

Nabatean Language, Script and Inscriptions

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Nomadic Arab tribes inhabited the borderlands of Palestine at least as early as the first half of the 1st millennium BCE. Herodotus (III, 5–9, 88) relates that the Arabs in southern Palestine had special rights in the Persian Empire because they supplied water to the army of Cambyses on its march to Egypt in 525 BCE. In Nehemiah 2: 19 and 6: 1, a certain Geshem the Arab, or Gashmu, is mentioned among the rivals of Nehemiah. He was presumably the father of "Qainu, son of Geshem, King of Qedar", whose name is inscribed in Aramaic letters on a silver bowl dedicated to the Arab goddess Han-Ilath, found at Tell el-Maskhuta in Wadi Tumilat in the eastern Nile Delta. Since the 7th century BCE there was an infiltration of Edomites into southern Judah and the northern Negev. On a 6th-century seal found at 'En Hazeva the script is Edomite but the names are Arabic. A mixed population of Edomites and Arabs is demonstrated in the personal names occurring on several hundred 4th-century-BCE Aramaic ostraca of unknown provenance and on the inscribed potsherds found at Beer Sheva, Arad and other sites in the area. In this period an Arab tribe, known as the Nabateans, appeared in Edom and established its center in Petra. Diodorus of Sicily informs us that in 312 BCE, the Nabateans sent their Greek adversaries a letter written in Aramaic characters.

Aramaic was originally the national tongue of the Aramean kingdoms. When the Assyrians conquered this region in the second half of the 8th century BCE they made Aramaic and its alphabetic script into the official medium of communication among the peoples of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Aramaic soon became the international language of the entire region. In the Babylonian and Persian periods the use of Imperial Aramaic and a uniform script became even more widespread, extending over an area from Asia Minor as far as Afghanistan, Egypt and North Arabia. In the Hellenistic period, the official language of the government was no longer Aramaic, but Greek. However, the Aramaic language and script had become so deeply entrenched that each nation had developed its own Aramaic dialect and national script. The Jews developed the Jewish (or square Hebrew) script from Aramaic, and the Arabs who lived in North Arabia, Transjordan, the Negev, Sinai and Egypt, developed a script of their own called "Nabatean", the ancestor of the Classical Arabic script.

The earliest Nabatean inscription, found at Elusa in the

Negev, mentions a certain "Aretas, King of the Nabataeans" (Fig. 17). However, this script does not yet have Nabatean features, but rather resembles the uniform Imperial Aramaic and Jewish scripts. The inscription is to be dated to the first half of the 2nd century BCE, and the king mentioned should be identified with Aretas I, described in 2 Macc. 5:8 as the Arab ruler with whom Jason sought refuge in Petra in 169 BCE.

Dated inscriptions from the 1st century BCE include the Aslah inscription from Petra (95 BCE), the dedication to Al-Kutba from Wadi Tumilat (77 BCE) and the inscription of Rabbat I from Petra (66 BCE). These are formal or monumental inscriptions engraved in stone. However, an incantation text written in ink on a large pebble from Horvat Raqiq, 10 km. north of Beer Sheva, represents the earliest Nabatean cursive script known so far; this should be dated around 100 BCE. Later inscriptions show the characteristic features of this script – a tendency to join the letters and to curve the bars (Fig. 18).

Nabatean inscriptions, mainly burial and votive, have been found at Petra and other Nabatean towns in Transjordan and the Negev, as well as at various sites in Egypt, North Arabia, Syria and even in Italy. The Nabatean legal documents discovered in a cave in Nahal Hever, near 'En Gedi, are of special importance. They range in date from 94–122 CE and were written in both formal and cursive scripts.

Most of the inscriptions, and all the coins with Nabatean legends issued in Petra, antedate 106 CE, the year the Romans abolished the Nabatean kingdom and annexed its territory to Provincia Arabia. There are, however, numerous inscriptions written after 106, including thousands of graffiti engraved in the 2nd and 3rd centuries on rocks in the wadis of Sinai, and several hundred in the wadis of Egypt and North Arabia.

The language of the inscriptions and legal documents is Imperial Aramaic, but some Arabic words and forms were inserted. The spoken language of the writers of these texts was Arabic and they and their deities bore Arabic names. Over time the Arabic elements increased. A burial inscription from Hegra, dating to 162 in the era of Provincia Arabia (267 CE), is actually bilingual (Nabatean-Thamudic). Apart from the personal names, it contains 13 Arabic words and 20 Aramaic ones. Moreover, the name of the deceased is written in Thamudic characters as well (Fig. 19).

A burial inscription dating to 328 CE, found at 'En Nemara in the Hauran, mentions "Imru'lqais, son of Amru, King of all Arabs", and is written in a fairly developed Nabatean formal script although the language is Arabic (Fig. 20). An Arabic poetic passage of two lines within a six-line Nabatean inscription was found near 'En 'Avdat, 4.5 km south of Oboda. This may be dated to some two hundred years before the 'En Nemara inscription. The latest dated Nabatean inscription, from Hegra and dating to 356 CE, was written in Aramaic with a single Arabic word (Fig. 21).

No 5th-century Nabatean inscriptions are yet known, but there do exist three 6th-century Arabic inscriptions which represent an early stage of the Arabic script (Fig. 22).

Although "Nabatean" was the official script of the Nabatean kingdom, it was also used by other Arabs in the area. Quite a number of the "Nabatean" inscriptions were not actually written by Nabateans. The c. 100 BCE incantation text from Horvat Raqiq, representing the earliest Nabatean cursive, was presumably inscribed by an Edomite or an Arab who lived in Idumea in the late Hellenistic period. The above-mentioned bilingual burial inscription from Hegra (Nabatean-Thamudic) and the bilingual Rawwafah inscription (Greek-Nabatean), were presumably written by Thamudeans. The Sinai graffiti were inscribed by Arabs who were not Nabateans.

The term "Nabatean" was first assigned about a century and a half ago to the monumental inscriptions from Hegra and Petra, dating from the time of the ascent of the various Nabatean kings. Some decades earlier, travelers in the Sinai Peninsula discovered graffiti engraved in the rock faces of Wadi Mukkateb and Wadi Mughara and other sites in Sinai. For many years there was a clear distinction between the Nabatean and Sinitic inscriptions. However, after the discovery (in 1905) of the Proto-Sinitic pictographic inscriptions in Serabit el-Khadem (sometimes called "Sinitic"), the Wadi Mukkateb and Wadi Mughara graffiti and other similar inscriptions were now also called "Nabatean". For example, rock inscriptions found in Egypt, identical to those from Sinai, were published as "Nabatean Inscriptions in Egypt".

Some scholars believe that the Arabic script did not evolve from the Nabatean, but from the Syriac script. I believe this theory is baseless due to the fact that in the Nahal Hever deeds from c. 100 CE, mainly in those written in the cursive style, one can discern all the elements of the Arabic script (Fig. 23).