

Preface

The exhibition 'The Nabateans in the Negev' presents archaeological finds discovered in the Negev cities of Elusa, Nessana, Rehovot-in-the-Negev, Sobata, Oboda, and Mampsis, as well as at way stations and fortresses along the Nabatean 'Spice Route' — or more accurately, the 'Incense and Spice Route'— through the Negev Desert and the Arava Valley. The remains uncovered at these Nabatean sites, along with finds attributed to the Nabateans, revealed in neighboring countries, are evidence of their prosperity and economic success resulting from their position as middlemen in the incense and spice trade, especially during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Their economic success influenced their culture and way of life — converting them from their nomadic traditions to life in permanent settlements and cities. Later, during the Byzantine period, the Nabateans abandoned their pagan beliefs and became Christians, as evidenced by the remains of magnificent churches in their cities. The present exhibition concentrates on the material culture from the Nabatean sites in the Negev and the Arava, and does not deal with Nabatean architectural remains.

The scarcity of written sources — which leaves many questions concerning the Nabateans unanswered — coupled with the impressive remains of their material culture uncovered in the desert cities, especially Petra in Jordan, has inspired the imagination of generations. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israeli youth were captivated by the mysterious 'Red Rock'— Petra, and risked their lives just to view the wonders of this place. Consequently, it was forbidden to play the song 'The Red Rock' (words by Haim Hefer, tune Yohanan Zarai), on the radio for fear that it would inspire additional young people to endanger their lives. Even today, after many years of research, a veil of mystery still surrounds the Nabateans, and scholars are in disagreement over various aspects of Nabatean history, including the question of their ethnicity, the circumstances surrounding their conversion to Christianity, the reasons for their sudden appearance on the stage of history in the second half of the first millennium BCE, and their disappearance in the second half of the 1st millennium CE.

When dealing with the Nabateans of the Negev, one cannot but be impressed by the outstanding work of Prof. Avraham Negev, scholar of Nabatean archaeology. Avraham Negev, Professor Emeritus of the Archaeological Institute of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, devoted most of his years of research to the study of the Nabateans — their history, language,

inscriptions, coins, pottery, art, and architecture. *Masters of the Desert*, his book on Nabatean culture, expresses his great appreciation for the Nabateans. (At present, Negev is working on another book which will summarize his research of the Nabatean cities in the Negev.) In this book, one encounters not only his respect for the Nabateans and their culture, but also his deep identification with them. The fruit of years of research, including many years in the Negev itself, the work is devoted to revealing the hidden secrets of this culture. He writes, for example: "I first met the Nabateans towards the end of my academic studies, when I was busy with my thesis on Jewish symbols in the Second Temple Period. I was particularly bothered by the question of the existence of a definitive Jewish art. I was attempting to study the ways in which cultural influences are absorbed, a topic very difficult in itself. I assumed at the time that if I could find a people who appeared on the stage of history in a relatively late period, from a completely different environment from that to which they arrived, it would facilitate this research. It was natural that I would alight upon the Nabateans, who apparently fulfill these conditions. From that day, I have never left the Nabateans for a single day" (Negev 1983: 83). He also writes: "The main difficulty in locating sites and structures and their identification at Elusa lies in the thick layers of sand and dust which cover the site and in the few visible remains. However, with time I learnt to understand the special anatomy of this place, and on numerous occasions I was able to feel beneath my feet the beating heart of the buildings" (*ibid.*: 19).

Among his students, who through him became acquainted with the Nabatean culture and became scholars of Nabatean history themselves, was the curator of the present exhibition, Dr. Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom. Renate completed her studies from Bachelor's degree to Doctorate at the Archaeological Institute of the Hebrew University, gained appointment on the teaching staff, and participated in the Institute's archaeological expeditions and research of the Nabatean sites at Sobata, Mampsis, Oboda, and Rehovot-in-the-Negev. The present exhibition and the accompanying catalog bring together Prof. Avraham Negev and Dr. Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom and their studies, along with the present generation of archaeologists and their discoveries in the Nabatean sites of the Negev and the Arava.

From a personal point of view, the exhibition 'Nabateans in the Negev' and the coins presented here are a return to the end

of the 1960s, when I was a student of Prof. Avraham Negev at the Archaeological Institute, and through him became acquainted with the wonderful culture of the Nabateans. Professor Negev assigned me the task of studying 2,000 coins from a hoard of 10,500 discovered at Mampsis. My modest contribution to Nabatean research was the identification of a small group of Roman coins on which appear Nabatean inscriptions, evidence that these coins were first minted as Nabatean coins. The coins date from the reign of the Nabatean king Rabbel II (70–106 CE). After the annexation of the Nabatean kingdom by the Roman Empire (106 CE), the coins fell into Roman hands and were re-used for the minting of Roman coins (Negev 1971a: 115-119).

In 1976, the Israel Museum mounted the exhibition 'Nabatean Coins,' curated by Prof. Ya'akov Meshorer, whose doctoral dissertation was devoted to a study of Nabatean coinage (Meshorer 1975). Professor Meshorer has also contributed an article on Nabatean coinage in the present catalog of the exhibition in the Hecht Museum.

We express our gratitude to all those who participated in the preparation of the exhibition, especially to its curator, Dr. Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom, who helped to realize the idea of an exhibition on the subject of the Nabateans.

We also wish to express our appreciation to the scholars who contributed to the catalog of the exhibition, especially Prof. Avraham Negev. Thanks are due the staff of the Israel Antiquities Authority: Hava Katz, Michael Sabanne, Adi Ziv-Sodri, Orit Shamir, Donald Ariel, Yigal Israeli, Tali Erickson-Gini, and Rachel Bar-Natan. We would like to make special note of the wonderful cooperation of the Antiquities Authority staff, who were so excited with the opportunity to exhibit to the general public the Nabatean material uncovered in the excavations.

We are further grateful to the Antiquities Authority for putting at our disposal their important collection of finds, including textiles, basketry, and large amounts of pottery, originating in the salvage excavations carried out by Dr. Rudolph Cohen at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

We also wish to thank Beni Sekay, Hillel Geva, Dr. Eilat Mazar and Daphna Zoran of the Archaeological Institute of the Hebrew University; and the Israel Museum and its curators: Yael Israeli, Dudi Mevorach, and Dr. Haim Gitler. Finally we thank the Department of Museums of the Israel Ministry of Education and the management of the Hecht Foundation.

Ofra Rimon

Director and Curator of the Museum