establishing temples (e.g., in Puteoli, Italy) where they could worship their gods. Nabateans also incorporated non-Nabatean styles and symbols into their religious expression (e.g., anthropomorphic depictions of deities, and statues of elephants). Yet as we have seen, the “old” or “traditional” styles (non-figurative depictions of deities in the form of betyls) were not completely supplanted by the new; at times, by combining the contrasting symbols (non-figurative with anthropomorphic), Nabatean artisans created images that were uniquely their own (for example, the medallion and block relief at Petra).

The Nabatean itinerant lifestyle is reflected in these customs associated with the gods. Their use of stone, a symbol of stability, to represent their gods (the “other” in the form of betyls) and their dead (in the form of *nepheshes*) contrasted with the mobile and insecure characteristics of Nabatean life and may relate to the “otherness” of their gods and their deceased. If Knauf’s interpretation of the square Nabatean temple, with its corridor around the inner sanctum created by walls or pillars, is correct, and circumambulation was practised by Nabateans, this could be considered a ritual especially natural to a people whose lives involved itineracy on a part-time or full-time basis. Clay figurines of horses (some with riders) and camels, depicted fully equipped for desert journeys, as well as the possible etymology of the name Dushara, the Nabatean supreme deity, can likewise be seen as reflecting the phenomenon of travel. It may be said, therefore, that travel affected, and is reflected in, the archaeological evidence for cultic life among the Nabateans. Even as their once nomadic lifestyle changed into a semi-nomadic one, the vestiges of their former life on the move remained.

Notes

- 1 The Nabateans used Aramaic in their inscriptions and legal documents (Healey 2001: 26), but Arabic words and forms gradually increased in later centuries (see Naveh 2003: 16 [in Hebrew]; see also Starcky 1955: 87–88).
- 2 D.F. Graf 1997: 45–68 argues that J.T. Milik’s proposal locating the homeland of the Nabateans in the northeastern region of North Arabia is persuasive because of linguistic, historical, and geographical factors—particularly the affinities existing between the language used by Neo-Assyrian Arab communities of Mesopotamia and the proto-Arabic dialect used by the Nabateans.
- 3 The Nabatean name lacks the *yod* found in the biblical *Nebaioth* and has the emphatic *tet* rather than a *taw*; this makes a relationship between the two peoples very unlikely (see Starcky 1966: cols. 900–3; and Taylor 2002: 14). But D.F. Graf (1997: 68) suggests that if Milik’s proposal placing Nabatean origins in Mesopotamia is correct, then the Nabatean “relationship with the Nabayat of the earlier period should not be removed from consideration.”
- 4 Bowersock 1983: 76–78. On Babatha’s family, see Yadin et al. 2002.
- 5 Josephus, in *War* 1.181, states that “Antipater had married a lady named Cypros, of an illustrious Arabian family.” Josephus usually, though not always, means Nabatea when he uses the terms “Arabia” and “Arab”; see Richardson 1996a: 62.
- 6 The second historical mention of Nabateans, which probably is first-hand, is in the papyrus archives of Zenon, the right-hand man of Apollonius, finance minister for Ptolemy II Philadelphos (Graf 1992: 970; Taylor 2002: 38). According to this document, the Nabateans were in southern Syria (today’s Hauran), in Auranitis, and in the Northern Transjordan in the third century BCE.
- 7 A prominent citizen called Moschion, son of Kydimos, of Priene, a city on the west coast of Asia Minor, mentions “Petra in Arabia” as one of the cities he visited during his diplomatic tour of the Mediterranean, along with the capital city of the Ptolemies, Alexandria. Dated to 129 BCE, this is “a clear sign that Nabataea was regarded as decidedly more than a minor provincial kingdom. The Nabateans were by now significant actors on the world stage” (Taylor 2002: 41).
- 8 In the summer of 2004 I participated in a six-week excavation at Wadi ath-Thamad, Jordan, a project directed by Dr. Michèle Daviau of Wilfrid Laurier University. Excavations of the Nabatean areas of this site were led that season by Dr. Noor Mulder-Hymans of Maastricht University in the Netherlands. I am indebted to Dr. Mulder-Hymans for sharing her vast knowledge of Nabatean history with me.
- 9 Even though Nabatean inscriptions do not reflect use of the term *beth-el*, it is standard scholarly practice to use the term “betyl,” as I do here. The earliest evidence for betyls, which comes from the temple of the goddess “Ninni-Zaza” in Mari, Syria, dates to the third millennium BCE. See Jean-Marie Durand 1985: 79–84.
- 10 Mettinger 1995 addresses the widespread practice of aniconism among West Semitic peoples. Several ancient authors dated between the second and fourth centuries CE state that the Arabs worshipped a god represented by a stone slab. Maximus Tyrius, for example, wrote in the second century CE: “The Arabs worship I know not whom, but their image I have seen—it was a square stone”

(*Philosophumena*, II, 8, ed. H. Hobein, Leipzig, 1910, p. 25, l. 19f, cited in Patrich 1990: 51).

- 11 Summary of personal correspondence with Avner in Patrich 1990: 66.
- 12 See Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 2001: 711–13.
- 13 Also see illustration 40 in Patrich 1990: 122. The neighbours of the Nabateans, the Judeans, used an “architectonic shape or a column topped by an object resembling a pine cone” as the *nefesh* as well (Patrich 1990: 122–23).
- 14 See illustration 36 in Patrich 1990: 116.
- 15 One Greek inscription in the Siq, which is difficult to read with certainty, seems to contain a reference to a priest of Isis (Patrich 1990: 105).
- 16 Martha Joukowsky (2002: 246) points out that there are approximately 156 elephant-headed capitals adorning the Lower Temenos; of these, five have been restored and “429 elephant fragments remain to be united with other elements.”
- 17 “It is reasonable to assume that Dushara was originally worshipped in betylic form, but the fact that he was represented also figuratively is suggested by the marble hand from the *adyton* of the Qasr el-Bint temple at Petra, assuming that this was dedicated to Dushara as high god (Zeus Hypsistos). There are also possible terracotta figurines of Dushara” (Healey 2001: 97). Dushara came to be identified with the god of Bosra and the god of Adraa, and with Dionysus and Zeus in areas particularly influenced by Greek and Roman cultures. For example, there is a bilingual inscription (Greek and Nabatean) from Miletus dedicated to “Zeus Dusares Soter” (Healey 2001: 101).
- 18 “A quite extraordinary stele for the Nabatean region was discovered in the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra... It is a flat, rectangular slab, its two oval eyes are carved in outline and are topped by thick, curved eyebrows, suspended from them a long nose points toward thick lips that are, in turn, split by a deeply incised horizontal line” (Patrich 1990: 84–85).
- 19 Suidas’ *Lexicon* is a Byzantine document compiled at the end of the tenth century CE, but it contains earlier material. It provides a detailed description of the symbol, or image, of Dushara, the central god of the Nabateans in Petra — what is described is a “black stone, square and unshapen, four feet high by two feet wide. It is on a base of wrought gold. To this they offer sacrifice and for it they pour forth the blood of the victims, that being their form of offering. The whole building abounds in gold and there are numerous votive offerings” (Suidas, *Lexicon*, ed. Ada Adler 1967: 713).
- 20 Knauf 1986: 77–78. Cf. Mettinger 1995: 66; and Patrich 1990: 46, illustration 3.
- 21 Hachlili 1975: 75; Mettinger 1995: 66. Cf. Patrich 1990: 44, illustration 2.
- 22 Knauf 1986: 77. Mettinger (1995: 66–67) believes that Knauf’s suggestion “deserves serious consideration.” Healey (2001: 163) concurs that “circumambulation might have played a part in the cult of some [Nabatean] temples at least.”
- 23 The Ka‘bah “is an ancient square building that contained a large number of idols or images of gods and goddesses... It still contains at one corner an unusual black stone, thought by some to be a meteorite” (Ayoub 2002: 342). Circumambulation is in fact a regular ritual performed by Muslims at any shrine or tomb, including, for example, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Pilgrims may walk around the sacred rock enshrined in this octagonally shaped building (Dickie 1975: 43).

- 24 Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2003: 39; also see Parlasca 1986: 200–13.
- 25 Rosenthal-Heginbottom (2003: 38) notes that camel figurines, perhaps akin to those offered by the travelling merchants in Puteoli, are among the repertoire of mould-made figurines found in Nabatean sites in the Negev.
- 26 For example, the Babylonian god Marduk assumed as his proper name Bel (from the title *bēlu* in Akkadian, which means “Lord”), “Marduk Kdrm” (Van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst 1999: 543).
- 27 See also Starcky 1966: cols. 886–1017; and Gawlikowski 1990: 2659–77.
- 28 The name *Dûshara* is understood to be synonymous with *ḥaram*, a consecrated place “where animals, trees and also fugitives, could find divine protection” (Gawlikowski 1990: 2664, my translation; see also Starcky 1966: col. 986).