

Avraham Negev, Scholar of the Nabateans in the Negev

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Even as a high school student at the "Shalva" Gymnasium in Tel Aviv, Avraham Eisenberg was attracted to the Negev Desert. When his friends in the youth group "No'ar Oved" had to decide where to set up their kibbutz, he voted for Bir 'Asluj, some thirty km from Be'er Sheva. For two years they waited in their preparation camp in Rishon Lezion, and when a typhus epidemic broke out among his friends, he volunteered to work as a male-nurse in the hospital. The experience led him to choose medicine as his vocation, and he vowed to devote ten years to the development of the Negev, and only then train as a brain surgeon.

In December 1943, at the age of 20, he arrived at "Revivim", the second outpost established in the Negev. He was in charge of maintaining the water pumps and taking meteorological measurements, and in his spare time he often explored the ancient cities of the central Negev, mainly on foot. He frequently visited Elusa, which was only 6 km from Revivim.

"I felt as if the ground below my feet was soaked with history, but revealed only hints of what it contained. This was the beginning of my experience with archaeology, a subject that had interested me since childhood. I remember the attic in my grandfather's house in Pinsk, Poland, which was filled with antiques and troves of old coins which had lost their value in the galloping inflation, and I spent hours studying them. When I came to Elusa to excavate in 1973, I felt that now I could finally not just imagine, but actually uncover its hidden secrets". To reach the more distant cities such as Rehovot, Sobata, Mampsis, Oboda and Nessana he had to ride his bicycle.

"Many times I would just sit in the large square in front of the Church at Sobata and enjoy the silence. Sometimes I thought I could even hear the hushed whispers of the monks and the ringing of the chimes in the monastery, and smell the incense. At that time in the Negev there were small groups of Jewish settlements trying to set down roots between the Bedouin tribes, while the ground whispered of the ancient people who had been here and were no longer."

The Nabateans, whose name was still unknown at that time, and the meagre evidence of their once-active presence in the region, fired his imagination.

One of the first visitors to Revivim was Dr. Yehuda Leib Magness, the president of the Hebrew University, and when he heard that Avraham Negev was interested in archaeology, he promised him a scholarship. There was little chance that the

kibbutz assembly would agree, given the harsh conditions they were living in, with only a handful of settlers. Nevertheless, Magness invited Negev to his home in Jerusalem to meet the university researchers.

"The most wonderful experience for me was meeting Professor Nelson Glueck, director of the American School of Oriental Research", reminisces Avraham Negev. "He looked like the descendent of an ancient people, tall, thin and scorched by the sun. With heavily-accented Hebrew, peppered with biblical and Talmudic phrases, he unfolded before me the magic of the Nabatean culture. He showed me his potsherd collection, the only one of its kind, and gave me a beautiful decorated Nabatean sherd, commanding me to search for similar sherds."

Following his visit to Jerusalem, Negev's interest in the Nabatean Negev grew, and he began to collect material, read books and excavation reports, and visit the Hebrew University from time to time.

"I thought that it would be a hobby after I became a doctor".

When the Independence War broke out, the Egyptian army besieged Revivim. On the morning of June 8th, 1948, while Abraham Negev was training his comrades in the use of grenades, one of the grenades exploded in his right hand. He was flown to Hadassah Hospital in Tel Aviv, where his arm was amputated below the elbow. His dream of being a doctor was over.

After he recovered, he and his wife Rachel were sent to South America as representatives of the "Dror Habonim" Zionist movement. In 1953 he began to study at the Hebrew University. His hobby, archaeology, now became his career.

"I actually went through two universities: the first, my five years in the Negev, illuminated my academic studies at the Hebrew University. During a discussion on the condition of the water in cisterns in ancient settlements, I was able to apply knowledge acquired from my life in the Negev, on the difference between storing water in an open pit, as opposed to a covered, well-plastered rock-hewn cistern".

Immediately after finishing his M.A. in 1958, Negev was appointed assistant director of the excavations at Oboda, and a year later he became director of the excavations, which continued until 1961. These excavations uncovered an extensive area of the site, including the fortress, the church square, the southern quarter, and the "Cave of the Saints". However, the most important discovery for the history of the Nabateans was the chance find

of a Nabatean pottery workshop in the east of the city, which became the subject of his doctoral thesis. In his thesis, Abraham Negev was the first to establish the typology and chronological framework of the decorated Nabatean pottery.

During the excavations at Oboda and its surroundings, a number of Nabatean inscriptions were found. As there was no one in Israel who was able to decipher them, it was decided to send them to an expert abroad. However, Negev requested to be allowed to work on them himself, and he succeeded in deciphering them. Two of them, inscribed on the walls of large stone basins found in Nahal 'Avdat, were of particular importance to the history of the Nabateans. According to Negev's interpretation, these were libation altars, and inscribed upon them was a description of the construction of dams in the time of Rabbel II, the last Nabatean king, who constructed water systems around Oboda. These finds suggest that, although the Nabateans were for the most part nomads and itinerant traders, the agricultural development of the Negev had already begun at the end of the Nabatean period.

The most important Nabatean inscription from the area of Oboda was discovered by Negev years later, and published in 1986. It was found in the vicinity of 'En 'Avdat, inscribed on a smooth stone tablet and dedicated to Obodas, the king who was deified after his death, and after whom the city was named. This inscription is unique in that parts of it were written in Arabic, in the writing style of the 2nd century CE. This inscription was 300 years earlier (!) than the earliest known Arabic inscription (see Negev this volume).

Negev's excavation at Oboda revealed that the settlement was first established as a way station for the Nabatean trade caravans, and in its center stood a Nabatean temple, probably to the god Obodas. Only the foundations of this temple remain, and a few architectural details from the treasury. In the Byzantine period Christianity replaced the pagan cults, and upon the ruins of the Nabatean temple two churches were built. The site was abandoned at the time of the Arabic conquest of the Holy Land. Oboda is thus a key site for the reconstruction of the history of the Negev and its sites during late antiquity.

In 1965 Negev began excavations at Mampsis, which continued for two years and employed 150-200 workers every day. At the end of the Nabatean period only a few houses stood at the site, but after the Nabatean kingdom was annexed to the Roman empire, construction began in earnest at the site. In the 3rd century CE the settlement was fortified with a wall, and from

this period the best known structure is Building XII in the eastern part of the city. This is the largest private dwelling in the city, covering c. 1600 m. An early owner had removed the paving of the floor of the stairwell and built there a hiding place into which he placed a large bronze jar containing 10,500 silver Roman coins. Although the house was occupied for hundreds of years, the treasure was only discovered after c. 1750 years. The discovery of such a large treasure is impressive evidence of the economic prosperity of the Nabateans in the Negev. The coins themselves, which were minted in the Roman provinces Phoenicia, Syria and Asia, are indicative of the distances to which the Nabatean trade in race horses reached.

Outside the city, the graves of Roman soldiers were uncovered by chance, and in another area a Nabatean cemetery was excavated. The graves, which had not been looted, contained many valuable finds, including gold jewelry and Nabatean stamp seals.

Negev conducted a survey on foot along the "spice route" between Oboda and the 'Aravah, documenting evidence of the nature and date of this route. He concluded that this was the main roadway of the Nabatean trade caravans, similar to the conclusions reached by Yoram Tsafrir and Ze'ev Meshel.

In 1973 Negev conducted limited excavations at Elusa:

"On one of my last days at Elusa, I was surveying the garbage dump along the eastern border of the city. The last rays of the setting sun revealed to me a sight I could not believe I was seeing. It seemed more like an illusion - a desert mirage. The sun had now set, and before me, in the thin fog of twilight, rose up the coliseum of Rome. Here? In Elusa?" He ran down the slope of the garbage dump, and after some 200 meters found himself before a curved wall made of smooth hewn blocks of hard limestone. When he climbed onto the wall he saw that it was the semi-circular construction of a theater, not a round amphitheater, as it had looked to him from above. From here he was able to discern the cavea (the seating structure) and the remains of the scaena frons (the stage).

An inscription found at the theater states that it was repaired in the 5th century CE, during the Roman-Byzantine rule. This was important and interesting evidence for the preservation of Greek and Roman traditions at the site in the Byzantine period. The theater was first built in the days of the Nabateans, important evidence for the nature of the Nabatean presence at the site. As Nabatean theaters were usually built in proximity to cult places, it is probable that there was a Nabatean temple nearby. Negev also discerned remains of a Nabatean cemetery near the settlement where funerary meals were conducted.

In 1975-1977 Negev returned to excavate at Oboda, together with Rudolph Cohen of the Department of Antiquities. The excavations concentrated on the exposure and dating of the military structure built in the east of the city. In 1980 Negev conducted a short additional excavation at Elusa, in which the cathedral was uncovered, the largest church in the Negev. In light of this excavation, Avraham Negev identified a unique phenomenon in the churches of the Negev, concerning the development of apse construction and the worship of saints. His theory received further support from the results of the sounding conducted by S. Margalit and D. Chen under the supervision of Negev, in the northern church at Sobata in 1985-1986.

Although he did not excavate at Nessana, in 1990 Negev offered an alternative explanation for one of the papyri found at the site. Papyrus 39 lists the names of nine sites, and alongside them different numbers. The American expedition that excavated the site presumed that these were amounts of taxes collected from the various cities. However, the amounts listed alongside Nessana, Oboda and Mampsis were almost identical, although the sizes of the settlements and in particular their agricultural land, which was the economic base of their existence, were very different. In the vicinity of Nessana 15,000 dunams were cultivated, around Oboda 10,000 dunams, and at Mampsis only 420 dunams. Negev raised the possibility that the amounts recorded in the papyrus were not taxes collected but rather payments to soldiers posted in the various cities. This theory would explain the nature of settlement in the Negev during the Byzantine period and the process of abandonment at the end of the period.

In 1989 Avraham Negev returned to Oboda to conduct a sounding in the southeastern wing of the fortress, and uncovered remains of a Nabatean temple, perhaps a temple to the god Obodas.

Negev's work on the Nabateans is considered the most authoritative research on the subject. In his opinion, Petra was not the seat of Nabatean government, and the cities in the Negev should not be considered as simply way stations. He is convinced that the center of the Nabatean kingdom was in the Negev Highlands, while Petra was only their religious capital, a burial city where only a few hundred people lived, who functioned as a burial society in the temples.

"The Nabatean settlements in the Negev were living cities, with houses, markets, streets and workshops, none of which were found at Petra. From the taxes on caravans that passed through them, and their agricultural produce, the six Nabatean cities in the Negev formed the

economic base of the kingdom. The cities of the Negev can be compared to the greater Tel Aviv area, where most of the commerce took place, while Petra was the Jerusalem of the Nabateans, an ascetic sacred city, financed by the money from the commercial cities".

Professor Emeritus Avraham Negev is still today contributing to the research of the Nabateans, and in this catalog he publishes two new Nabatean inscriptions that he has deciphered and translated. At present he is concentrating on the writing of a new book that will summarize his research on the Nabatean cities of the Negev.

