

Beyond Petra: Nabataean Cultic and Mortuary Practices and the Cultural Heritage of the Negev and Edom

Juan Manuel Tebes¹

Abstract

It is well known that the Nabataeans adopted and modified foreign cultic and funerary practices for their own religious purposes, particularly from the Greco-Roman and Egyptian worlds. However, their origins and precedents lie in the millennia-old cultural heritage of the peoples of the southern arid margins of the Levant and northern Arabia. This paper will make a reassessment of the Nabataean cultic and mortuary practices as they can be seen in rural and desert sites outside Petra, analyzing them within the background of their antecedents in southern Transjordan (ancient Edom) and the Negev. Particular attention will be placed on two types of evidence: the geographical distribution and evidences of re-visiting and re-use of extra-mural Nabataean shrines and burials; and Edomite archaizing features present in the temple of Khirbet et-Tannur. Taking the evidence as a whole, it will be concluded that the debate of a local vs. external origin of these Nabataean cultic practices is a false dichotomy.

Keywords: Nabataeans, Cult, Mortuary practices, Extra-mural shrines, Edomites.

Introduction

It is usually recognized that the Nabataean cultic and, to some extent, mortuary practices, bear the imprint of their nomadic origins, figuring prominently in the continuing debates over the Nabataeans' place of origin. An overwhelming problem is that when the Nabataeans begin to be archaeologically visible in the first century B.C.E., they are not only already much sedentarized but also their culture and religion is heavily influenced by their neighbors. Therefore, when discussing their nomadic heritage scholars usually pay attention to a few attributes, most particularly aniconism (Patrich, 1990; Mettinger, 1995: 57-58; Avner, 1999-2000; Healey, 2001: 185-189; Murray, 2011). However, as noted by many, in the Nabataean world anthropomorphic iconography featured consistently along with aniconic representations, and therefore aniconism can hardly be considered an

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older and more “original” cultic practice than more recent Hellenized traditions (Alpass, 2013: 229-232).

Our knowledge of the Nabataean religious and afterlife beliefs is highly variable and biased in favor of large, visible sites, particularly Petra. My goal for this synthetic study is to discuss some ways in which the Nabataean cultic and mortuary practices in desert and rural sites – that is to say, those ones located outside Petra - relate to the cultural heritage of the Negev and Edom. I will focus attention on two main issues: the geographic distribution of Nabataean extra-mural cultic and mortuary sites in southern Jordan and the Negev and the evidences of their re-use and temporal continuity, and the presence of archaizing “Edomite” deities, cultic architecture and objects in the temple of Khirbet et-Tannur.

The Desert and Rural Cultural Heritage

While decades of surveys and excavations conducted in southern Jordan and the Negev have revealed dozens of rural Nabataean sites, most of them seminomadic campsites (Rosen, 2007), few studies have focused on their associated cultic and mortuary architecture. Although these sites are conventionally attributed to the Nabataeans, their remains can be attributed to the diverse ethnic groups living under the umbrella of the Nabataean kingdom, among which the Nabataeans were the dominant but not the only group. Similarly, their dating is not restricted to the period of existence of an independent Nabataean kingdom, as evidences of a Nabataean identity began appearing in the Hellenistic period and persisted well into Roman and Byzantine times (Politis, 2007; Graf, 2007).

The rural Nabataean cultic and mortuary sites form part of a long tradition of extra-mural architecture present in the Syro-Arabian arid lands that harks back to the Neolithic and extends at least to the Early Islamic period (for the following, see Avner, 2002; Tebes, 2016). Although there is a wide variety in morphology and function, most cultic/mortuary structures can be classified into four categories: open-air shrines, standing stones, cairns/tumuli and burials. Judging from the surviving archaeological evidence, there was a preponderance of open-air spaces (courtyards) with few, if any, roofed spaces, appropriate to the clear skies of the desert and adapted to the mobile nature of the nomadic peoples and trade caravans. Unhewn standing stones were very important in focal points of worship and constitute, by far, the largest corpus of paraphernalia in these sites. Generally speaking, rural architecture was consistently conservative, while changes were generated by external influences, particularly the integration of outside cultic practices. This was especially so during the last part of the Late Bronze Age and the succeeding Iron Age, the first true era of “internationalism” in the area, manifested in the Egyptianizing shrines at Timna Valley (Tebes, 2013: 39-40).

Although the relevant literature on the Nabataean rural sites is vast, it is often dispersed and difficult to access. That is why I am building a database with associated map that lists all the cultic and mortuary sites in southern Jordan and the Negev dating from the Neolithic to the Early Islamic period. The database contains the most essential information about these sites: site names, geographical

position, site type, dating and bibliography. The database uses data drawn from all the surveys and excavations done in the area, with the hope to include in the future the Sinai and the little we know of north-western Arabia. Most of these are small sites with one or few periods of occupation and therefore artifacts found on the surface, such as pottery, are often representative of their history of occupation. So far over 4000 sites have been identified, classified into four main categories: open-air shrines, cairns/tumuli, burials, and standing stones. These categories are not impermeable compartments and purposely include burial spaces as places of worship. As Tholbecq (2017: 44) pointed out recently for Petra, funerary spaces are by definition inviolable and therefore present a sacred character, including cultic paraphernalia.

More than 400 extra-mural cultic/mortuary sites with evidence of Nabataean use or occupation outside Petra have been found,² with big clusters east of the Petra Area, south of Wadi el-Hasa and the Wadi Faynan district (Fig. 1). The most common types are burials, especially cist tombs (present in 70% of the sites), with cairns and tumuli coming in second place (26%). Standing stones are found in only 3% of the sites, while so far only 1% can be categorized as open-air shrines.

At first glance, and with the caution that these are preliminary remarks, some patterns can be noted in the geographical distribution of the different type sites. Cairns/tumuli, standing-stones and open-air shrines are proportionally a larger part of the desert sites in the Negev and the southern Arabah, probably because of the importance of nomadic semi-pastoral groups in these regions. The prevalence of cist and rock-cut burials in southern Jordan may be related to cultural patterns, the area's agricultural economy and the abundance of sandstone ready for carving in the Petra area.³

Sites are ubiquitous in the Negev Highlands, south of the main Nabataean road stations such as Haluza, Rehovot, Mampis, Avdat and Nizzana. Tumuli dated to the Roman period have been surveyed, for example, in the Nahal Ramon (Haiman, 1992: 27; Fig. 2:7). This pattern raises questions about the identity of the users of the Negev cultic sites. As indicated by Rosen (2007), this pattern can be interpreted as reflecting a system of complementary zones, pastoral in the south and agricultural in the north. The pottery evidence also indicates that both zones did not develop at the same time. In the Negev Highlands sites the vast majority of Nabataean pottery can be dated to the first and second centuries C.E. and the succeeding Roman and Byzantine sherds are well represented (Rosen, 2007: 347),

² This short, preliminary review most likely underestimates the number of Nabataean rural cultic/mortuary sites. For methodological reasons, I only have included sites with evidences from the Nabataean period, bearing in mind that sites listed as Roman, Late Roman or Byzantine but not Nabataean likely produced Nabataean cultural remains (see above). In addition, there are large areas containing hundreds of Nabataean sites that have been surveyed but not published, such as 'Uvda Valley in the southern Negev (cf. Avner, 1999-2000).

³ The Negev, with few or inaccessible karstic formations, showed relatively little cave or carved burials throughout history, except for the northern Negev with its easy-to-dig loess soil (Rowan and Ilan, 2013: 102).

whereas the Nabataean road stations only developed into towns during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods (Erickson-Gini, 2010). On the contrary, in the southern Negev and southern Arabah, Hellenistic pottery found at local sites is likely indicative of the early phase of Nabataean presence in the area during the third or second centuries B.C.E., agreeing with the well-known accounts of Hieronymus of Cardia and Strabo (Avner, 2018).

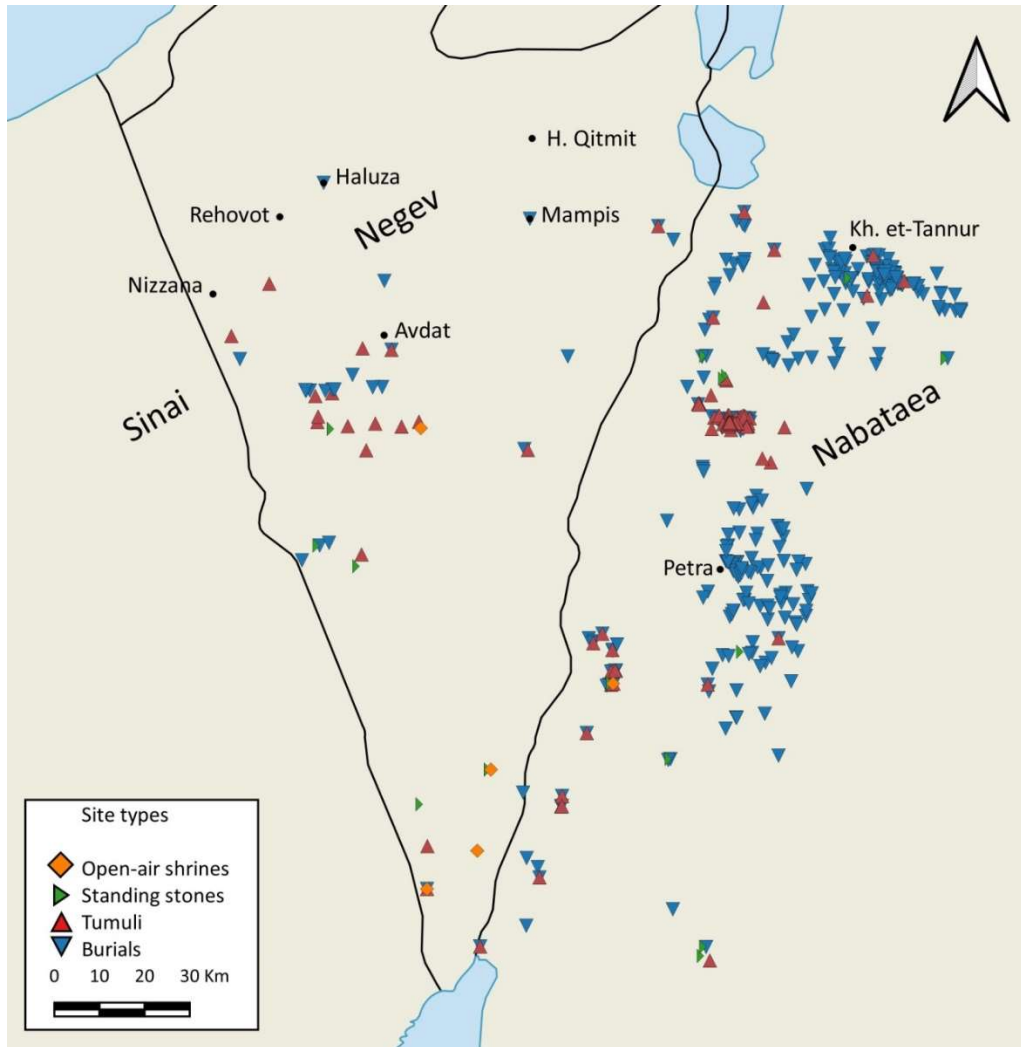


Figure 1. Distribution of Nabataean extra-mural cultic and funerary sites in southern Jordan and the Negev outside Petra (Juan Manuel Tebes)

The Nabataean standing stones in the Negev have been studied by Avner (1999-2000; also 2018), who documented more than 2000 in the area of ‘Uvda Valley alone. Although they do not present a preference for specific orientation, most of them were set with their back towards a hill or mountain, a practice maybe associated with the worship of Dushara, “the one from the Shara mountain” (R. Wenning, in *ibid.*: 108). Based on a comparative analysis of the desert cults

extending to the Neolithic period, Avner suggested that the arrangement and physical features of these standing stones can be linked to specific types of aniconic worship of deities in the Nabataean realm. While Avner's identifications with certain deities or groups of deities cannot be verified beyond reasonable doubt, it is clear that there is a connection between the aniconic standing stones and the reliefs in niches known as baetyls or stelae.

Although Avner's conclusions have been accepted by some scholars (Murray, 2011: 223; McKenzie and Reyes, 2013b: 265), they are not without critics. Most particularly, Rosen has pointed out that "attributions based on assumptions concerning Nabatean belief systems and geographic proximity require verification of at least a sample based on excavations and proper dating techniques" (2017: 226). Although Rosen's concern is justified, the identification of Nabataean sites has been done based on the dominance of Nabataean sherds found scattered over the surface (Avner, 1999-2000: 98), a methodology that is standard in desert surveys (Rosen, 2017: 347). To be sure, Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine sherds occur as well, but this reflects nothing but the continuation of similar religious practices over different periods.

Surveys also indicate the proliferation of Nabataean extra-mural mortuary sites, although very few have been excavated, such as at Bir Madhkur (Perry, 2007), Wadi Ramm (Perry and Jones, 2008), Wadi Musa (Sites 25 – an-Naqla; 27, 29), Umm Sayhun (Sites 4, 5, 6) ('Amr and al-Momani, 2001) and Wadi Mudayfa'at/Wadi Abu Khasharif (Perry *et al.*, 2007; Al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009). Contrasting with the prevailing burial practices in large or provincial Nabataean sites (Perry, 2002), most rural burials presented two main forms: burials in stone- or mudbrick-lined cist tombs with or without capstone, and burials with piles of stones on top (cairns/tumuli). They normally present few grave goods, finds consistent with their association with individuals of low economic status and/or belonging to nomadic groups.

Most importantly, preliminary results from the database suggest that many ancient rural monuments and tombs were re-visited and re-used in the Nabataean period, a phenomenon already noted in southern Arabia (McCorrison, 2013). Although the proportion of extra-mural sites with sole evidence from the Nabataean period is relatively high (15%), most of them present evidences of use before and after the Nabataean period – as early as the Neolithic period (85%), pointing to the re-visiting of ancient funerary and cultic sites through in the *longue durée*. The few extra-mural sites that have been excavated have confirmed the results provided by the pottery surveys, showing use during the Nabataean period of the Late Neolithic tumuli field of Ramat Saharonim (Rosen *et al.*, 2007: 17-18), the Neolithic cemetery of Wadi Faynan 16 (Mithen *et al.*, 2016: 91) and the open-air shrines of Ṭurayf al-Marāgh in Wādī Ramm (Rollefson and Pine, 2009: 85, 93), Timna 200 (Late Bronze; Rothenberg, 1972: 177-179) and Har Shani X (Chalcolithic, Late Bronze; Avner, 2002: 106-107).

Archaizing Edomite features

The religion of the Nabataeans drew from multiple cultic traditions, but its closest source was that of their Iron Age predecessors in southern Jordan, the Edomites. Much has been debated over the continuity of settlement and material culture between the Edomite and the Nabataean periods (see Schmid and Mouton, 2013), but here I would like to focus on one case of study that sheds light on certain aspects of the Nabataean religious practices that may be connected with Edomite influences.

This is the Nabataean temple of Khirbet et-Tannur (KET), a sanctuary located in the hearth of the former Edomite territory which provides several Edomitizing features in the cultic architecture and paraphernalia. Scholars have pointed out four main archaizing “Edomite” features at KET: worship of the Edomite deity Qos; layout, similar to the “Edomite” open-air shrine of Horvat Qitmit in the Iron Age II Negev; altars, related to Iron Age II Edomite types; and a hand-modeled terracotta animal figurine similar to Iron Age antecedents.

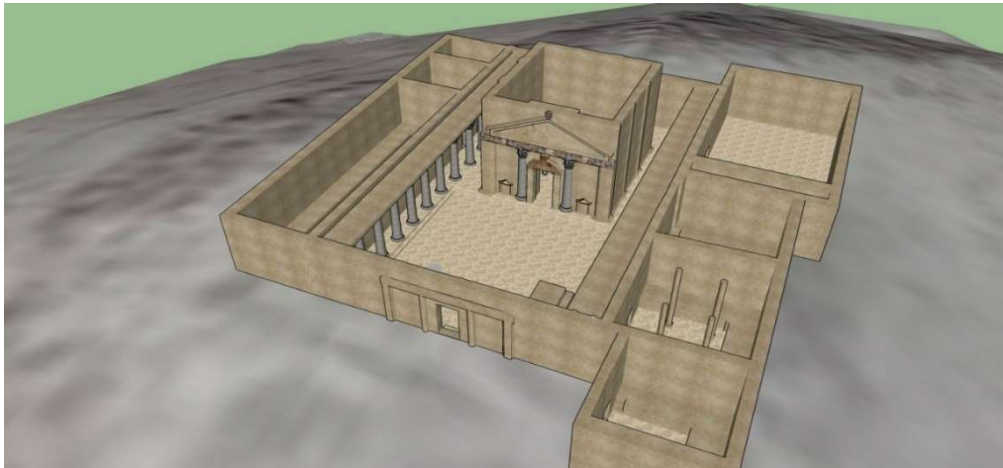


Figure. 2. 3D reconstruction of the temple of Khirbet et-Tannur. (Reproduced by permission of Cale Staley, <https://tannur.omeka.net/>)

The most notorious Edomite feature is the famous stele that a certain Qosmilik dedicated to Qos “the god of Horawa” (probably Humayma) (Glueck, 1965: Pls. 196-197; McKenzie and Reyes, 2013a: Fig. 334). Glueck (1965: 86) argued from the beginning that the main deity at KET was Zeus-Hadad, but the role of Qos was later emphasized by Starcky (1968: 209) and Millar (1993: 390), while Healey (2001: 140) and McKenzie/Reyes (2013a: 195-196) suggested the presence of the worship of a version of Qos-Dushara. Qos is best known as the patron deity of the Edomite monarchy, with plenty of evidence in epigraphic finds from Iron Age II Negev sites, such as Horvat Qitmit (Knauf, 1999: 675). Dozens of ostraca from Persian and Hellenistic Idumaea attest the continuation of the worship of Qos, particularly at Maresha (e.g. Stern, 2007).

The stele of Qos, unlike other Nabataean stelae, had two “horns”, now broken,

while two other stele from the same site were also horned (Glueck, 1965: Pls. 198; McKenzie and Reyes, 2013a: Figs. 336-337). The representation of horns is not an exclusive attribute of Qos, because we know from Wadi Ramm a rock-cut stela of the goddess Allat with two horns at the base (McKenzie and Reyes, 2013b: Figs. 338A-338B). It is not a sole attribute of the Nabataean period either: a head figurine of a three-horned deity, probably a goddess, was found in Horvat Qitmit, identified as Qos' consort wife (Beck, 1995: Fig. 3.56, 78).⁴

The design of KET is quite unique among the Nabataean temples, essentially consisting of an open-air rectangular temenos and square altar enclosure with no internal subdivisions, with adjoining rooms (Fig. 2).⁵ The altar platform is the center of the temple's design. McKenzie/Reyes (2013b: 247-248) pointed out the similarities of this layout with the Iron Age II open-air shrine of Horvat Qitmit in the northern Negev. Horvat Qitmit is a perfect example of an open-air shrine built in the tradition of the desert cultic architecture, featuring an open-air area for worship and adjoining dining rooms, but incorporating outside elements, such as roofed structures with parallels in Iron Age Judah (Beit-Arieh, 1995b) (Fig. 3). An important difference was their orientation, because while KET was oriented nearly due east to accommodate the rising sun on the equinoxes, Qitmit was oriented to the south. Like KET with its Nabataean parallels, Qitmit differed markedly from contemporary Iron Age temples, most of which featured a roof with cella, such as the shrine of Yahweh at the nearby fort of Tel 'Arad.

Although MacKenzie/Reyes related KET's layout to a "reflection of the Edomite legacy" (2013b: 248), the lack of pre-Nabataean archaeological remains (the earliest local inscription dates to Aretas IV, 8/7 B.C.E.) precludes the possibility that its design is based on an earlier Iron Age shrine. The existence of a consistent Iron Age Edomite occupation in the nearby site of Khirbet edh-Dharih (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, 2005), to which KET acted as some sort of prominent high-place for the local population, may be at least indicative of cultic traditions linking the area with the Edomite heritage.⁶

⁴ Beck (1996: 107-114) interpreted the low relief on a limestone stele found in a cultic pit in 'En Hazeva as the representation of a bull's head with horns, although a later reassessment made by Ben-Arieh (2011: 166) suggested that this reconstruction was based on an incorrect line drawing, and therefore any divine symbolism is absent.

⁵ Some of KET's features match a Roman sanctuary excavated at Humayma (E125 – Room H) – central cult nucleus with betyl, surrounded by square walls of naos, in turn enclosed within a rectangular open-air walled courtyard (temenos), which probably replaced an older Nabataean shrine (Oleson *et al.*, 2008: 312-316).

⁶ This is corroborated by the fact that the Edomite architecture not only influenced the Nabataeans, but probably also religious architecture in Hellenistic Idumaea. In this respect, Beit-Arieh (1995b: 309-310) suggested that the layout of Horvat Qitmit is similar to one building identified as an *adyton* of an Idumaeian shrine in the acropolis of Hellenistic Maresha. This interpretation, however, was rejected by Finkelstein (1995: 142) on the grounds of "[t]he gap of six centuries separating Qitmit from the Marisa building".

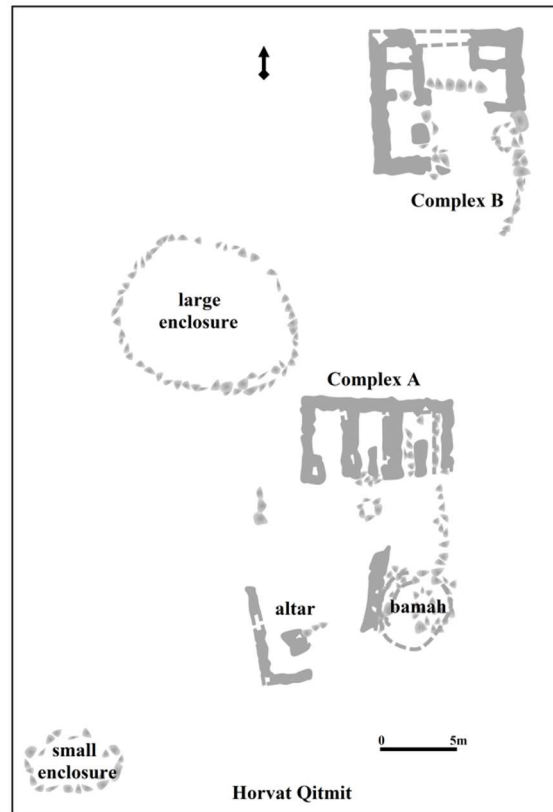


Figure. 3. Plan and basic features of the shrine of Horvat Qitmit (Juan Manuel Tebes)

One significant feature present in KET is circumambulation, as it was possible to go all the way round the free standing podia (Mettinger, 1995: 66-67; Healey, 2001: 163; Murray, 2011: 229). To be sure, circumambulation was also present in the temples of Khirbet edh-Dharih, the temple of the Winged Lions in Petra and the temple of Wadi Ramm. That this probably constituted a practice of the southern Levantine and Arabian world can be suggested by the description of Ephiphanius of the circumambulation celebrating the birth of Dushara in the fourth century C.E. (*Panarion* 5.22.11) and the later Islamic circumambulation at Mecca. We do not know how old the practice of circumambulation is and whether it originated in the Arabian Peninsula or Syria-Mesopotamia (Catagnoti, 2015). The architecture of the desert open-air courtyard shrines of the arid southern Levant – in which the central altars, and only secondarily the back walls, were the focal point of worship and sacrifices – did allow the possibility of circumambulation of at least a few individuals. One working hypothesis that needs further research is that the tradition of the central position of the altar and podia originated in the design of the desert courtyard shrines.

Glueck (1965: 511, Pl. 193.a,b,c,d), Roche (1999: 66) and Reyes/McKenzie (2013: Figs. 10.10a-b, 10.14a-b; McKenzie and Reyes, 2013b: 241) also pointed to small four-legged altars found at KET and Petra as having “Edomite” influences, comparing them with similar objects found at Iron Age Tell el-Kheleifeh (Glueck,

1965: Pl. 193.e). While these similarities are unquestionable, four-legged portable incense altars were popular not solely in southern Jordan, but can be found in several sites of the southern Levant between the Late Iron Age and the Hellenistic period. However, they feature prominently in Negev sites such as Tell Jemmeh (Hassell, 2005: Figs. 5-29), Tel Beersheba (Ziffer, 2016: Fig. 28.1,2,5,6), Tel Malhata (Freud and Reshef, 2015: Figs. 12.1.1,2,3), Tel 'Ira (Goldsmith, Ben-Dov and Kertesz, 1999: 470), Horvat Qitmit (Beit-Arieh, 1995a: Fig. 6.5), 'En Hazeva (Ben-Arieh, 2011: Figs. 42-43, 45-46), Tell el-Qudeirat (Gera, 2007: 215) and Negev Highland sites (Cohen and Cohen-Amin, 2004: 167, 172, 183). Their preponderance in southern sites is not by mere chance, as incense altars are usually regarded as indicators of the trade in south Arabian aromatics, if not of the presence of desert nomads themselves (Hassell 2005: 160).

Similarly, Glueck initially identified a hand-modeled terracotta figurine of an unidentified quadruped found at KET as an Edomite heirloom thanks to parallels from Iron Age Buseirah, but later described it as "perhaps Byzantine". McKenzie/Reyes (2013b: 245, 267-268) noted the absence of parallels with Byzantine terracottas and other Nabataean figurines and re-evaluated the Edomite connection. According to them, even if the figurine is of Nabataean manufacture, it "certainly fits comfortably within the Iron Age coroplastic tradition of southern Jordan". They suggest parallels in small animal figurines from Buseirah, Horvat Qitmit and 'En Hazeva, particularly in the eyes of a bull's head from Qitmit (Beck, 1995: Fig. 3.82). However, there is nothing in the KET figurine to suggest that it was a decorative element attached to large cultic vessels or stands, like the figurines found at Qitmit and Hazeva. Similar yet independent figurines were also found at Tel Malhata (Kletter, 2015: Figs. 9.5-9.9), where they are regarded as Edomite rather than Judaeen cultural elements (*ibid.*: 571-572). In sum, although these figurines clearly concentrate in Edom and Negev sites ostensibly influenced by the Edomite culture, the attribution of a specific ethnic label to them would be methodologically flawed.

Final Remarks

Despite the brevity of our review, it is clear that the Nabataean period constituted a period that in many aspects of its cultic ritual and mortuary practices continued cultural trends that were in vogue in southern Jordan and the Negev for several millennia. Taking the evidence as a whole, the debate of a local vs. external origin of these practices is a false dichotomy. Although it is likely that the cultic sites in the southern Negev and Arabah reflect the earliest stages of the Nabataean religious practices, they formed part of the wider religious world of the arid southern Levant and northwestern Arabia that was several millennia old.

Similarly, considering the archaizing features present at KEN as solely "Edomite" is too restrictive in terms of cultural appropriation, as they reflect more the cultural heritage of the Iron Age Edom and Negev as a whole. The interpretation of this phenomenon is difficult as these archaizing traits are so

unique that it is easy to consider them as regional expressions of a religious identity that cannot be extrapolated to the whole Nabataean world. To the sure, both KET and Khirbet edh-Dharih constituted sub-regional centers of worship, probably expressing the interests of the local and (after the Roman annexation) provincial authorities (Villeneuve and Al-Muheisen, 2003: 100; Alpass, 2013: 223; Tholbecq, 2017: 47-48). Yet KET also was a center of pilgrimage for mobile populations visiting from other parts of the kingdom – probably as far as Humayma, thus transcending the local identities. In this respect, Roche (1999) suggested years ago that the Edomite features found at KET are consistent with a political strategy of the Nabataean kings towards the Idumaeans inhabiting in both sides of the Arabah. Even if Qos was not the main god worshipped at KET, the two dedication inscriptions attest the presence of pilgrims visiting the site for whom Qos was an important divinity. If the sanctuaries were the political and religious expression of the local communities, it should not be difficult to envisage the local Nabataean authorities drawing from the Edomite culture in order to draw attention to the cult of Qos in areas east of the Wadi Arabah. Judging from the continuous conflicts between the Nabataeans, the Hasmoneans and later the Herodians (see Tholbecq, 2009; Schmid, 2009) for the control of this region, such a policy would have attenuated discord with people for whom their Edomite heritage was a central part of their identity.

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ما وراء البترا: الممارسات الدينية والجنائزية النبطية والتراث الثقافي في النقب وإدوم

خوان مانويل تيبيس

ملخص

منّ المعلوم أنّ الأنباط تبوّأوا ممارساتٍ تعبديةً وجمائزيةً وعدّلوا عليها لغاية طقوسهم الدينية، خصوصاً منّ العالمين اليونانيّ - الرومانيّ والمصريّ، وتعودُ أصولُ هذه الممارسات وسابقتها -على أية حال- إلى تراث شعوب أطراف البادية الجنوبية لبلاد الشام وشمال الجزيرة العربية الحضرية الذي يمتدّ عمره إلى ألف عام. وعليه، فستعيدُ هذه الدراسةُ تقييمَ الممارسات التعبدية والجمائزية النبطية التي يمكنُ ملاحظتها في مواقع ريفية وصحراوية خارج البترا، وتحليلها ضمن خلفيّة سابقتها في جنوبي الأردن (آدوم التاريخية) والنقب، وسنتركزُ بشكل خاصّ على نوعين منّ الدليل الأثريّ: التوزيع الجغرافي والأدلة على إعادة زيارة المزارات والمدافن النبطية واستخدامها خارج المدينة، والمعالم الأدمية المهجورة الموجودة في خربة التنور. وبالنظر إلى الدليل بشكل عام، سيُستنتجُ أنّ الجدلَ حول أصل تلك الممارسات التعبدية النبطية المحلي وأصولها الخارجية انقسامًا خاطئًا.

الكلمات الدالة: الأنباط، العبادة، الطقوس الجمائزية، مزارات خارجية، الأدميون.

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