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PETRA – HOLY CITY FROM
THE PERSPECTIVE OF ART,
ARCHITECTURE, INSCRIPTIONS
AND OTHER FEATURES

Abstract: Scholars who have written about the city of Petra have concentrated on the history and archaeology of the city. And, while some of them have written about Nabataean religion, only few of them mentioned information about the holiness of the city; specifically, if it was worshiped as a deity. The aim of this study is to fulfil a gap in Nabataean religion in general and, in particular, re-examine the status of Petra in their religion. In addition to the archaeological evidence, such as buildings, art, and features, the study is based on written resources, such as historical sources and Nabataean inscriptions found in Petra and other cities.

Keywords: Petra; Nabataean religion; Nabataean architecture; Nabataean inscriptions; Holy city

Introduction

Holy cities are known throughout history, each of them as a center of faith or religious activities. Some of them are functioning as a places which obtained their holiness from the God or a pagan god, while others from people and their history. Usually, each one consists of a complex of buildings, art and features. Some of these cities, more precisely, became symbolic and popular destinations for pilgrims who visit them on specific occasions in order to practice their religious rituals and to participate in religious ceremonies. A wide number of holy cities are known in the world, with some probably yet to be discovered.

Mecca can be described as one of the main holy cities in the world. It is where the Prophet Abraham built the first house to worship God, this house is known as Kaaba. It is the birthplace of the Prophet Mohammad, and it is the holiest city in the religion of Islam. Millions of Muslims visit it annually on pilgrimages to participate in the Hajj. The pilgrimage in Islam is only allowed to three mosques and cities in the all world specially: the Holy Mosque in Mecca, the Prophet Mosque in Madinah and the Alaqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is another example, the city is important for Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. It includes specific religious buildings and features for each religion. In turn Bethlehem, which is a holy city for Christians, is the birthplace of Jesus and the place of the Church of the Nativity. A wide number of holy cities exist in different parts of the world for gathering the followers of Hinduism, Buddhism and other religions. Each one of them consists of a complete religious complex, which may include: buildings, art works and different other features which exist as symbols or serve the worshippers while practicing their religious rituals and ceremonies.

Petra, the capital of the Nabataean Kingdom, is one of the caravan cities, situated in the south of the present day Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (Pl. 1: 1). Lying hidden in the mountains east of Wadi Araba, the majority of its monuments which can be seen by visitors at present are tombs with spectacular decorated facades. The main one is the Treasury (Pl. 2: 1), first seen through the end of the cleft or the Siq, the formal main entrance to Petra. The inside of the Treasury reflects its use as a tomb, but why, with the beauty of its sculptured and decorated façade, did the Nabataeans placed this tomb here? The main function was funerals, but it may also be considered a temple or a shrine for the deified King Obada. Does the Treasury with the wide number of the rock-cut tombs (Pl. 4: 1) carved on the sandstone mountains of the city, make it look like a city of the dead? Do the many tombs along with other cult monuments and features make the city – in the Nabataean religion – a holy one?

Petra as a deity

Inscription as evidence

Some of the inhabitants of Petra and Nabataean people visiting the city left carved inscriptions, dedicated to their deities; many of these inscriptions have been found on rock surfaces at Petra.

Most of the inscriptions found in Petra and all around the Nabataean Kingdom were dedicated to Dushara, the main Nabataean god, or to other Nabataean deities, and also to specific sites. Among these inscriptions, we can find: Dushara of Adraa, the god of Medrasa, the god of Bosra found at Qattared-Deir at Petra (Augé 1990, 131) and the one which is in Gaia (Teixidor 1977, 84, 85; Zayadine 1988, 115). All these names are related to the specific places. Medrasa and Gaia are areas located inside and around Petra (Dalman 1908, 127). T. Milik interpreted the one in Bosra as a god as the city of Bosra was worshiped among Nabataeans. J. Starcky also agreed with this idea (Milik and Starcky 1975; Starcky 1981, 195, 196; Augé 1990, 131). This means that the Nabataeans were used to deifying their cities. Petra, in this case, deserves more than Bosra to be worshiped as a god or goddess; because of its long history, uniqueness and wide number of religious monuments and features.

Sculptural evidence

Other evidence which may reflect Petra as a worshiped goddess, is a high relief statue of a female sphinx (Pl. 2: 2) discovered in Petra in 1967. This statue was unearthed during clearance work organized by the Department of Antiquities in Jordan in the Temenos of Qasr el-Bint around the Temenos Gate (Wright 1967-8).

We may consider this human female head as a goddess personification of Petra. From this perspective we may also describe other images of deities placed around the city to take care of it. Images of Dushara, the master of Nabataean deities, can be an appropriate example of this idea. He is embodied also in the form of wings of an eagle that appears fluttering on the back of the female sphinx, as a sign of giving power and protection to the city from the main Nabatean god. This interpretation can be applied e.g. to the statue of Khafre, the Egyptian Pharaoh. It shows the king enthroned, with the falcon of the god Horus (symbol and guardian of the royal authority) enveloping the back of the head with its wings, in a gesture of protection (Janson and Janson 1977, Fig. 61).

The consort of Dushara, Al-Uzza or Allat, the goddess of fertility, is also embodied on the mentioned statue in two symbols; the lion's body and the female breast. The lion's body was used to underline his care over the city goddess. An analogy for this representation is also known from the Khirbat et-Tannur sanctuary, where the lion accompanied the goddess Atargatis (Glueck 1965, pl. 31). Therefore, the writers think that the goddess of et-Tannur should be identified as Allat or Al-Uzza. So, the goddess Al-Uzza

or Allat represented in our statue by the lion gives power and protection to the Petra city and its people.

The other above mentioned symbol that represents the goddess Al-Uzza or Allat as a goddess of fertility is the female breast. Goddess Al-Uzza or Allat gives birth, life and prosperity to the city of Petra and its inhabitants.

After analyzing the features and elements of the Petra female sphinx statue, it seems that the Nabataeans perceived Petra city as a goddess and the city area could have been worshipped as a holy site.

Coins as evidence

Other important evidence which may confirm worshipping Petra as a goddess is the widespread evidence of Tyche representations on some Nabataean coins, minted in Petra and Damascus (Pl. 2: 3). An important detail can be noticed – the god of the river is swimming below her foot. This representation of Tyche seems to be a Hellenistic inspiration, coming from the images of the Antioch city goddess (Boardman 1973, Fig. 186; Augé 1990, 131-136). The river on the coin is a symbol of the city of Antioch, in the case of Petra we have the Wadi Mousa spring which supports the city with water. The similarity of those two representations suggests that Petra was probably considered and worshiped as a goddess.

Petra as a holy city

Architectural evidence

A wide variety of cultic structures exist in Petra, and with their features and inscriptions, it provides us with more information about the Nabataean religion, and especially the role of Petra within the religious world of the Nabateans. These cult buildings can be classified as temples, tombs, high places, and *triclinia*.

Temples

Around four freestanding temples have been discovered in Petra (El-Khouri 2003-2007, 337), the latest one discovered is the Great Temple (Joukowsky and Basile 2001; Jaukowsky 2002) (Pl. 3: 1). Although the writers think that it may have been used as a royal court or as an administrative center and not a temple is due to the fact that no specific and distinguished deities statues have been found in this building, and because its plan does not reflect a typical temple plan.

The next largest cultic buildings seems to be the Qasr el Bint temple (Pl. 3: 2), dedicated to the main god Dushara, as well as the Winged Lions temple dedicated to Al-Uzza, goddess and consort of Dushara. It is worth mentioning that the Nabataeans built their temples as freestanding buildings in contrast with the rock-carved tombs. The reason of such important difference should be also searched in Nabataean beliefs. The temples were used in daily life, while the tombs were built to last forever, and serve to its owners in the afterlife, leading them to immortality. The large scale of Petra temples and its wide courtyards reflects that it was used by a wide number of people living in the city or visiting it as pilgrimage.

Tombs

Petra is also fulfilled with a variety of rock-carved tombs, visible today in the rocky landscape of the Petra Archaeological Park (Pl. 4: 1). This group of structures consists of the simple shaft tombs and pit graves, carved vertically into the rock, as well as of the monumental façade tombs, carved horizontally into the sandstone rock-faces surrounding the city. A total of 628 façade tombs have been recorded till today. Among this group several different types or cemeteries also located around the city can be distinguished (Perry 2002; Wadeson 2011a, 2).

The Nabataeans buried their dead inside their city because they believed that the city of Petra was a holy place, and offered them an immortal and happy afterlife (Wadeson 2011a, 1).

Making rock-cut cult installations and structures near the tombs insure that it was part of funerary rituals used to be practiced inside and outside the tombs. This ritual activity mostly converged on the platform or courtyard immediately in front of the façade of the tomb or in the adjoining *triclinium*. Therefore, the tomb with its decorated facade, it's inside contents, the features around and inside it, and the funerary rituals constitute the holy complex. For this reason and because of the high status of Petra in the hearts of the Nabataean people, they took care to bury their dead from different parts of the Kingdom inside Petra for its holiness, and this is the reason why the city includes hundreds of highly decorated rock cut family tombs. Building the tombs in this high level status and sometimes in huge scale is time and cost consuming, this means that the people have to start building their tombs and preparing for their afterlife during their life. This will be easy if the person lives living in Petra, if not they have to order a tomb from a builder and make regular visits as a pilgrim to Petra to take handle the matter and they may participate in some religious rituals and make

sacrifice to their deities. Nabataean inscriptions, in general, but especially the one visible on the façade of the Turkmaniyah tomb, are among the best evidence regarding the tomb complex and its holiness. The inscription can be translated as follows:

‘This tomb and the large burial-chamber within it and the small burial-chamber beyond it, in which are burial-places, niche-arrangements, and the enclosure in front of them and the porticos and rooms within it and the gardens and triclinium-garden and the wells of water and the cisterns and walls and all the rest of the property which is in these places are sacred and dedicated to Dushara, the god of our lord, and his sacred throne and all the gods, (as) in the documents of consecration according to their contents. And it is the order of Dushara and his throne and all the gods that it should be done as in these documents of consecration and nothing of all that is in them shall be changed or removed and none shall be buried in this tomb except whoever has written for him an authorization for burial in these documents of consecration forever...’ (Healy 1993, 238-239).

This inscription reveals that the property of a tomb was much more than just the façade, chamber and burial places. It seems that the Turkmaniyah Tomb Complex included an enclosure, porticoes, additional rooms, gardens, *triclinium*, walls and water sources (Wadeson 2011a, 5). Some of the words mentioned in the inscription like: these place are sacred, reflect the holiness of the tomb as a sanctuary dedicated to Dushara and the other gods, even its dedication to the god Dushara gives it sacredness importance. This inscription is strong proof of the holiness of all tombs located in the city of Petra. Another Nabataean inscription discovered in Wadi Mousa, dedicated by a priest and his son says: *Oboda the god in Gaia* (Al-Salameen and Falahat 2014). This inscription indicates that the Nabataeans deified their king Obada. Therefore, we may suggest that the place as well as its monuments and features where the deified king ruled was treated as a sacred space.

Actually, the sacredness of the tombs did not come only from the funerary inscriptions that used to be written on the façades of the tombs for protection, but it comes from the faith of the Nabateans on the tombs as the way to the afterlife. The Nabateans used to keep the dead things inside their burial place. In line with this belief, some of the dead found wearing their precious jewelry, for protection and to reflect their social statues (Almasri *et. al.* 2012).

The holiness of these tombs is also reflected by the obelisk’s shapes carved on the façades of some tombs as part of the complex, as well as by the Nabatean funerary beliefs (Pl. 8: 2). Obelisks had a pyramidal shape,

to reflect the high place idea, the place of the divine and immortal world. The pyramid shape could also serve as a connection between the deceased and their deities in the afterlife. Obelisks are also a bit different in shape to represent the specific deceased, or they may serve as a place where the deities' spirit dwells in to help the deceased in their safe travel to immortal life.

High or Sacrificial places

'Sacrificial places' or the so-called 'high places' are other important, religious features located in Petra. These places are spread-out over many Nabatean mountains inside and outside Petra. Their creators saw these high places as home to their deities and religious rituals were undoubtedly performed there, especially in the times before they built their temples (Hammond 1973; Healey 2001, 72). These high places can be considered open air temples to practice direct and life religious rituals in front of the sun god and the god of thunderbolt, storm and rain. These high places usually include: courts with benches, altars, motabs as idols bases and pools (Curtiss 1900; Obinson 1901; Hoskins 1906; Tholbecq *et al.* 2014). In Petra around ten high-places have been discovered, in: Al-Madhbah, Al-Khubtha, Al-Habis, Al-Najar, Obelisk ridge, Bab al Siq and at Al-Beidha area (Kennedy 1925, 13, 16-19, 22, 24-25, 28, 46, 61, 67, 72-74). One of them, the Great High Place in Al-Madhbah, can be regarded as a public city sanctuary. The others are rather private chapels, associated with the funeral rituals and activities (Robinson 1908, 21).

The high places or the sacrificial places usually include courts, altars and basins. Some are regarded as a public sanctuary, while others were private chapels associated with burials (Robinson 1908, 21). They allowed the Nabataeans to practice some of their religious rituals and make offerings and sacrifices to their deities in an open area, on a high place, facing the planets deities; thus, making the connection between the worshippers and the deities easier, spiritually stronger, and more faithful. The sacrifices or offerings could either be living animals, fruit or small objects such figurines (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 333) or even frankincense. Sacrificing animals is an essential element for Muslims during their Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

The altars are one of the main architectural elements of the high places as sacrificial sites. In addition, and according to Strabo, Nabataeans built outdoor altars on top of their houses to worship the god Dushara, the sun god. According to him, a particular cult to the sun was made by them, and there, they honored it every day by pouring libations and burning frankincense

(Strab. 7.16.4). A characteristic example – small altar – was found in the al-Khaznah Courtyard. It was full of burnt incense that would have been used as an offering during the religious ceremonies (Farajat and Nawafleh 2005, 381). The altars also exist in the middle of some Nabataean temples with passages around them to allow people to circumambulate around them, such as the case in the temple of the Winged Lions in Petra (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 333).

Triclinium (Figs. 11-12), with benches on three sides, the *biclinium* (Pl. 5: 2) with benches on two sides and *stibadia* are found throughout Petra, in domestic, religious and funerary contexts. (Wadeson 2011a, 9). This type of cult structure can be described as a rock cult hall, the place where different groups of the Nabataean society gathered at different religious or private occasions, to have sacred meals. The aim of the meeting was to honor a living or deceased person, but sometimes also a deity, or a special occasion. From another point of view, Tacitus (c. 55-c. 120) focused on the wealth of the Nabataean monarchs when he described a specific banquet taking place in 18 AD. In addition to the writings of historians, Nabataean inscriptions and archaeological remains provide additional information about the banquets and their participants (Sachet 2010, 249-260). Some of these *triclinia* were erected in the early first century BC. This means that they were constructed before the freestanding temples were built (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 332). In this case, the use of the high places and the *triclinia* for religious rituals came before the building of the temples, when the Nabataeans were still not wealthy.

The purpose of *triclinia* can be determined from the inside features, such as the niches, and the outside features like the basin, or from the façade of some *triclinia* in which lions, masks, jars, geometric and plant decorations were carved on it. The *triclinia* were sometimes built beside the tombs underlining their religious and funerary purpose. And in some examples beside the temples. In these *triclinia*, ritual meals usually followed the sacrificing of animals (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 333). Strabo mentioned Nabataean feasts: 'They prepare common meals together in groups of thirteen persons; and they have two girl singers for each banquet. The king holds many drinking-bouts in magnificent style, but no one drinks more than eleven cupfuls, each time using a different golden cup' (Strab. 7.16.4). A group of facts appear in Strabo's information about the Nabataean banquets. Firstly, the importance of these feasts in the Nabataean traditions can be reflected by the participating of the king

in them. Secondly, the audiences are in the different levels of the society and are made up of both males and females and finally, singing and drinks were an essential part of these rituals.

In addition to the small gathering of people in the *triclinia*, around the banquet, bigger religious, social and formal ceremonies used to be held by the Nabataeans in Petra which are also an important indication of the holiness of the city. The Nabataeans, like other oriental cultures, had their own sacred times and spaces (Janif 2006-2007, 341). Diodorus mentioned an annual meeting held by the Nabataeans at Petra and Elusa as early as the fourth century BC (Diod. Sic. XIX, 95.1-2). The celebrations were also held by the Nabataeans because of festival events, related to cyclic sacred seasons, during the times for special sacrifice. N. Glueck, in his analysis of the iconography of the Khirbat et-Tannur zodiac, found, on the basis of the unusual order of the months, the suggestion of two 'New Year' festivals celebrated by the Nabateans. One in the spring season, the time of harvest, and one in fall season, the time of ploughing, sowing and planting (Glueck 1970, 231). Two Nabataean inscriptions dedicated to Dushara-A'ra, dated in the month of Nisan could indicate a spring festival (Healy 2001, 169-175). This means that the Nabataeans were concerned with fertility, seasonal feasts performed on the occasions of planting crops, harvesting, rain, annual meetings, death rituals (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 333; El-Khoury 2007, 87; Janif 2006-2007, 351), social parties such marriage and birth and formal ceremonies such as in the case of victory against enemies. One of the inscriptions show that the Nabataeans had a ceremony after their victory against Cleopatra's army in the battle of Actum before 31 BC (Kammerer 1930, 407, 410, 411).

J. Healy mentioned solstice festivals held by the Nabataeans in the late fourth century AD. At Petra, in this night time festival, the worshippers sang to their idol until sunrise, then they carried the idol and walked seven times around the Naos of the temple, then they ate a ritual meal and set the idol in its place (Heally 2001, 160). This ceremony reflects a group of facts: first, the relation of the Nabataean religion with the planets, the continuation and the keeping of the old Nabataean religious tradition, the use of open and closed areas in the same ceremony and finally, the holiness of the temples and the areas around them and the city of Petra in general.

Participation in these ceremonies was possible for ordinary people, high court people, priests, musicians (Pl. 9: 2), and the royal family. The high level and the variety of participants added more dignity and holiness to the event and to the site. Petra as the capital of the Nabataeans

would be the best place for such formal and religious ceremonies, its theatre (Pl. 10: 1), temples, *triclinia* and many open air spaces would be perfect for such ceremonies.

Sculptural evidence

A wide number of sculptures and relief representations have been discovered in Petra. Many of them are made of terracotta (Parlasca 1990; Khouri 2002) and represent different Nabataean deities. Their small sizes and the inexpensive costs may lead us to the conclusion that these statues were available to ordinary people for private ownership. People would have been able to keep them for travel and also inside their houses. In this case, the houses also functioned as private chapels.

Niches

Niches or *betyls* (symbolic statues of deities) carved in rock are a very common feature in Petra. Some niches are empty while others have cult statues in an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic shape (Patrich 1990, 50-113; Wenning 2001; Raymond 2008) (Pl. 9-11). Some of these niches or *betyls* can be identified by inscriptions (Pl. 7: 3-4), some are known as eye idols, because of their wide and recognized eyes (Pl. 7: 4). In some cases, the *betyl* are raised on *Mwatb* (throne) (Pl. 7: 1-3, 8: 1), while others are adorned with a simple architectural façade consisting of two engaged columns and an arch, or pediment (Pl. 7: 1-3). This façade serves different purposes to some niches. Firstly to give the *betyl* the dignity and honor suited to a high level deity, while secondarily to distinguish the rank of the deity represented in the *betyl*. The next aim was to reflect the social status of the people who offered it to the deities, and finally, to make the niche look like a façade of a temple through decoration. For those reasons, niches were considered as miniature temples. They gave a holy impression to the worshippers and made the practicing of religious rituals in front of the niche more practical and convenient. The worshipper could participate in the religious rituals within their stay in the city, but also on their way in or out of the city.

Reliefs and sculptures are one of the main objects for the analysis of the religious way of thinking. It usually portrays the deities and mythologies. The Nabataean niches with their *betyls* are a very good example, reflecting the Nabataean religion and Petra's religious status. Concerning the niche contexts, it seems to be evident that there were commonalities with regards to the structural features that were present in most niche sanctuaries, and that these areas were used in cult activity. This suggests that certain

specific structural features were deemed necessary by the Nabataeans to be included in their sanctuaries. These structural elements included the niches themselves, a stairway of some sort, a platform, which was either a part of the niche base or located directly in front of the niche, and water-holding devices such as: cisterns, libation pools, basins, or water channels (Pl. 5: 2) (Rymond 2008, 105). *Betyls* are often found carved on or beside tombs, perhaps signaling the sacred quality of the space, and the involvement of the deities in funerary practices and beliefs. Sometimes, they are observed at the entrance ways of the tomb's complex as part of elaborate installations involving water (Wadeson 2011a, 7).

H. Raymond classified the niches into two main groups: open air sanctuaries and closed air sanctuaries, usually found inside tombs and *triclinia* (Raymond 2008, 114). The niche itself may be the house of a deity or group of deities, where worshipers make their offerings and pray. Therefore, hundreds of niches in Petra can be viewed as miniature temples with holy sites within; thus, since the entire city includes niches as the houses of their deities, and because they can worship their deities in front these miniature temples which spread all over the city, the city in this case could have a holy meaning for its inhabitants.

As mentioned before, there are also water installations functioning in cult areas in Petra (Pl. 10: 2, 11: 1). This may force the conclusion that water played a major role in the Nabataean religion and rituals. B. MacDonald included a number of cult areas, such as niches (Pl. 10: 2) and discussed the ritual use of water (MacDonald 2006). In some niches, water was directed over *betyl* via a drain leading out of a basin in the rock platform (Wadeson 2011a, 7). The connection of basins with tomb complexes, usually in its entrances (Wadeson 2011a, 8), may suggest the role of ritual purification upon entering the sacred space of the tomb's property. Nabataeans used water, which was sacred, in their religious rituals. This theory can be supported from the wide water installations connected with tombs, temples and niches in Petra, and also because the cult of their main god Dushara is associated with the importance of the holy water collected from the mountains of Petra (El-Khoury 2006-2007, 328, 239, 330).

Obelisks, Nepesh

Other rock carvings, known from Petra, are the obelisk-shaped reliefs called *nepesh*, localized throughout the entire city of Petra. *Nepesh* was the Nabataean funerary stela that was carved in the rock symbolizing the presence of the dead individual, as a kind of memorial marker (Pl. 8: 2).

However, *nepesh* differs from *betyl*. It was constructed to represent the dead; as opposed to the *betyl*, which was carved to represent the deity. Scholars can make this differentiation based on the iconographic evidence, as well as epigraphic evidence (Raymond 2008, 4).

The Djin blocks

The Djin blocks are three-dimensional carvings, named after the Arabic word Genie, and a total of 26 structures have been discovered in Petra (Wenning 2003). The function of them is uncertain, however, they could be a part of a tomb complexes, signs, monuments or a representation of Nabataean deities, where the spirit of the deity dwelled.

Terracotta figurines

In addition to altars, another religious item can be found inside Nabataean people's houses. Small terracotta figurines of their deities were used for prayer, to practice their rituals, to bless the houses and to get rid of bad spirits. In this case we can consider the inside and outside of these houses a sacred space. This makes both the civil and religious buildings sacred places and, as a result, the entire city should be described as a holy city. The connection of Petra monuments with the astral elements insures the holiness of these monuments in particular, and the city of Petra in general, since the planets were worshiped as deities in Nabataean religious beliefs.

Carved symbols

To reflect the holiness of Petra and the religious status of the city and its people, a wide number of carved or painted symbols have been discovered in Petra, on its architectural monuments, sculpture, pottery and coins. These symbols vary from its astral, animal, plant and still life object origins. The astral ones reflect the planets like the sun disc or the lunar shape. The animal symbols are varied, such as: the lion, fish, panther, eagle, serpent, camel and gazelle. In addition to these symbols mythological creatures were used also such as: the sphinx, winged lion, Medusa, griffon (Almasri *et al.* 2012; 2018), The plant symbols include: palm, grapevines, rosette, fig, pomegranate, the wreath, pine cones and ears of wheat. The function of these symbols is connected with their religious believes, it was for cult, immortality, magic and fertility purposes (Al-Salameen 2012).

Astronomical evidence

A study made by J. Belmonte *et al.* demonstrates that the sky was a substantial element in Nabataean religion and reveals new evidence for cult worship, centered on the celestial sphere (Belmonte *et al.* 2013, 487). ‘The analysis of the light and shadow effects confirmed in several Petra monuments of the city related to the consistent use of the equinoxes, the solstices and, perhaps, other conspicuous astronomical features. In addition, a statistical analysis of the orientation of Nabataean sacred monuments demonstrates that astronomical orientations were often part of an elaborate plan and possibly suggest the astral nature of the Nabataean religion. Petra has proven to be a marvellous laboratory for the interaction between the landscape’s features and astronomical events, showing impressive hierophanies on particular monuments related to cultic times and worships. The famous Ad-Deir has shown a fascinating ensemble of light and shadow effects; perhaps, connected with the bulk of Nabataean mythology, while with the impressive Urn Tomb ‘a series of suggestive solstitial and equinoctial alignments help explain its selection as the city’s cathedral’ (Belmonte *et al.* 2013, 487, 499).

Finding the Zodiac as part of a relief decoration in many Nabataean sites shows us the important role of the planets in their religion. One of these reliefs is the zodiac Tyche, discovered at the temple of Khirbat At-Tannur (Pl. 8: 3). This zodiac is unusual for two reasons: because of the order in which the symbols are represented, and because the visible signs are a mixture of symbols and personifications (Mackenzie, 2003, 186-187).

Usually, when the signs of the zodiac are depicted in a circle they run continuously, either in a counter-clockwise direction or clockwise, although the month positioned at the top of the circle can vary. On the Khirbat et-Tannur zodiac, the symbols begin from the top with March and run counter clockwise down the left-hand side for the first half of the year; then from September, they return to the top of the circle and run down the right-hand side for the other half of the year. N. Glueck suggested that this change of direction was to indicate the two halves of the Nabataean calendar: the New Year beginning with spring, and the second half with autumn (Glueck 1952, 5-10). It is notable that the Sanctuary is oriented toward the east, so that the first rays of the rising sun would penetrate the maximum distance into the sanctuary on the spring and autumn equinoxes. The small altar on the west was possibly also used on these days, when the sun would have been in alignment with it. Analogies can be found on Egyptian coffins from

the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, which have the zodiac symbols depicted in a combination of the clockwise and counter clockwise directions (Mackenzie 2003, 188).

The second example, of the zodiac in the Nabataean Kingdom was found at the Khirbet edh-Dharih site (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve 1994, 1999). The external main façade of its temple was 15 meters high and it has anthropomorphic busts consisting of: Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Libra, and a fragment of Sagittarius (Pl. 9: 1) (Villeneuve and Al-Muheisen 2003, 86).

The third example of the Nabatean zodiac came from Petra – a unique molded lamp (Pl. 8: 4) recovered at the Temple of the Winged Lions by an American Expedition. It displays the signs of the zodiac running clockwise round the filler hole. Apparently beginning with the sign for Scorpio, the regular order of zodiac representations was not followed. A female bust (a goddess?) is shown on the handle, and a walking cock, with a schematized plant, is shown next to the wick hole (Hammond 2002).

The relationship of some Petra buildings with the planets, stars and the astronomical events insure its relation with planet deities from one side and its holiness from the other side. It also shows the effect of planet deities and the astronomical events on the kind and time of Nabatean religious ceremonies such as the New Year celebrations or those connected with the coming of rain or plants in spring times.

In addition to these sacred monuments, art and features, L. El-Khouri in her study about Nabataean pilgrimage stated that the Nabataeans believed that some types of landscape forms were inhabited or guarded by specific deities, the mountains served as a divine power, altars and bodes for several deities (El-Khouri 2006-2007, 328). In addition to mountains, the natural water from springs or from rain is sacred, because it comes by the abilities and wells of some deities. This means that the Nabataeans not only considered the religious man-made monuments and features as holy ones but also the natural such as like the mountains and springs. This makes the entire city a holy one with all its natural and man-made resources.

Apart from the holiness of some natural and man-made monuments and features in Petra, its region includes two sites considered holy by some people until today: the spring of the Prophet Moses in Wadi Musa, the main source of water to Petra, where Moses supposedly struck the rock with his staff and water gushed forth to the thirsty Israelites. While the other site is the shrine of the Prophet Aaron, the place where Mosa buried his brother (El-Khouri 2006-2007, 337). Both sites are made during the journey

of the Prophet Moses to the holy land of Palestine. The Swiss traveler, geographer Johann Burckhardt who discovered Petra and introduced it to the Western world, told the Bedouins who used to live in the site, that he is coming on a pilgrimage to visit the shrine of the Prophet Aaron to allow him to enter the city. These two places makes Petra and its region a place of religious meaning and holiness and a destination of pilgrimage not only in the Nabataean period but before and after it.

Conclusions

The unique geographical location of Petra on caravan roads, the supernatural and protected place, the multi-colored, different shapes of sandstone mountains stand high on the desert, its distinctive art works, and the rock-cut buildings, all these unique features make it stand out from its surroundings and an exceptional place in the region.

However, Petra is not only the natural masterpiece but as a holy city, it has the five basic elements or a concrete criteria of any holy city. First, a pantheon of deities to be worshiped by the Nabataeans. Second, it has a wide number of religious buildings, monuments, sculptures and features. Third, the worshipers who believe that Petra is a blessed and protected place by deities and it is as unique site it can offer their needs and hopes to them. Fourth, the religious rituals practiced by them, and finally it is a distention of pilgrimage, in particular. As one of the main caravan cities, the traders take care to pass through it and make a religious pilgrimage to it, since it includes thousands of religious items. All these element were extensively featured in Petra. The religious buildings and monuments include: temples, tombs, high places, *triclinia* and even the privet houses. All these had wide courtyards and other features like: niches, basins, altars, benches as main elements where people are allowed to gather and perform their rituals. The sacred art and sculptures, like the rectangular blocks called *Djine*, can be seen before the entrance of the city. The art works are varied as the sculptures, niches with their *betyls*, obelisks and the reliefs and symbols of animals, mythical creatures, plants and geometric motifs, such as: the crow-steps carved on many tomb facades, the high relief statues carved on some monuments as in the case of the Treasury. All these statues and symbols are extensively featured in Petra: monuments, pottery, objects and coins to serve in religious rituals and to help people to obtain success in their trade, a blessed and happy daily life and an immortal afterlife.

The inscriptions carved on rock surfaces or objects, dedicated to Nabataean deities. All this physical evidence may prove the hypothesis that Nabateans were treating their capital as a deity, or as a holy city. This evidence strongly suggests that the entire city was a holy space, which can be described a huge, open temple. Nabataean worshippers, pilgrims and visitors to the city could practice their religious rituals and ceremonies, any time and any place, in a unique, peaceful and spiritual city. Its holiness does not exist only in what is made by man but also its found in the natural resources such as the mountains which stand as deities or houses of deities and the springs, the source of the sacred water. They practiced purification with this sacred water, praying to deities, sacrificing and offerings for deities, pouring libations on their idols, circumambulation around altars inside temples and burning frankincense for their deities and to get rid of bad spirits. They also participated in sacred processions through the Siq, the main and formal entrance to Petra which includes a wide number of carved deities' niches, leads to the Treasury, the main religious monument in the city. The other important processions ways are those which lead from the city center up to the Deir and to the high places of the city. They also participated in their group religious, social and formal ceremonies as females and males, like: funerary, royal ceremonial banquets, victory and occasional festivals.

Nabataeans from all parts of the Kingdom, carefully participated in the religious and formal ceremonies inside their capital, and buried their dead in magnificent and decorated rock-cut tombs inside Petra, the home city of their main god Dushara. These activities also had deep religious and mental significance, constituting the Nabatean way of thinking and perception of Petra's role as a place of the beginning of the afterlife with its happiness and immortality.

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Pl. 1: 1. Major Nabataean sites of the Nabataean Kingdom and cities of ancient Near East.
Sachet 2010, Fig. 1



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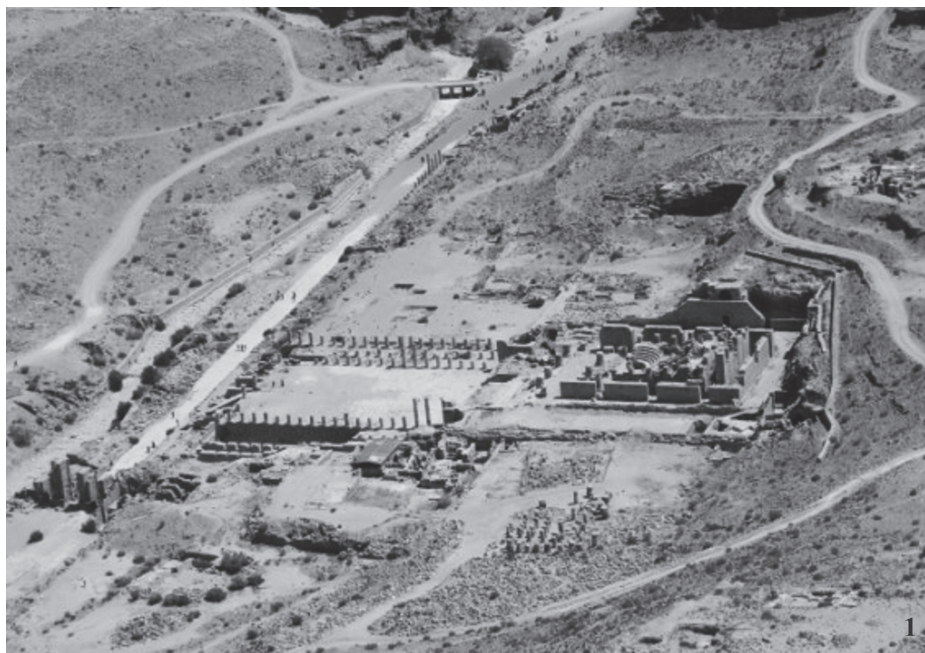


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Pl. 2: 1. The Treasury, the main monument at Petra. Photo by Safaa Dajah
Pl. 2: 2. Female Sphinx after restoration. McKenzie 1990, Pl. 63, a
Pl. 2: 3. Nabataean coin, portray Tyche with the god of the river swimming below her legs.
Auge' 1990, Pl. 1. Fig. 1. a, b



Pl. 3: 1. The Great Temple, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen
Pl. 3: 2. Qasr Bint Faroun Temple, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen



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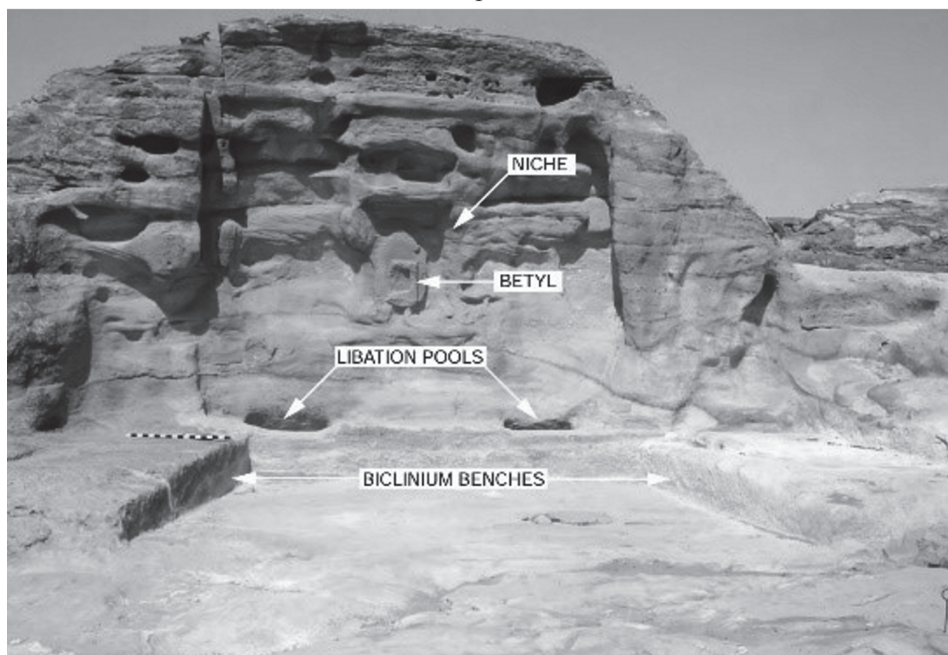
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Pl. 4: 1. The Tombs facade, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen

Pl. 4: 2. The high place, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen



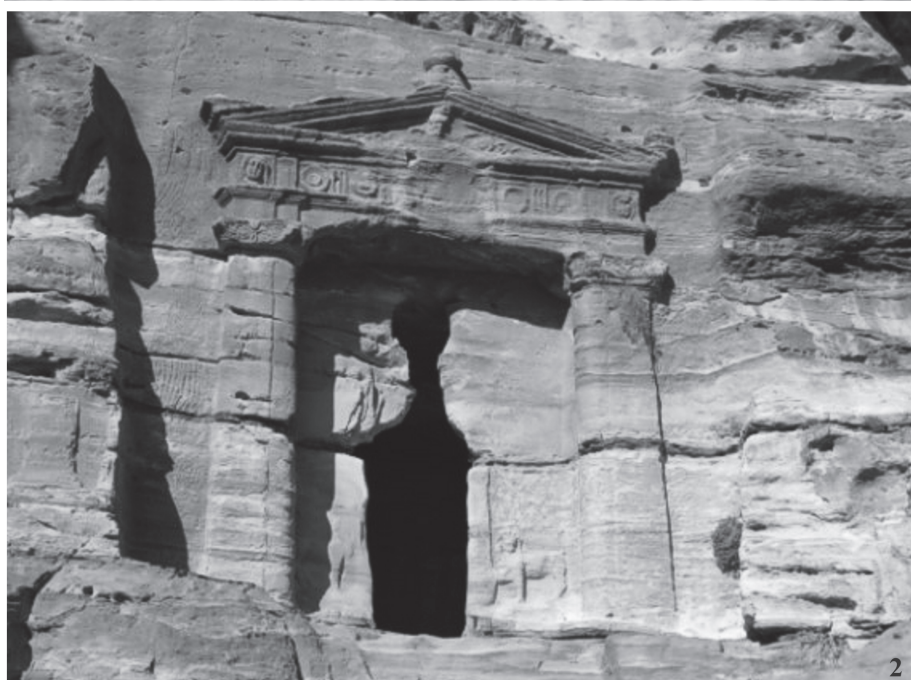
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Pl. 5: 1. The Altar at Jabal Khubthah, in Petra.

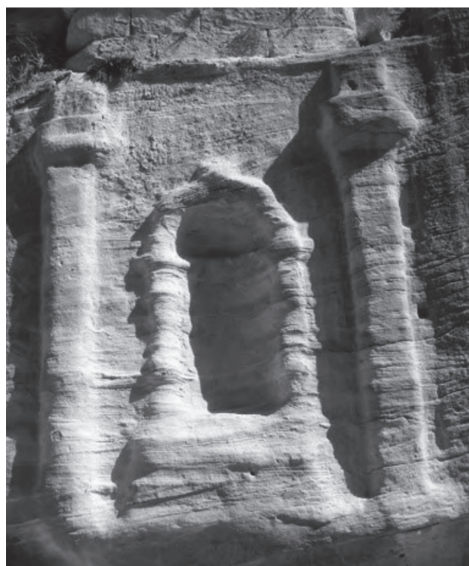
Pl. 5: 2. Niche, *Betyl*, Libation pools and biclinium, Petra. Raymond 2008, Fig. 1.3



Pl. 6: 1. *Triclinium* of a tomb with a basin, Wadi Muaisra, Petra. Wadeson 2011a. Fig. 16
Pl. 6: 2. Façade of the Lions *triclinium*, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen



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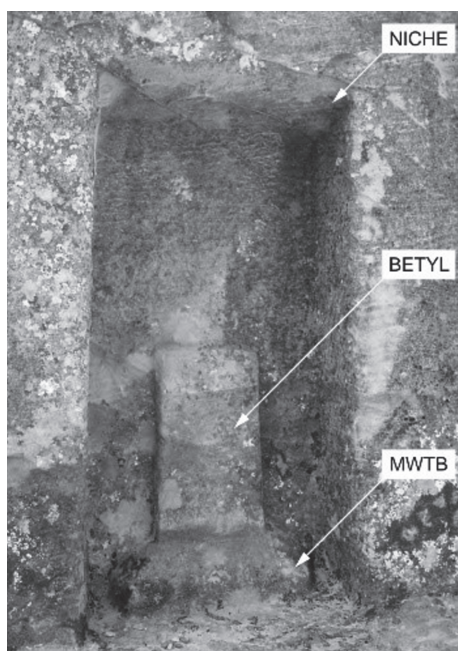
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Pl. 7: 1. Dushara, medallion and *betyl*, Petra. Rymond 2008, Fig. 3:3

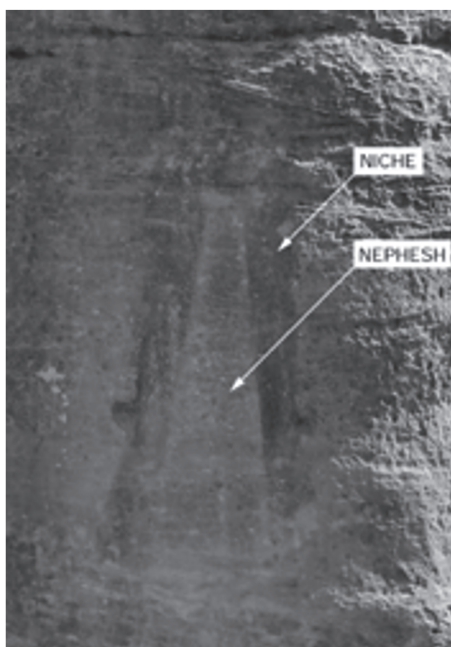
Pl. 7: 2. Arched niche in Wadi as-Siq, Petra. Rymond 2008, Fig. 5:8

Pl. 7: 3. Half egg shape *Betyl* depicting Dushara of Adraa, Petra. Raymond 2008, Fig. 3:1

Pl. 7: 4. Petra, Wadi as-Siyyagh: Nabataean eye *betyl* of the Syrian goddess Atargatis, identified by a Nabataean inscription, Petra. Wenning 2001, 84



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Pl. 8: 1. Niche, *betyl* and *Mwtb*, Petra. Raymond 2008, Fig. 1:1

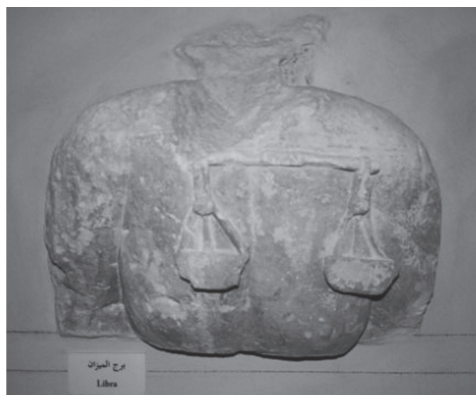
Pl. 8: 2. *Nepesh* 18, Petra. Raymond 2008, Fig. 1:2

Pl. 8: 3. High relief statue of goddess Nike holding the zodiac, encircling the goddess Tyche, Khirbet et-Tannur. Glueck 1965, Pl. 48

Pl. 8: 4. Zodiac signs carved in a circle on a terracotta oil lamp, Petra. Hammond 2002



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Pl. 9: 1. 1, 2, 3, 4. High relief statues of Cancer, Libra, Gemini and Taurus, Khirbet edh-Dharih. Jordan Museum. Photos by Eyad Almasri
Pl. 9: 2. Group of musicians, terracotta figurine, Petra. Khairy 1990, Fig. 27: 9



Pl. 10: 1. Petra Theatre set in the middle of the tombs façade. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen
Pl. 10: 2. Group of niches on the Siq, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen



Pl. 11: 1. Water basin, Petra. Photo by Zeyad Al-Salameen