

## SYMPOSIUM ON PETRA & THE CARAVAN CITIES

by  
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Thanks to financial support from UNESCO, the Department of Antiquities was enabled to organize a symposium at Petra from September 23-28, 1985, in cooperation with the Iconographic Lexicon of Classical Mythology (LIMC). As was outlined by its General Secretary, Professor Lilly Kahil, this Foundation has for a number of years been active in bringing together an exhaustive documentation on the full range of Greco-Roman divinities which is to be published in seven volumes. Three magnificently illustrated volumes have already appeared from Artemis Verlag in Zürich.

His Royal Highness Crown Prince Hassan was the patron of this scholarly gathering and his inaugural address impressed the audience with his extensive knowledge of Nabatean civilization.

The overall theme of the symposium was "The Local Identity of the Caravan Cities and Hellenistic and Roman Impact on Cultic Representation." This general theme included 4 sub-themes:

- 1- Cult Building and Sculpture
- 2- Tombs and Funeral Iconography
- 3- Mythological Painting and Mosaics
- 4- Representation of Deities on Coins.

By proposing this subject to oriental scholars my objective was to rejuvenate the old theme of caravan cities treated in 1932 by Rostovtzeff, but in a new perspective, that of religious iconography. In studying the representation of the divinities, the participants demonstrated how these cities, which had been created by caravan traffic and inhabited by a majority of Arabs, reacted to Hellenistic and Roman influences in order to create the images of their divinities. The chronological range of researches extended from the 4th century before our era to the 4th century A.D. However some of the papers presented went beyond this chronological limit. For example Professor Iannis Sakalarakis, the director of the Herakleion

Museum, Crete, presented a paper on the ivories discovered in the grotto of Ida in Crete and demonstrated Syro-Phoenician influences on them. Professor Saleh Hamarnéh of the University of Jordan also gave a paper which dealt with the iconography of Arab idols in the pre-Islamic epoch. The phenomena of acculturation and international exchanges were at the centre of the scientific discussion.

It is certainly not possible in this short note to summarize the presentations of thirty specialists coming from 17 different countries, including a number of Arab countries. We will have to be satisfied with indicating that the caravan cities of Petra, Palmyra, Hatra as well as the caravan cities of Central Arabia, Hegra, Qaryat al Fau and Teima had an important place in the scholarly communications. Dr. Margaret Lyttelton, known for her studies on Hellenistic baroque art presented an excellent study of the Khazneh sculptures, which she places as early as the time of Arteas Philhellene (87-62 B.C.). Even if one is not in agreement with this dating, one cannot fail to be struck by the force of her arguments for assigning the most beautiful monument in Petra to the time of the Nabataean kings. While G.W. Bowersock and Tran Tam Tihn dealt with the iconography of Dusares, Ph. Hammond attempted to show that the goddess of the Winged Lions Temple at Petra must be related to the cult of Isis and its iconography created on the model of the Egyptian goddess. Two statuettes found in the temple do represent the mourning Isis. However the betylic relief with the inscription "goddess of Hayyan son of Nybat" is of south-Arabian origin and is related to the representation of al-'Uzza, as I noted in *ADAJ*, 23 (1979), pp. 194-197. The riches of a popular religious iconography were presented by the papers of P. Parr and Ingemarie Parlasca on the terra-cotta figurines found at Petra. In my own communication I have shown the importance of

the cult of the god(ess) Aktab-Kutbä, the Assyrian Nabu and the Hermes-Mercury of the Greeks and the Romans, as well as his (her) different iconographic representations.

Palmyra occupied an important place in the iconographic researches thanks to the papers of K. Parlasca on "Roman Elements in the Funerary Art of Palmyra" and of A. Bounni on "The Sanctuary of Nabu at Palmyra". A serendipitous blend between the Syrian, Roman and Hellenistic traditions emerged. However one of the most interesting themes was that of "The Supreme God of Palmyra", brilliantly treated by J. Starcky. The evolution of the religion of this caravan city towards belief in a single unique god is a revealing experience of the path leading the human spirit towards monotheism.

Participants in the Symposium were extremely interested in and impressed by the excavations conducted in Saudi Arabia at Qaryat al-Fau in the Nejd by Professor A. Ansari of King Saud University in Riyadh. It is astonishing to find bronze statuettes of Egyptian-Roman deities which had been transported to this desert commercial center by caravaners. This is a world which is now opening to archaeology and ongoing research is promising.

In his report on "The God Aššrbel at Hatra", B. Agoula, an Iraqi scholar, treated the iconography of this deity in the caravan city of Hatra, which had been influenced by Parthian Iran.

E. Will presented a synthesis on "Seats of Gods, altars and shrines in Semitic sanctuaries of Hellenistic and Roman times". According to him, the *adyton* of the Roman temples in Syria is a variant of the *motab* (platform) of the Nabataean temples at Petra, W. Ramm and Kh. Dharih. In Lebanon, the *cippus*, a central pillar provided with niches, was probably created in Baalbeck-Heliopolis, while the *naiskoi* or small shrines, well known at Amrit, Tyrus, Sidon and the Punic world are probably of Egyptian origin. As a conclusion, Will states that the monuments under discussions are not of bedouin origin and cannot be linked with the caravan cities. He considers the Syrian area as the

centre of these cultic monuments. However, in the opinion of the writer, the *motab* which provides a podium for the sacred baetyl is an Arabian creation since it is well attested in South-Arabia as early as the 5th century B.C. In the same sphere of ideas, J.-M. Dentzer demonstrated in his paper the connection between the Greco-Roman *naiski* of the Hauran and the *qubbah* or domed tent.

Although not directly related to the Caravan Cities, the report of M. Fantar on the funeral monuments of Tunisia from the 4th to the 2nd century B.C., showed the similarities between the funeral architecture and iconography in the Punic and Oriental world. It was also most interesting to find in Classical Greece aniconic steles, which can be paralleled by the Nabataean *nefesh* as demonstrated by N. Moutsopoulos of the University of Salonique. Other funeral monuments of 'Palmyrenian' origin in Rumania were presented by E. Condurachi. To sum up the cultural ties between the East and West, N. Yalouris presented the Symposium with a brilliant study on the "Mythological connections between Greece and Near Western Asia".

A field trip to the site of Udhruh, east of Petra was led by A. Killick, a participant in the Symposium, who had also presented a paper on his recent excavations. Another field trip was also organised to the Nabataean site of Kh. Dharih in W. Hasa under the guidance of F. Villeneuve who had also lectured on his recent discoveries.

This brief summary shows the great interest of the communications which were often followed by enthusiastic discussions. In the opinion of all the participants, this Symposium was a great success thanks to the variety and importance of the themes discussed. It indicated clearly how in all cases the caravan cities were not only centre of commerce and trade but were above all foci of diffusion and cultural exchange.

It is hoped that the Department of Antiquities will be able to publish the proceedings in the near future.

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