

# About the Nabateans

Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom

## Historical Background

Who were the Nabateans? It is easier to define who they were not: they were definitely not an ethnic identity or a nation or state in the 19th-century concept.

They defined themselves by tribe and family. They had a strong sense of personal freedom and considered themselves a society of free Arabs, for whom the king was *primus inter pares* – the first among equals. He ruled the city of Petra in the manner of a Hellenistic sovereign and remained at the same time the sheikh of the tribe, and indeed the majority of the people living in his realm were not Nabateans. On the other hand, Nabatean inscriptions have come to light in areas that were never part of the kingdom and date from a time when it no longer existed.

The few ancient authors who mention the Nabateans have partly or fully misunderstood the political, social, and economic “stratigraphy” of their society. A reliable source on Nabatean society is the 1<sup>st</sup> century-BCE Greek scholar Diodorus Siculus, who, drawing from the writings of earlier historians, informs us of “....Arabia. The land is situated between Syria and Egypt, and is divided among many peoples of diverse characteristics. Now the eastern parts are inhabited by Arabs, who bear the name of Nabateans and range over a country which is partly desert and partly waterless, though a small section of it is fruitful” (Bibliotheca II,48,1–2). On their way of life Diodorus says: “They are exceptionally fond of freedom...” (XIX,94,1). “Consequently the Arabs who inhabit this country, being difficult to overcome in war, remain always unenslaved; furthermore, they never at any time accept a man of another country as their over-lord and continue to maintain their liberty unimpaired” (II,48,4). The Nabatean economy is also described: “Some of them raise camels, others sheep, pasturing them in the desert. While there are many Arabian tribes who use the desert as pasture, the Nabateans far surpass the others in wealth although they are not much more than ten thousand in number; for not a few of them are accustomed to bring down to the sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kind of spices, which they procure from those who convey them from what is called Arabia Eudaemon”, i.e. Arabia, the Blessed (XIX, 94, 4-5).

Considering the significant Nabatean economic and cultural impact, historical information from the 3rd and 2nd centuries

BCE is rather meager. Apart from mention of Aretas, the first Nabatean king, in the Second Book of the Maccabees 5: 8–10 and in an inscription from Elusa (169 BCE), a continuous succession of rulers extends from 120/110 BCE until 106 CE, the year of the formation of Provincia Arabia. Territorial and administrative changes were introduced in the late third century CE under the emperor Diocletian and about a hundred years later Petra and the south of the province as well as the Negev became the nucleus of the Provincia Palaestina Tertia. In the 5th century Christianity spread and many churches were constructed. On the basis of Nabatean names recorded in inscriptions and papyri, it appears that the autochthonic population did not change in the Byzantine period.

## Trade Routes

In the 1st millennium BCE the burning of incense became part of daily life in the Mediterranean basin. Consumer demand for frankincense (called *olibanum*), used in ritual and medical practices, grew rapidly and prices soared to exceeding heights. The aromatic gum resin was obtained from trees of the genus *Boswellia carterii*, which grow in southern Arabia (Dhofar and Hadhramaut) and Somalia. From there it was transported by ship to the harbor of Qana and then by camel caravans northward to the Mediterranean coast and beyond. At the time of the Nabateans, their center and holy precinct of Petra served as a place of reloading, with one route crossing the Negev to the port of Gaza and another leading through Damascus to Mesopotamia in the east and Phoenicia in the west. Gaza developed into a prosperous city, and already in the 3rd century BCE, when the Egyptian official Zenon visited the city, he encountered an officer in charge of the incense trade.

While frankincense was the main trading commodity, other aromatics and spices were also traded. Arabian balsam was used mainly in healing preparations and as an addition to incense; myrrh was an ingredient of perfumes, cosmetics and medicines, and necessary for embalming; labdanum was used in perfumery. Indian, Chinese and Oriental spices like pepper, cinnamon and cassia, cardamon and ginger were in great demand. Indigo, the blue dye obtained from plants of the genus *Indigofera*, may also have been imported, since the color occurs on textiles from

Nabatean sites (see Shamir this volume). These commodities were brought by ship to the ports in southern Arabia from India and the Far East and transported overland to the Mediterranean by the Nabateans, who served as intermediaries.

The area of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden with the Bab el-Mandeb passage, was controlled by the Sabeans, the inhabitants of one of the four main states of Arabia Felix, which emerged in the 8th century BCE along the south–north trade route running parallel to the Red Sea for a distance of some 200 km. This was the principal connection that came to be known as the “spice and incense route”, yet it was only part of an extensive network of routes connecting the Arabian peninsula to the Mediterranean. Another major route from Qana through the Wadi Hadhramaut and the Sabean capital of Shabwa lead across the Arabian peninsula and to the port of Gerrha on the Persian Gulf.

The Nabateans gained control of the northern Arabian desert, the Negev and the Sinai Peninsula in the Persian period. Inscriptions provide evidence that Nabatean merchants traveled further west to the Aegean Islands (Delos, Cos) and reached the Bay of Naples (Puteoli, modern Pozzuoli), thus establishing trade connections with the Romans.

The historian Strabo (63 BCE–19 CE) visited Egypt at about the time when Augustus sent an expedition, under the command of the prefect Aelius Gallus, from Egypt to Arabia and Ethiopia (24 BCE). The aim of the Roman expedition was to forcefully participate in the enormous trade profits enjoyed by the Arabs. The expedition failed, the Roman army suffered heavy casualties and an unknown number perished in the desert of southern Arabia. The Romans held the Nabateans responsible and accused them of treacherous behavior. Nevertheless, the event heralded a shift in the incense and spice route towards Egypt, as reported by Strabo who mentions the old route through Petra as well as the new route via the west coast of the Red Sea and the Nile: “Now the loads of aromatics are conveyed from Leuke Kome to Petra, and thence to Rhinocolura, which is in Phoenicia near Egypt, and thence to the other peoples; but at the present time they are for the most part transported by the Nile to Alexandria; and they are landed from Arabia and India at Myos Hormos” (XVI,4,24). Eventually, the rerouting of the trade caused the decline of Nabatean economic prosperity, resulting in Roman occupation and annexation to the Provincia Arabia in the year 106 CE. By that time the Greek seafarer Hippalus had understood the system of the monsoon wind cycles and it became possible

to sail from Egypt through the Red Sea to southern Arabia and India. This was the Roman opportunity to control transportation and trade and push the Nabateans aside.

**Chronological Table** (after Knauf 1997: 15)

312 BCE Petra (“the Rock”) is mentioned in Greek sources  
169 King Aretas is mentioned in the Book of Maccabees and in an inscription from Elusa

**The Nabatean kings**

120/110–96	Aretas II
c. 96–85	Obodas I
85/84	Rabbal I
84–62/60	Aretas III
84–72	Aretas the Philhellene, King of Coile Syria
62	Aretas, client of Rome
62–60	Obodas II (?)
60–30	Malichus I
30–9	Obodas III
9 BCE–40 CE	Aretas IV
9 BCE–16 CE	Huldu I, queen
9–6 BCE	Syllaios, co-regent
16–40 CE	Shaqilat I, queen
40–70	Malichus II
	Shaqilat II, queen
70–106	Rabbal II
70–75	Shaqilat II, regent
76–101	Gamilat II, queen
102–106	Hagiru II, queen
106	Malichus III (?)
106	End of Nabatean kingdom and formation of Provincia Arabia