

## Nabataean Identity and Ethnicity: The Epigraphic Perspective

The “Nabataeans” are normally discussed on the basis of literary (Josephus and Strabo) and archaeological evidence. But neither material culture nor the observations of foreigners or outsiders is necessarily a good index to the nature of Nabataean society. The best sources for Nabataean identity are epigraphic. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that very few if any Aramaic “Nabataean” texts identify the engraver as a “Nabataean”. In addition, the “Nabataean” texts in the Ḥawrān are considered by some to be merely the product of “Nabataeanized” local Arabs, and the Sinai texts merely representative of a population that had adopted the “Nabataean” script, since none are dated to the reigns of the Nabataean kings. In contrast, writers of Safaitic texts identify themselves as “Nabataeans” and Thamudic texts have embedded in them elements of Nabataean culture. This raises the question just who is a “Nabataean”?

“Ethnicity” has become the hobgoblin of trendy academic minds. As Fergus Millar has noted, in more sympathetic terms, “the question of ethnicity, of what group people believe themselves to belong, has emerged as the fundamental issue of the late twentieth century” (1993b: 23). This search for “ethnicity” that has become the preoccupation of the current generation hardly existed at all in the previous generation. It is primarily a product of post WWII American urban sociologists who first began to employ the term with any degree of profuse regularity. Nor is it always shared by the practitioners of the profession. Clifford Geertz, a leading American cultural anthropologist, has observed that “All ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession” (1973: 346). On the other side of the Atlantic, there is even some agreement among British anthropologists. Edward Leach considers all ethnography “fiction,” since cultures are never static (1989: 44-45), and Benedict Anderson (1983) warns that “ethnic groups” may merely be “imagined communities that exist purely in the mind of the ethnographer. If cold hard scientific evidence is sought, we need only be reminded that even DNA analy-

sis of the small three million year old Australopithecine hominid found in Ethiopia we fondly call “Lucy”, or of the Neolithic iceman donned “Ötzi” discovered in the Alps just within Italy near the Austrian border, or of the 4,000 year old Tarim Mummies on the rim of ancient China, or the remains of the XVIII dynasty royal family in Egypt, have failed to produce any consensus among geneticists. Even if we had “Nabataean” samples of DNA, we would still be in a quagmire in regard to determining “ethnicity”.

For the Nabataeans, therefore, any search for a common ancestry and ethnically pure race is hopelessly futile and I am not overly optimistic of achieving much more than clarifying perhaps some of the issues. Of course, the ancient Greek sources of the early Roman imperial era - Diodorus, Strabo, and Josephus — are all united in designating the Nabataeans as “Arabs”, but Nabataean origins are murky (Milik 1982; Knauf 1989; Graf 1990; cf. Millar 1987 and 1993a). One interesting clue is provided by Strabo, who says that “The Idumaeans are Nabataeans, but owing to a sedition they were banished from there, joined the Judaeans, and shared in the same customs with them” (*Geog.* 16.2.34 [760]). This may seem like idle speculation, but archaeology has added substance to his observation. Since the 1960s, ostraca inscribed in Aramaic from Idumaea have been accumulating, and they now comprise a corpus of close to a thousand (Eph’al and Naveh 1996; Lemaire 1996; Lozachmeur and Lemaire 1996). They mainly date to the fourth century BC, cutting right across Persian administration and the Hellenistic monarchies ushered in with the conquests of Alexander the Great (Eph’al 1998). What is significant for our purposes is the striking number of Arabic names in the documents. Many of the theophoric names are composed with Qôš, and Arabic verbs, with the traditional final -w ending typical of the Nabataean onomasticon, as are many of the names. As a result, André Lemaire has remarked that “la culture iduméenne se rapprochant peut-être de la culture

nabatéenne.” (Lemaire 1996: 142). The province of “Idumaea” was probably created by Persia sometime around 385, after the “Arab” king sided with the Egyptians (Diodorus 15.2.4). With the dissolving of the Qedarite confederacy, the province of Idumaea offered a buffer to any further Egyptian affront. The Arabs and Edomites that appear in the ostraca are estate owners delivering wheat and barley as taxes to the garrison storehouses, and an integral part of the sedentary culture, not nomads (cf. Strabo 16.2.2. [749]). Henceforth, it is the Nabataeans that appear in the sources. Epigraphy, in essence, in one full swoop, has discarded all the speculation about the existence of Strabo’s “Nabataeanized Edomites”. The connections now seem fruitful and less venturesome.

Of course, it is fundamental to ask what the Nabataeans say about themselves. Unfortunately, we have no contemporary Nabataean writer in antiquity to offer such a perspective. In the absence of any Nabataean literary sources, we are then forced to turn to their inscriptions, but here again we encounter difficulties. There are thousands of what we call today ‘Nabataean’ inscriptions, but a close inspection of the corpus reveals problems both in content and script. As a result, it has been argued that what we call ‘Nabataean inscriptions’, the ‘Nabataean script’ and the ‘Nabataean Aramaic language’ are purely modern paleographical and linguistic categories that are “clearly anachronistic and highly misleading” (Macdonald 1999: 255). For example, it is pointed out that the script of the Sinai texts has “its own characteristics and internal development, which is distinct from that of the Nabataean heartland around Petra. It is therefore misleading to refer to them as ‘Nabataean’ and to use them as evidence for ‘the Nabataeans’”. It would be wiser to return to the practice of earlier scholars and refer to them as ‘Sinaitic’.” As a result, we are warned about “the danger of treating as a homogeneous corpus all the inscriptions which we label ‘Nabataean’” (Macdonald 2000: 47). But Starcky long ago observed that there existed several varieties of Aramaic script in southern Syria and Transjordan that were unlike that of the Nabataean chancellery at Petra, yet he only saw this as a mere reflection of “conservatism”, not that the authors were not Nabataean (1966: 930). No one would expect all Nabataean inscriptions to be uniform across its entire expansive territory. Differences in script are to be anticipated. The more fundamental reservations about identifying inscriptions in “Nabataean script” as Nabataean are based on the *content* of the inscriptions, rather than script or language. From this perspective, it is the failure of their authors to date their inscriptions by the reigns of Nabataean kings or to designate themselves as “Nabataeans” that really excludes them from being considered “Nabataean” in the ethnic sense of the word (Macdonald 1998: 186). In addition, many of the texts date after the annexation, and

are considered Nabataean only because their authors use the Nabataean script, not because “any definite link with the Nabataeans can be established” (Healey 2000: 17). The objections about the nature of the corpus suggest a more intensive inspection of what we call ‘Nabataean’ inscriptions is needed. Let us then examine briefly the number, distribution, date, and content of the Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions, before taking on the possible “ethnicity” of the Nabataeans.

### Number and Distribution

When the “Nabataean” section of the *Corpus Inscriptionem Semiticarum* was published in 1989 and 1906, the number of recorded inscriptions was 3076 (namely nos. 157-3233). This number has more than doubled during the past century. If we eliminate stray finds, the distribution of the inscriptions would suggest that the contours of the Nabataean realm extended from the southern Ḥawrān to the Ḥijāz, and from the eastern borders of Egypt to Jawf in the middle of the Syrian-Arabian desert. But instead of an equal distribution across this expansive territory, what we find are disparities in regard to their disbursement.

*Ḥawrān*: slightly over 30 texts were published in *CIS* (no. 161-193), and with the Princeton Expedition to Syria, Littmann (1914) quickly expanded the number to 107. After Milik and Starcky’s exploration in the region the number increased to 250 (Starcky 1985: 167) and with more recent additions the number now is approximately 300 known texts (MacAdam and Graf 1989; Nehmé 1998; Khairy 2000; Graf and Sa’eb forthcoming).

*Northern Jordan*: Only a handful are known from places like Rihāb, Jarash, Mādabā, Zizya and Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (*CIS* nos. 194-196; Savignac; Milik, Macdonald). As Starcky has observed, Nabataean texts are strangely rare between the Ḥawrān and al-Karak in an area where Nabataean presence is clear from literary sources and archaeological evidence (1985: 179). This virtual lacuna should remind us that Nabataean presence does not always yield inscriptions and that mere silence should not be construed as evidence.

*Petra and Southern Jordan*: Only 115 Nabataean texts were known from the vicinity of the capital at the beginning of the twentieth century (*CIS* nos. 349-464), but Milik and Starcky’s new corpus lists 974 Nabataean inscriptions from Petra alone (*apud* Nehmé 1997; cf. Milik and Starcky 1975) and a few notable additions in the vicinity were made recently by A. Negev (1971), N. Khairy (1981), P. Hammond (1986), and J.-M. Roche and F. Zayadine (1999). Further south, in the Ḥismā, Savignac published a number from the area of Wādī Ramm (1933;

1934), and additional texts were published by William Jobling, Fawzi Zayadine, and myself. As a result, there are now well over one thousand texts in the Nabataean heartland between Petra and 'Aqaba.

*Al-Ḥijāz*: The *CIS* published 151 texts (nos. 197-348), but Jaussen and Savignac (1904-09) expanded this to about 390. Additions have been steadily made since by Milik and Starcky (1970), Sulaiman al-Theeb (1993; 1994; 1997; 2002), John Healey (1993), and myself (forthcoming), so that the number is now approaching 800 published texts with many more reported and yet to be recorded. Most of these are concentrated in the region of Madā'in Šāliḥ, the commercial and military outpost of the Nabataean kingdom (Negev 1976). Many more are obviously scattered in the northwest of the Peninsula between Madā'in Šāliḥ and 'Aqaba that need to be recorded.

*An-Naqab/Negeb*: Not a single text was known at the time *CIS* was published, but Jaussen and Savignac (1905) found some graffiti at 'Abdah (Oboda) and during C.L. Wooley and T.E. Lawrence's survey of the region, a text was found at Khalāṣa (Elusa) that was written in an archaic Nabataean script. Later, F. Rosenthal published a number of Nabataean texts from Nessana (1962), and Avraham Negev (1961; 1963; 1986; cf. Naveh 1967) has added even more to this number from his archaeological explorations at Oboda. The text found at Elusa by Wooley and Lawrence is possibly the earliest Nabataean text known, with a date ascribed to it sometime in the early second century BC (Cantineau 1932: 43-44). Another text on a pebble from Khirbat/Horvat Raḡiq, 10km northwest of Beersheba, contains an incantation that is in a cursive script that Naveh (1979) regards as dating to about 100 BC. A few more have been found scattered in the desert south of the Petra-Gaza road, so that all total, the number from the Nabataean cities in the Negeb is less than three or four dozen.

*Sinai*: *CIS* published 2744 inscription (nos. 490-3233), but this number has expanded even more. Avraham Negev added about 70 new ones (1977a; 1977b), and many more still are unpublished. A comprehensive survey of the Sinai directed by Michael Stone's project catalogued all the inscriptions and graffiti in the Sinai. This database contains 7500 inscriptions from over 360 sites. Slightly more than half of these are Nabataean inscriptions, numbering 3851 inscriptions (Stone 1994: 208).

*Egypt*: Littmann and Meredith published 83 from the eastern desert (1953-54), and only a few have been added since (Briquel-Chatonnet and Nehmé 1997). The most important of these are the texts from Tall ash-Shuqafiyah

found near the Suez canal and dating to 77 and 36 BC, the later according to the reigns of Cleopatra VII and the Nabataean king Malichus I (Fiema *et al.* 1990).

No attempt has been made in this rather rough survey to mention every single Nabataean inscription discovered since the publication of *CIS*. My purpose has simply been to provide rather an impression of the general number of known texts and their distribution. In total, if my calculations are correct, there are now more than 6000 Nabataean inscriptions recorded, including several dozen found in outlying regions of the Arabian peninsula, the Levant, and across the Mediterranean, as far as Rome (Roche 1996). More importantly, the disparities in their distribution should be apparent. Those from the region of Petra and southern Jordan are as many as those from the Ḥawrān, Northern Transjordan and the Ḥijāz put together. But the number of all the 'Nabataean' inscriptions from the region stretching from southern Syria to the Ḥijāz shrink in comparison to those from Cisjordan, the Negeb, Sinai and Egypt, where over 60% of all known 'Nabataean' inscriptions are located. In fact, those from the Petraean heartland constitute less than 15% of the total number of the entire corpus, whereas the Sinai constitutes almost two-thirds of all the known inscriptions that we call 'Nabataean' in spite of the fact that it was never of strategic importance to the Nabataean kingdom. These facts should demonstrate just how fragmentary and unrepresentative the information is about Nabataea if we restrict it to inscriptions alone. This observation is not to diminish these epigraphic sources as our fundamental and primary source for insight into the nature of the Nabataean realm. It just reveals how limited a view we have about the Nabataeans if we use the royal capital as the epigraphic measuring stick. In addition, any observation drawn from Nabataean inscriptions must deal with a similar disparity in regard to their chronology.

### Chronology

As we have seen, any analysis of the Nabataean epigraphic corpus that proceeds purely on the basis of a quantitative and distribution basis will be flawed. But from a diachronic perspective, it is clear even more how distorted the corpus is by just isolating the inscriptions dated precisely to the reign a Nabataean king (see the convenient list in Wenning 1987: 305). For example, the Petra inscriptions begins in 96/5 BC, but end in AD 28/9, during the reign of King Aretas IV, a span of about 125 years. Not a single inscription from Petra is dated precisely to a year in the reigns of the kings afterward Aretas IV nor are any dated after the provincial era of AD 106. In contrast, the seven dated texts in the Negeb begin in 8/7 BC and end in AD 204/5, but all of them are from one site, Oboda. In similar fashion, the dated texts in the

Ḥawrān begin in 51 BC and extend to AD 148, also almost two centuries. In the Ḥijāz, the first dated inscription is 2/1 BC and the last is AD 356, the largest time span of any area, a period of more than 350 years. In contrast, the first dated Sinai inscription is not until AD 150/151, and the last in AD 267/8, a period of just over a century, in spite of the fact that the majority of inscriptions are found in the region. Those in the eastern desert of Egypt begin in AD 226 and end in AD 266, just a forty year period, perhaps accounting for their small number. But all of this is misleading. The approximately 100 texts dated to specific years constitute less than 2% of the total in the corpus and about a third of these are concentrated at Madā' in Ṣāliḥ in the Ḥijāz (note the five additions of Al-Theeb 1994 and 2002: nos. 12, 190 and 134). Nevertheless, this simple diachronic approach adds to the irregularities and complexities already encountered in the Nabataean corpus.

Of course, there are numerous texts dated to the reign of a Nabataean king but lacking a specific year of his reign. In addition, the precisely dated texts provide the basis for determining the paleographical evolution of the 'Nabataean' script from the second century BC to the fourth century AD (Gruendler 1993). Such relatively dated texts also offer a challenge to the chronological picture just described. Several examples will suffice. In the Damascus Museum, Milik discovered an inscription in archaic script probably from Buṣrā (Bostra) that mentions a "King of Nabataea" whose name is lost. He originally dated this text to the end of the second century BC (*apud* Starcky 1966: 930), but later assigned it to the middle of the third century BC (*apud* Starcky 1985: 167-168). This would make it the earliest Nabataean inscription known. Laila Nehmé informs me it is soon to be published in *Hauran II*. If Milik's dating is accepted, it means our earliest texts come from the Negeb and the Ḥawrān, not the Petraean heartland. Secondly, although the Sinai inscriptions are normally assigned to the period after the annexation, not all fit into this pattern. For example, in Wādī al-Mukattab, there is a graffito inscribed "Peace, 'ABD-ḤRTT, hipparchos, and GRMW his slave" (*CIS* 790). Savignac and Starcky suggested that this hipparchos may be identified with the 'ABD-ḤRTT who was "head of the military camp" at Petra in the reign of Aretas IV (1957: 203 n.1), but Starcky later observed that the script of the Sinai text was later, approximating that of the end of the first century AD, or beginning of the second century AD (1971: 158). Whatever the case, the Sinai text dates to the pre-annexation period, at least half a century before the first explicitly dated Sinai text. Finally, all the specifically dated texts from the region of Petra date before the annexation, but the paleographical tendencies of some clearly suggest a date after the annexation (e.g. Roche and Zayadine 1999: no. 3, has a late y),

so it is clear that Aramaic continued to be used in the region of the old Nabataean capital after the establishment of the Roman province. In essence, the imbalance of information is not assisted by the additional texts.

### Cult and Culture

The basic problem remains that in none of the Aramaic texts we call 'Nabataean' does an individual use the self ascription "Nabataean" as an ethnicon. However, several people identify themselves as 'Nabataean' in other scripts and languages. In a Palmyrene Aramaic text dated to AD 132 (*CIS* 3973), a man from the tribe of Rwh at Umm al-Jimāl identifies himself as a "Nabataean" (*nbtv*). In three Safaitic North Arabian texts, the authors also identify themselves as "Nabataeans" (*CIS* V 2820, *CSNS* 661; and Macdonald, Al-Mu'azzin and Nehmé 1996: 444-449, nos. B1-B2). All are from what is considered normally the periphery or outside Nabataea (Macdonald 1998: 185) and have been assigned a date after the annexation, when the Nabataean state had vanished (Healey 2000: 9). This is not quite accurate, as Safaitic texts cannot be dated that precisely, and most seem to have flourished in the two centuries before the annexation, not after. Nevertheless, these texts seem to offer the desired 'ethnicon' missing from Nabataean Aramaic texts. The trouble is that they are in the wrong script and language, so for some the use of the 'ethnicon' becomes questionable (Macdonald 1998: 186). But this assumption implies that there is one culture, one religion, one language, and one script in the Nabataean realm. Several examples suggest otherwise and indicate the diversity of cultures and languages that existed in the Nabataean kingdom.

*Ḥawrān*: The tradition Syrian deity Ba'alshamīn appears in Nabataean texts throughout southern Syria, as should be expected. At Si', Nabataean and Greek inscriptions indicate the 'Ubaishat tribe was responsible for the erection of a temple, which was the center for pilgrimages by the local inhabitants. Just 20km east of Buṣrā and at Summaqiyāt, about 15km from Buṣrā, other dedications were made to Ba'alshamīn (Littmann 1914: no. 14). None of this is surprising, as Ba'alshamīn is the traditional local deity of the Ḥawrān. But this presumably 'foreign god' to the heartland of Nabataea (Teixidor 1977: 84; Gawlikowski 1990: 2670; Healey 2001: 124) appears in a dedication at Wādī Mūsā from the reign of Aretas IV which refers *l b'lsmn 'lh mnkw*, "to Ba'alshamīn the god of Manku" (J.T. Milik *apud* Khairy 1981: 25-26). Healey suggests this may be just a dedication by a Ḥawrānī visiting Petra (2001: 126), but there is no indication of such in the text, which provides the most detailed inscription of the royal family known. What is clear is that Ba'alshamīn was adopted as an official Nabataean deity by the lesser individual than the Nabataean king Mal-

ichus (I?) sometime before the reign of Aretas IV. This text also has led to the suggestion that a major temple to Ba'alshamin existed at ancient Gaia, the modern Wādī Mūsā (Tarrrier 1990), and Zayadine even suspects that Ba'alshamin may be associated with the Zeus Hypistos at Qaṣr al-Bint within the royal city (*apud* Healey 2001: 126). Further south at Wādī Ramm, Ba'alshamin also appears in a text alongside of and with Dushara-A'ra of Bostra (Savignac 1934: 576-577, no. 19). Although Ba'alshamin does not appear in the Ḥijāz, a native from Salkhad in the Ḥawrān has left us his graffito near Madā'in Ṣāliḥ and possibly carried his Syrian god with him (JS 226). If the worship of Ba'alshamin is not indigenous to the Nabataeans, it certainly became adopted in Nabataea.

*Moab:* The Decapolis city of 'Ammān-Philadelphia must have a sizable Nabataean community, as finds of Nabataean fine-ware and coins ranging from Aretas IV to Rabbel II have been made throughout the old city (Harding 1946; Zayadine 1973: 25; Hadidi 1974: 82-85). The literary sources support this presence. Aretas III (85-63 BC) found the city a safe haven (Josephus, *BJ* 1.6.3 [128-130]) and later, around 32 BC, Herod the Great engaged the forces of Malichus I in a struggle near the city (*BJ* 1.19.5 [380-385]; *AJ* 15.5.4-5 [147-160]). Of importance is a Greek-Aramaic bilingual text discovered at Zizya just south of 'Ammān that is the product of a Hellenized 'Nabataean' by the name of 'Damos son of Hellen[os] son of Damos' who offered a dedication to a deity (Jaussen and Savignac 1909; JS Nab no. 392 = Greek 21; cf. *RES* 1284, and Gatier 1986: 180-181 no. 154). The Aramaic text is fragmented, but the Greek text identifies the deity as Ba'al-Pe'or, the traditional god of the Moabite region (cf. *Deut.* 4:3).

*Edom:* The anonymous deity implicit in the epithet Dushara — perhaps the 'one of (the) Sharāh (mountain range)' (but see Healey 1999 and 2001: 87-89) — has been identified as the regional god of Qōs (Knauf 1989: 59). This old Edomite deity is known primarily in the Nabataean period from Khirbat at-Tannūr (Starcky 1968; Healey 2001: 126-127), where a stone slab inscription contains a dedication to Qōs, the god of Ḥārawā, the mountain adjacent to the sanctuary (Savignac 1937: 408-409, no. 2; cf. Savignac and Starcky 1957: 215-217, and Milik 1958: 237-238). This text probably dates to the foundation of the temple in 7 BC, during the early years of the reign of Aretas IV (Roche 1999: 63). But the worship of the Edomite god Qōs was by no means restricted to his traditional locale. A Nabataean-Greek bilingual inscription on a basalt sculpture of an eagle from Buṣrā attests to his worship in the Ḥawrān (Milik 1957: 235-241, no. 3). There are also reflections in the Nabataean on-

omasticon that the worship of Qōs extended to other regions as well. A tomb at Hegra in AD 31 is for the son of *Qsntn* (*CIS* 209), and a *Qws'dr* appears in a Sinai graffito (*CIS* 923), and, of course, Qōs names are abundant in Idumaea in southern Palestine during the Persian and Hellenistic era (Lemaire 1996, *s.v.*; Eph'al 1998). Just as Ba'alshamin spread from the frontier to the Nabataean heartland, so Qōs spread from the Nabataean heartland to the periphery of the kingdom.

*Sinai:* The inscriptions of the Sinai have been characterized as the product of Bedouin who occupied the southern region of the peninsula after the annexation. Their inscriptions have been described as peculiar both in their execution and by their content: they contain no historical content, lack references to families, tribes, and clans, and are in mainly Arabic, not Aramaic (Teixidor 1998: 86). Numerous names in the Sinai onomasticon use the Arabic article 'l, and the word 'bn is used as opposed to Aramaic *br* in providing the patronym. As a result the 'Nabataean inscriptions' in the Sinai are not really considered 'Nabataean'. Starcky earlier proposed that many of the texts from around Wādī Firān were the product of an Arab tribe whose eponymous ancestor seemed to be Qainu (*qaynw*), whom he associated with the biblical Kenites who were from the eastern Negeb. During the Roman period, he further argued, they became Arabized (1979: 38). Support was found in their petitions to the god Al-Ba'ali (e.g. *CIS* 1479, 'l-b'ly), i.e. the Arabized form of 'Ba'al', the Caananite-Phoenician deity (Starcky 1979: 39-40; cf. Zayadine 1990: 158-165). In the Sinai texts, there also are frequent references to the priests of the god Tā' (*khn 'T'*, *CIS* 506, 766, 1748, etc.), and this same god Tā' appears in a Nabataean incantation text that is dated to about 100 BC, centuries earlier (Naveh 1979: 112-113, line 3). Other texts are also clearly earlier, such as those that invoke Dushara (*CIS* 912) and al-'Uzzā (*CIS* 611, 1236), the graffiti of 'Abd'lg, who was from Aila or 'Aqaba (1205), and 'Abd-Ḥrtt, a Nabataean cavalry commander (*CIS* 790) mentioned earlier. What is evident is that the Sinai corpus of about 4000 inscriptions is far more complex than assumed.

*Al-Ḥijāz:* In Saudi Arabia, in the central Ḥismā of the northwest of the peninsula, a temple was constructed by the Thamudic confederation in AD 166-169 during the reigns of the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, after a dispute had been settled by the governor of Arabia, Antistius Adventus. The temenos was dedicated under the governor Lucius Claudius Modestus. All of these actions are recorded in a bilingual Nabataean Aramaic-Greek dedication inscription on the lintel of the temple (Milik *apud* Parr *et al.* 1972: 54-57), which has been described as "a Nabataean building" (Parr *et al.*

1970: 219). But no mention is made in the 'Nabataean' text of the deity worshipped at the 'Nabataean' sanctuary. For this information, we must turn to another 'Nabataean' Aramaic dedication found at the temple by a "priest of 'Ilāhā, from [the tribe of] RBTW: 'fkl '[l]h' mn rbtw (Milik *apud* Parr *et al.* 1972: 58). It is not likely that 'Ilāhā ("the god") conceals the identity of the Nabataean royal god Dushara, but the name rather should be interpreted as a designation of "the Most High God" (as noted by Healey 2001: 24). A Thamudic text from the region even indicates that 'Ilāhā regards with favor the tribe of RBT: 'LH TR 'L RBT (Milik *apud* Parr *et al.* 1972: 58). All the Nabataean elements are here — language, script, and architecture — but they are the product of the venerated Thamudic confederation and a priest of one of the tribes for the anonymous high god.

These examples demonstrate just how much social diversity existed in the Nabataean realm. Rather than the Nabataean royal god Dushara, a wide array of local traditional deities are attested from the Ḥawrān to the Ḥijāz: Ba'alšamin, Ba'al-Pe'or, Qōs, Al-Ba'ly, Tā', and 'Ilāhā. In none of these texts do the authors utilize the self-designation or ascription, 'Nabataean', but they all reside within the Nabataean realm and use the script we call 'Nabataean'. As a consequence, rather than a single *ethnos*, these examples suggest that it is best to understand "Nabataean" as a political umbrella signifying a number of diverse Arab groups who were subjects of the Nabataean king. From this perspective, what we call "Nabataean" and understand as a ethnicon is better seen as the designation of a 'state' involving the integration of various indigenous Arab groups into a political framework or system. The evidence for this diversity defies any suggestion that the Nabataeans were a single race or ethnic group, supplanting or replacing the existing population of North Arabia, or even driving out of existence any counter traditions. Of course, it may be argued that the above examples are products of individuals who were not truly 'Nabataean', but this begs the question. As we have seen, there are individuals who designate themselves as 'Nabataean' who do not use the Aramaic script or language; in contrast, there are individuals who use the Aramaic script and language, worship other deities than Dushara, that we call 'Nabataean' but who appear to be merely the traditional local population who preceded the appearance of the Nabataeans. On this basis, it seems clear we must re-evaluate what we mean by the term 'Nabataean'. Rather than an 'ethnicon', it seems preferable to regard the term 'Nabataean' as primarily a political concept. If we seek what united these diverse elements into a unity, the answer is not race, but primarily politics, to some degree culture, and perhaps religion. Another unifying factor that may be considered is "language".

### Language

Since Theodore Nödelke's pioneering work in the nineteenth century, it has been generally assumed that the Nabataeans wrote publicly and officially in Aramaic, but used Arabic as their spoken language. Both Littmann (1914: xvii-xxiv) and Cantineau (1932: 177-180) accepted and even extended the argument. In fact, after categorizing the names in the Nabataean onomasticon, Littmann argued that an Arabic etymology was the case "in about nine tenths of all Nabataean names" (1914: xvii; cf. Al-Khraysheh 1986 and Negev 1991). Although the Aramaic script and language had led some scholars to assume that there was a strong Aramaean element in the Nabataean language, he argued that "The language of the common people among the Nabataeans was always Arabic" (xvii; cf. Healey 1989). For Littmann, "it is absolutely certain that the Nabataeans were Arabs by race and language" (1914: xxiv). Partially, this was based on the fact that in many names he discovered that "the forms of the classical Arabic verb are very well represented". This argument has been disputed, since the indisputably Arabic names, those "which are clearly of Arabic form, e.g. those containing the definite 'l or the word 'bn (as opposed to the Aramaic *br*) for 'son', or the 'f'al nominal form, occur very largely in the Sinai" (Macdonald 2000: 47; cf. 1999). But this ignores the fact that the 'f'al Arabic verbal paradigm is embedded in Greek names that appear in the Nabataean realm, not just in Aramaic texts.

Furthermore, there are a number of Arabic loanwords that appear in Nabataean Aramaic texts. It has been argued that the majority of these occur in North Arabian texts, at Rawwāfa and Hegra (Madā'in Šāliḥ) in the Ḥijāz, precisely: "where some Old Arabic and Ancient North Arabian influence is to be expected" (Macdonald 2000: 47; cf. 1998: 187; 2000; cf. O'Connor 1986). The exceptions were few, namely *sry'* at Petra (*CIS* ii 350/1), and the appearance of 'l ("tribe") a handful of times in the Ḥawrān. But this argument depends mainly on Cantineau's brief provisional listing of several dozen Arabic loanwords (1932: 171-172), which is now out-dated, given the subsequent accumulation of Nabataean texts. At the time of his observation, the only "Nabataeo-Arabic" text known was JSNab 17 at Madā'in Šāliḥ, dated to AD 267 (cf. Healey and Smith 1989), long after the Nabataean kingdom was annexed by Rome. More recently, however, a "mixed text" in which Aramaic and Arabic are used in different sections was found at 'Ayn 'Abdah/ 'En 'Avdat and dated approximately to about AD 100 (Negev 1986, and commented on extensively since with little agreement except that several phrases are in Arabic: Noja 1989; Bellamy, 1990; Hämeen-Anttila 1991; Kropp 1994; and Testen 1996). In addition, among the items to be added to Cantineau's list, there are terms he neglected to include (e. g., 'sl in *CIS* 350/3; cf. Lane 64, with Can-

tineau 1930: 64, and 1932: 67), a brief Arabic poetic phrase in a text from Eastern Egypt (Littmann and Meredith 1953: No. 23), and several dozen or more legal or lexical items in the Aramaic papyri from Nahal Hever near the Dead Sea (Yardeni 2000: 862-863), for which we are still awaiting final publication. This additional evidence suggests that “Old Arabic” is not just a late post-annexation intrusion into the Nabataean realm from the Arabian Peninsula, but a fundamental language used much earlier for political, legal and cultural affairs in the heartland of the Nabataean realm.

Furthermore, the assumption that ‘Old Arabic’ was “a purely spoken language” that appeared only sporadically in Nabataean written texts until the Byzantine era, and then only in “the script of the local language of prestige,” such as Aramaic and Greek (Macdonald 2000: 36; cf. 1998: 179), must now be rejected. Several recent discoveries have changed this picture. In 1996, Pierre Bikai discovered a lengthy pre-Islamic Thamudic North Arabian text at Mādabā, which, according to Fawwaz al-Khraysheh (2000), is written in a North Arabic dialect that approaches what we call “Classical Arabic”. The content of the inscription is also striking, as it is a petition to the God Ṣaʿb, known from Palmyrene and Nabataean Aramaic texts as the “fortune deity of the Nabataeans”. It no longer stands alone. In the same year, Michele Davieau relocated an inscribed stone at a Nabataean structure at West Uraynibah, just 15km southeast of Mādabā. It is even longer than the Mādabā text, comprising 250 characters in seven lines. What is equally impressive is that its content is remarkably similar to that of the Mādabā inscription, suggesting that a rhetorical tradition existed in the Arabic culture of the time that was far more advanced than previously anticipated (Graf and Zwetler forthcoming). Although written in the script we call ‘Thamudic E’, the language of the text exhibits a number of features that favor identifying it as Old or even Classical Arabic. It is also a petition to the Nabataean fortune deity Ṣaʿb. These are the first references to the god in pre-Islamic North Arabian texts. Nabataean cultural elements had already appeared in many other texts, including basileophoric names composed with royal dynastic names of the kings and queens of the Nabataean kingdom. In fact, the onomasticon of these new texts includes such royal names as ‘Abd-Mankū and ‘Obodat. Far more important, these texts indicate that the Old Arabic language was not restricted to the scripts of prestige in Nabataea nor limited to the southern parts of the kingdom. It is now clear that Old Arabic was used throughout the Nabataean realm and that we should look for Nabataeans not just in Aramaic texts, but in the more popular scripts of the time. In sum, if the Nabataeans of North Arabia are known as “Arabs” to their neighbors, and spoke “Arabic”, we should not hesitate any longer to call them “Arabs” ei-

ther.

One sign of this cultural interaction is a growing number of Aramaic-Old North Arabic bi-lingual texts that are beginning to emerge. The most important finds in Safaitic relate to the ‘Amrat tribe, mentioned frequently in Safaitic texts, and known to have resided in the Mādabā area in the Hellenistic period (Milik 1980; Al-Khraysheh 1995). Nabataean Aramaic-Thamudic “E” bilinguals have all been found recently in the northern Ḥismā in Jordan (Jobling 1990: 107-108; King 1990: 385, no. KJC 380; and another yet to be published by S. Farés-Drappeau and F. Zayadine). Previously, it had been assumed that Old North Arabian was a product of nomadic cultures and Aramaic of sedentary cultures (Macdonald 1993), but it is now clear that this distinction can no longer be maintained, at least with the same force. Some 400 Safaitic texts were recently found on Jabal Ḥawrān in southern Syria, scattered among the ancient villages of the region (Zeinadden 2000). In addition, as we have seen, finds of Thamudic “E” Old North Arabian texts have been found in the settled area of central Transjordan that have Nabataean cultural elements embedded in them, demonstrating the script is not “Hismaic” or purely ‘nomadic’. What is striking is that the Zizya Aramaic-Greek dedicatory bi-lingual dedicatory text to the old Moabite deity Baʿal-Peʿor is by a Hellenized man who is from the Nabataean center of ‘Ammān, whereas the Thamudic texts found further to the west in the sedentary region contain petitions to the Nabataean fortune deity Ṣaʿb. This suggests that the criteria for identifying who is a ‘Nabataean’ must be enlarged even if this means blurring our artificial ethnographical distinctions and creating more fuzziness in regard to our concepts of ‘ethnicity’.

### Conclusion

In sum, the epigraphic perspective provides a rather confusing mélange of peoples and cultures that we normally assign the label ‘Nabataean’. Although inscriptions alone may be regarded as a fairly narrow and limited basis for ascertaining Nabataean ‘ethnicity’, they offer a far more suitable perspective than more theoretical approaches. Whereas our literary sources — Diodorus, Strabo and Josephus — identify the Nabataeans generally as “Arabs”, they represent the perspective of ‘outsiders’. In contrast, the ‘inside’ evidence of ‘Nabataean’ inscriptions offers a more direct and accurate perspective. This conclusion may be discounted because of the imbalances and capricious nature of the corpus. The majority of texts are from the remote area of the Sinai, most of the dated texts are from the peripheral regions of the Ḥijāz and Sinai, and the earliest texts are from the Negeb and the Ḥawrān, not the Nabataean heartland. In addition, any search in the ‘Nabataean’ Aramaic corpus for those who identify themselves as Nabataeans is fruitless. Rather

than presenting us with a uniform culture, the Nabataean inscriptions present us with a picture of a pluralistic society and culture. The standard Nabataean trinity of Dushara, Allāt, and al-'Uzzā are replaced with a plethora of local and regional deities, some of whom even are integrated into the Nabataean pantheon and adopted by the kings. In contrast, the Old North Arabic texts provide us with many of the essential Nabataean elements we search for in Aramaic texts — self ascriptions or designations of individuals as 'Nabataean' petitions to the Nabataean fortune deity Ša'b, and traditional 'Nabataean' royal names. What this suggests is the possibility that 'Nabataea' is a far more variegated and diverse society and culture than we anticipated. Rather than seeking for a single Nabataean culture, restricted to a certain language or script, or a particular material culture represented by certain kinds of architecture and pottery, we must be open to a broader cultural diversity, and a political state that embraced and welded into its political and social fabric a variety of indigenous factors.

### Abbreviations

Abbreviations for pre-Islamic Arabian inscriptions cited in the text are those of Harding 1971: ix-xxxiii and Macdonald 1993: 389-391.

CIS = *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum*. Pars secunda, inscriptiones aramaicas continens, Tomus I/2 (Paris 1889): inscriptiones nabataeae = nos. 157-1471; and Tomus II: inscriptiones sinaïtiques (Paris, 1907) = nos. 1472-3233.

JS = A. Jaussen and R. Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie*. Vol. I, Paris: Leroux, 1909. Vol. II, Paris: Geuthner, 1914.

Lane = E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-1893.

RES = *Répertoire d'Épigraphie Sémitique*

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