

Obodas the God in a Nabatean-Arabic Inscription from the Vicinity of Oboda and a Review of Other Nabatean Inscriptions

Avraham Negev, Hebrew University

In each of the regions of the Nabatean kingdom, there is at least one site which has produced many inscriptions: Hegra in northern Arabia, Petra in Edom, Si'a in the Hauran, Wadi Haggag in southern Sinai, and Oboda in the Negev – the site of the latest discoveries. The Nabatean inscriptions from Oboda, originating in the city's temples (Figs. 24-25) and agricultural periphery, reveal a new aspect of Nabatean life (Negev 1993).

In 1979 I received a slide of a Nabatean inscription found by A. Roones, an architect employed by the Sede Boqer branch of the Ben Gurion University, in the vicinity of 'En Avdat, near the Nahal Zin waterfall.¹ Standing near the inscription, I envisaged spread out before me vineyards and gardens. Today the region is covered with terraces and dams, evidence of ancient agriculture. The inscription is shallowly engraved on a rather large, flat stone, measuring approximately 1x1 m.² The inscription has six lines. I was able to read the first line and part of the second and third, quite easily, but I could not decipher the rest of the inscription. I turned for help to a colleague and friend, Professor Joseph Naveh. After studying the inscription he announced that it was written partly in Nabatean-Aramaic, and partly in another language, probably ancient Arabic. He suggested we consult with Professor Shaul Shaked, an expert of ancient Arabic. Thus, I first published this inscription in 1986, with the aid of J. Naveh and S. Shaked (Negev 1986).

The inscription (Fig. 26):

Nabatean-Aramaic:

1. דכיר בטב קרא קדם עבדת אלהא ודכיר
2. [הקים... (ד)מן
3. גרמאלהי בר תימאלהי צלם לקבל עבדת אלהא

Translation:

1. May he who reads (?) be remembered in good (memory) before Obodas the god, and may there be remembered
2. who(ever)...
3. Garm'alahi son of Taym'alahi [set up] a statue before Obodas the god

Ancient Arabic:

4. פיפעל לא פדא ולא אתרא פכן הנא יבענא אלמותו לא
5. אבענא פכן הנא ארד גרחו לא ירדנא

Translation:

4. And he acts neither for benefit nor for favor. And if death claim us let me not

5. be claimed. And if affliction seeks, let it not seek us.

Nabatean-Aramaic:

6. גרמאלהי כת(ב) בידה

Translation:

6. Garm'alahi wrote (this inscription) with his own hand.

While I was in the United States, prior to publication of the inscription, M. O'Connor informed me that he had just completed an article which proves that, contrary to what is accepted by scholars, the Nabateans did not employ any Arabic words in their language. All the words believed to be Arabic are Aramaic. When I told him about the discovery of the Oboda Arabic inscription, he included it as a note in his study (O'Connor 1986).

Until the discovery of the Oboda inscription, the only known Arabic text written in Nabatean letters was an inscription discovered at 'En Nemara in the Hauran, dated to 328 CE (Dussaud and Macler 1903). Apart from this inscription, there are isolated words in Nabatean inscriptions which have been interpreted as Arabic. These words were the subject of O'Connor's article.

There is no doubt that part of the Oboda inscription was written in ancient Arabic (lines 4-5), while the remainder was written in Nabatean-Aramaic. When was this inscription written and why did its Nabatean writer need to resort to the Arabic language? Based on the style of the Nabatean letters, this inscription cannot date much later than the beginning of the 2nd century CE.

Nabatean Inscriptions from Oboda

A considerable number of dated Nabatean inscriptions have been found at Oboda from the time of Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE). The inscriptions were found mostly in the vicinity of the Nabatean temple on the acropolis. Inscriptions engraved on Nabatean libation altars were found at Oboda itself and in the surrounding agricultural fields (Figs. 27-28). These date to 88–98 CE, within the reign of Rabbel II. Two additional inscriptions date to the 2nd and 20th years of the Provincia Arabia, a new era and numbering system which began with the annexation of the Nabatean kingdom to the Roman empire in 106 CE.

Who was the god Obodas and who worshipped him? This appears to be answered by Stephanus of Byzantium (Ethnika

482: 15-16), a 6th century Greek grammarian, who wrote: "Oboda, a place of Nabateans. Uranios, in his fourth book on the Arabs, writes where king Obodas, who is deified, is buried."

Obodas was the name of three Nabatean kings. Obodas I ruled c. 96–85 BCE. His history is relatively obscure, but it seems that he ruled for a short period, and was possibly killed in battle when the Nabateans reconquered the Negev after it had been lost to Alexander Jannaeus in the days of Aretas II (120/110–96 BCE). Obodas I was apparently the king who built the new city, named it after himself, was buried there and worshipped as a god after his death. Obodas II ruled c. 62–60 BCE, and Obodas III ruled in the years 30–9 BCE. Apart from the two-year reign of Obodas II, the later Nabatean kings, whose history is well known, enjoyed long reigns.

Nabatean inscriptions first appear at Oboda at the end of the 1st century BCE. These inscriptions are dated by the year of the king. A concentration of such inscriptions was found in a room identified as the main Nabatean temple's treasury. One of these inscriptions (Fig. 29; Negev 1961: 127–128) reads:

עבדת פצאל ושעודת בני חרתת

Translation:

'Obodat and Phasa'el and Sa'udat the sons of Aretas

This inscription names the sons of Aretas IV, thus dating it to 9 BCE–40 CE.

A partly-preserved inscription from the same room and the same year reads:

[חר]תת [של]ם – Aretas' peace (Negev 1963: 129).

A third inscription, engraved at the edge of a large slab of marble from the northern end of the acropolis reads: שנתם, perhaps an abbreviation for the second year of Aretas, 8 BCE (Negev 1963: 130). To the same group of inscriptions apparently belongs an undated monumental inscription, engraved on a large building block (Negev 1963: 131), reading:

[או]שו בר בר [ענ]מו

Translation:

['Au]shu the grandson of ['An]mu

In the debris of the gate tower on the northern slope of the acropolis an inscription on a small plaque of marble (Negev 1963: 128–129) reads:

1. [דנה תיאטר]א די קרב שעיו [בר . . . על חיי חרתת]

2. [חרתת מלך נבט] רחם עמה ו[אחתה שקילת מלכו נבט]

Translation:

1. Sa'iu son of ... dedicated this portico (for the life of)

2. (Aretas, king of the Nabateans), who loves his people, and (for the life of Shaqilat his sister, queen of the Nabateans).

It is tempting to relate these inscriptions to the Nabatean temple, located in the western part of the acropolis.

A number of inscriptions from the time of Rabbel II (70–106 CE) were engraved on the sides of large stone boxes, which I have identified as libation altars. According to my interpretation, they all deal with agriculture. Two such objects, partially broken, were found in the debris of the court of the Late Roman-Byzantine citadel, adjoining the temple compound. We have no idea of their original location. On one of the sides I read the words (Negev 1961: 133–134):

דנה סכרא / די קרב

Translation:

This dam which was dedicated

Some scholars object to the reading of the word סכרא as 'dam'. Joseph Naveh prefers the reading מדרא which has no meaning in Aramaic. Otto Eissfeldt suggested the reading מודא meaning in Aramaic 'measuring vessel'. In his opinion, this vessel was used to distribute wine to the participants in a religious festivity named in one of the Oboda inscriptions as: מרוח אלהא, 'gods feast'. On another side of this libation altar is written דנה דרתא, 'this house', and on another side appears שלם, the regular blessing word 'peace'.

Two broken libation altars were discovered amidst ancient fields near one of the tributaries of Nahal Avdat in Ramat Matred, at a distance of about 4 km southwest of Oboda. The inscription reads (Negev 1961: 135-136):

1. דנה סכרא די

2. בנה גרמו וחברוהי

3. שנת XVIII למראנא רב[אל]

4. די אחיי ושיזב עמה

Translation:

1. This is the dam (?)

2. which Garmo and his friends built

3. in the year 18 of our lord Rabbel

4. who brought life and deliverance (to his people).

This inscription dates from the year 88 CE.

At a small distance from this libation altar another one was found, on which was engraved (Negev 1961: 136-138):

1. וחברוהי

2. בני סרותה ערת

3. שנת XXVIII

Translation:

1. ... and his friends,
2. the sons of Saruta 'Arat,
3. in the year 28

It seems certain that the date refers to the reign of Rabbel II, i.e. 98 CE. Both these inscriptions refer to a (religious?) association that was concerned with the construction of agricultural installations. 'Arat is perhaps the name of the Nabatean deity A'arat, who was also worshipped in the days of Rabbel II.

Two additional libation altars, preserved in their entirety, were discovered amidst the remains of farmsteads in the nearby valley some 2 km south of Oboda. One of these is large, the other considerably smaller. On the larger one a four-line inscription reads (Negev 1963: 113–117):

1. דנה סכרא [די בנא] . . . טו בני ה.
2. דה [וחברוהי] בני סרותא דנה מרוז
3. דושרא אלה גאיא בשנת י"ח (?)
4. אל לרבאל מלכא מלך נבטו די אחיי ושיזב עמה

Translation:

1. This dam (which was built by) ... tu sons of ...
2. Da (and his friends) the sons of Saruta for the offering of sacrifices
3. to Dushara the god of Gaia in the year 18 (?)
4. of Rabbel king of the Nabateans who brought life and deliverance to his people.

If the numeral is read correctly, the date of the inscription is 88 CE. Now, in addition to the details known from other inscriptions of this type, we learn that this important event was celebrated by a religious feast.

Nabatean inscriptions connected with agriculture first appeared in the years 88–98 CE, and should be regarded as the earliest evidence of Nabatean agriculture. According to early Nabatean sources, drinking wine was forbidden to Nabateans. Now we learn that agricultural activities were accompanied by wine-drinking festivities.

The last two Nabatean inscriptions we shall deal with here were found at Oboda itself. The first comes from a small cave on the western slope. It was engraved on a rather soft stone, which is unusual with the Nabateans, who preferred hard building stones (Negev 1963: 117–119). This inscription reads:

אתבני שנת
תרתינן להפרכיה שלם

Translation:

Built in the second year of the eparchy. Peace.

This inscription opens a new dating era in Nabatean history, the era of the Provincia (eparchy in Nabatean) Arabia, which began on April 22, 106 CE, therefore this inscription dates to 106/107 CE. The second inscription was engraved on a hard building stone found in secondary use at the top of the eastern wall of the Late Roman–Byzantine citadel (Negev 1963: 119–120). I could not read the entire text of four lines, but part of line two and line four read:

2. די עבד . . .
4. שנת עשרין להפרכי[א]

Translation:

4. ... who made (built)
5. in the year twenty of the eparchy

This inscription can be dated to the year 125/126 CE.

Many important Nabatean inscriptions from Oboda are dated. They began in the days of Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE), followed by inscriptions of Rabbel II (70–106 CE). The latest inscription of the Nabatean Kingdom dates to the year 28 of Rabbel II, which is 98 CE. The earliest inscription from the Provincia Arabia dates to the second year of the provincial era –107/108 CE. I suggest that the 'Obodas the god' inscription falls between the two eras, that is, after the Nabatean Kingdom, but before the Provincia era was established.

At Oboda the cult of Obodas the god lasted for a very long period. His name also appears on many Nabatean-Greek inscriptions, in which he is usually identified with Zeus. The earliest Nabatean-Greek inscription was engraved on the lintel of the door leading to the Nabatean temple, renewed in the Roman period. The inscription is from the year PΞB, 162 of the Provincia, 267/8 CE (Negev 1981: 14). At the lower border of the lintel was written Πᾶς φίλων Ὁβόδα, meaning either 'all friends (of the city) of Oboda', or more likely, 'all friends of Oboda the god' (Negev 1991b: 63).

In 293/4 CE an inscription was engraved on the lintel of the tower in the 'Roman residential quarter' (Negev 1981: 15–18). This is apparently the latest inscription at Oboda in which the name of the god-king occurs. The beginning of the inscription reads:

Ἀγαθὴ τὴ
Ζεὺ Ὁβόδα

Translation:

In good luck, Zeus Oboda

In another inscription, although undated, the same god was mentioned in the form θεῶν Ὀβόδα (Negev 1981: 19-20). This title appeared at the head of a list of workers, apparently employed in the construction of the temple:

Translation:
to god Oboda.

The god Obodas is mentioned at Oboda more than any other Nabatean god. However, the names of other Nabatean gods as well as the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon also appear. A student of mine, Tali Erickson-Gini, excavated a house in the southern end of the 'Roman residential quarter', east of the tower excavated in 1958. There she discovered fragments of a white-plaster wall and upon it a Nabatean inscription written in black ink, in very fine script. The plaster was very hard, made of a mixture of lime, quicklime, small pebbles and much ash, typical of Roman-period plaster. There are two plaster fragments that don't connect, in each section are two lines (Fig. 30):

The right section, upper line:

דכרון טב ושלים מן דושר[א]

Translation:
In good memory and peace from Dushara

Lower line, right:

למראנא סנגוביא [. . .]

Translation:
To our lord Senogovia

The epithet 'our lord' is usually reserved for kings. The name of this ruler, Senogovia, is unknown. Perhaps he ruled during the Provincia Arabia, or perhaps this is the name of someone who was conscripted to the Roman army in Spain, and served as a high ranking officer in the Provincia.

In the left part of the inscription, the upper line is partly damaged.

1. [] תחניבה (?)

2. וגדיו ברה שידא נניה [. . .] ?

Translation:
1. (?)
2. Gadio his son. Plasterer. Nani

The father's name has not been preserved. Gadio is a Nabatean name common in Sinai and the Negev (Cantineau 1930: 149), but very rare in Edom and the Hauran. שידא is a plasterer. Nani is

the name of a deity. It is unclear how the last letter in the inscription connects with the name Nani proceeding it. This inscription, written with a fine brush on plaster, is unique at Oboda.

The 'Obodas the God' Inscription

Turning again to the 'Obodas the god' inscription, the question is raised: what was the purpose of the bilingual inscription written in Nabatean-Aramaic and Arabic?

While I was preparing this inscription for publication, I assumed that the man who set up the statue of Obodas the god must have felt he had committed a very grave sin. The Nabateans, like their Jewish neighbors, were forbidden to make any human likeness. For this reason he felt compelled to apologize and to state that 'he acts neither for benefit nor for favor', and asks for protection from death and bodily harm. Why did he not make these apologies in his own Nabatean-Aramaic language? I now began to formulate a theory that cannot be easily proven. Perhaps the Nabatean-Aramaic language was very limited in vocabulary, utilized mainly for matters of religion, and that the common spoken language among Nabateans was actually Arabic.

One scholar has suggested that the two lines written in Arabic are lines of an early Arabic poem. The existence of such poems has long been suspected, although there has never been any evidence, until this hint from the Oboda inscription (see Dussaud and Macler 1901: 409-421). In any case, we now possess the earliest Arabic inscription, which predates the early Arabic inscription from 'En Nemara by some 300 years.

In summary, Oboda, like Hegra, Petra and Si'a, is very rich in Nabatean-Aramaic and Nabatean-Greek inscriptions. The reason for this is still uncertain. It may be that all these cities were religious centers, as evidenced by the Nabatean temples at each site.

Notes

1. I was often guided to the site of the inscription by Mr. Ezra Orion, director of the Sede Boqer field school, who also helped me on numerous other occasions during my work in the Negev.
2. The stone was photographed by Gabi Laron, photographer of the Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University. Due to the flatness of the stone, this was a difficult task.