

The Nabateans in the Hauran

Shimon Dar, Bar Ilan University

Geography

The Hauran is a basaltic region in the northeast of the Land of Israel, called in ancient sources Bashan. The Hauran is the most fertile area in all of Transjordan, its rich soil and copious rainfall have enabled agriculture to flourish throughout the ages.

The Hauran is divided into a number of sub-regions, including the Golan, the Bashan Plain (el Nukra) the Hauran Heights or Bashan (Jebel Druz), and Trachon (Leja). Some scholars also include Iturea, which lies to the north of the Golan and includes areas from the Hermon Mountains to the Beqa'a Valley in Lebanon (Fig. 103).

Historical Background

During the Hellenistic period a wide variety of peoples and tribes lived in the Hauran, speaking Aramaic, Arabic, Nabatean, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Nabateans have been present in the Hauran since the 3rd century BCE, as evidenced by the Zenon Papyri (259 BCE) and a stele in the Damascus Museum (Bowersock 1983:17–19; Starcky 1985: 167–168).

The Nabateans had political, economic and commercial motives for settling in the Hauran — they wanted to establish themselves in northern Transjordan and southern Syria (Hammond 1973: 34–39). Their trade routes led westward through Damascus to the Mediterranean, and eastward through Palmyra (Tadmor) to Mesopotamia. The Nabateans took advantage of the weakness of the Hellenistic rulers, especially the Seleucid Dynasty, and expanded into southern Syria towards Damascus.

Based on archaeological and epigraphic evidence, the Nabateans settled heavily in southern Hauran, while in northern Hauran Nabatean settlement was thinner, comprising only one part of the varied ethnic mosaic in that area during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Nabatean settlement in southern Hauran was mainly of a rural nature, and the only urban settlement was at Bostra.

In building and dedicatory inscriptions in the Hauran, the Nabatean kings and their major gods are mentioned, evidence of the deeply-rooted Nabatean presence there (Fig. 104; Millar 1993: 392–393). The earliest Nabatean inscriptions date to the Hellenistic period, to the reigns of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties (Starcky 1985: 168). The Nabateans continued to

produce dedicatory inscriptions that mention their kings into the Roman period and after the annexation of their kingdom to the Roman Empire in 106 CE.

Over 70 Nabatean inscriptions have been found in the Hauran, in some 50 settlements mainly in southern Hauran and in the Hauran Heights (Starcky 1985: 174–176). The Nabateans also sent settlers in the direction of the Golan, as evidenced by a dedicatory inscription to the god Dushara found in the area of Susita-Hippos (Ovadiah 1981: 101).

Wars between Nabateans and Jews also involved Transjordan and the Hauran (Negev 1983: 46–52). The main disputes, over control of territories and economic interests in Transjordan and the Hauran, took place during the reign of the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus and the Nabatean kings Obodas I and Aretas III (ca. 93–80 BCE). In the opinion of Arieh Kasher, Alexander Jannaeus won important territorial and economic gains at the expense of the Nabateans, and only after the conquest of Syria and the Land of Israel by the Romans, were the conquered areas returned to the Nabateans and the Hellenistic poleis (Kasher 1988: 86–105).

The weakness of the Seleucid rulers in this region in the 1st century BCE, and the incursions of the Itureans and other Arab tribes, motivated the inhabitants of Damascus to request of Aretas III to take control of Coile Syria in 85–72 BCE. The Nabateans took advantage of this period to strengthen their hold on the Hauran, and the situation did not change even after the Roman conquest of Syria in 64 BCE (Hammond 1973:35–37). According to Hammond (*idem.*), the Nabateans refrained from interfering in political disputes in Syria, and concentrated mainly on establishing their settlements and their caravan trade routes.

On the eve of the Battle of Actium (31 BCE), with Anthony and Cleopatra against Octavian (Augustus), and the fate of the Eastern Roman Empire standing in the balance, Herod refrained from supporting either side but rather organized attacks against the Nabateans, thus saving his reign (Kasher 1988: 134–139). From 23 BCE, when Augustus awarded Herod control of the Hauran, until the death of Agrippas II towards the end of the 1st century CE, the Herodian dynasty ruled in the Hauran (Dar 1978: 146–151; Kasher 1988: 126–174).

The co-existence of both the Herodian dynasty and the Jewish settlers whom he brought from Babylon and the Land of Israel, and the Nabatean dynasty, is evidenced by inscriptions and stelae dedicated by the local population to the two ruling dynasties (Millar 1993: 393). However, discerning any cultural distinction between Nabatean and Herodian regions in the Hauran is almost impossible, and perhaps such a distinction did not even exist.

The settlement pattern in the Hauran did not change significantly even after 106 CE, when most of the Hauran was included in the new Roman province of Arabia, with Bostra as its capital. The new province comprised a mosaic of peoples and geographic regions, including areas of the Hauran where Nabateans had lived for hundreds of years (Millar 1993: 393–399).

The Archaeological Remains

Nabatean remains have been discovered in some 50 settlements in the Hauran. In most cases the remains consist only of memorial and dedicatory inscriptions, at a few sites remains of Nabatean temples have been found. The best-known temples are those at Zur, Sahar, Kanatha, Si'a, Suweida, Bostra and Salhad.

Nabatean temples in the Hauran belong to the square type, their typical feature being a square within a square. In the inner square is a hall surrounded by double walls, forming a corridor (Hachlili 1975). Within this inner hall is a kind of square sanctuary which perhaps contained an altar. Most of the temples had a front peristyle courtyard intended for the worshipping public. Some had a facade with two towers, and their reconstruction supposes a Syrian arch between them. Some of the facades included decorated niches. The facade towers probably contained stairs to the roof.

The temples, dating from the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE (Dentzer 1985: 79–80), faced north or east. Sources of architectural influence evident in the Nabatean temples in the Hauran are varied —the Mesopotamian and Iranian world (Hachlili 1975: 98–99), the Hellenistic-Nabatean traditions of the region, and even Herodian construction in Jerusalem (Dentzer-Feydy 1986).

The cultic complex at Si'a on the slopes of the Hauran Heights is the most impressive Nabatean monument in the region. The complex contains two courtyards and between them a richly-decorated monumental gate, a temple to the regional Tyche and a main temple to Ba'al Shamin (Millar 1993: 394–395; Burns 1999: 224–226). The cultic complex was built in stages —from

the second half of the 1st century BCE to the 2nd century CE. The site was abandoned in the 3rd century CE (Figs. 105–107).

The complex of Ba'al Shamin in Si'a is outstanding in its wealth of architectural decoration (Dentzer-Feydy 1986: 262–269). The motifs include delicate plants, vine scrolls and bunches of grapes, and human figures. The appearance of the grapevine in such a wide range of Nabatean architectural decoration in the Hauran leads to the conclusion that viticulture and the production of wine for export were among the basic agricultural and economic activities in the region (Peters 1977: 268).

In Si'a, Ba'al Shamin was "the god of the Nabatean king Malichus" (Bowersock 1983: 63–64), but inscriptions of the local people of Si'a have also been found, dedicated to the pagan gods of the Hauran. It seems likely that the temple complex of Si'a was shared by the varied population of the Hauran, of which the Nabateans were an important part. The end of Nabatean independence with the creation of the Province of Arabia brought about a growing Roman influence in the Hauran, and the construction of public buildings and urban planning were influenced by the Hellenistic-Roman traditions of the East. Temples were built for the worship of both the Imperial cult as well as pagan gods that had undergone a process of syncretism (Segal 2001). These temples, also built in settlements with an earlier Nabatean architectural tradition, emphasized the cult of the Roman emperor.