

The Social-Cultural Impact of Trade Relations: The Case of The Nabataeans

Introduction

Trade was the backbone of the economy and power of the Nabataeans. The importance of trade for the Nabataeans cannot be overestimated, but we should not consider the Nabataeans as just traders. Various papers at this conference have emphasized aspects of the Nabataean economy, and these papers introduced new promising approaches in this field.

Concerning trade relations, we have a couple of sources. First: inscriptions from or about Nabataeans in the Mediterranean world (Wenning 1987: 22-23; Roche 1996). Some of them are found at well-known centres of international trade like Delos, Rhodes and Puteoli. None of the inscriptions provide a clear trade context from its contents but we know that Puteoli was the harbour of Rome for trade with the Near East. The second information is provided by Strabo, who reports what products were imported to Petra and what was locally produced (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 615-617). Unfortunately, the source Strabo used, Athenodoros from Tarsus, was not well informed — a great part of his statements are wrong.

The trade activities, the presence of Nabataean and other Near Eastern traders in the international trade in the Hellenistic and Early Roman period and especially the trade goods offer a long list of questions. What can be said about the Nabataean trade is summarized by Graf and Sidebotham (2003). Therefore, I would like to focus on the impact and the effect of the trade on the Nabataeans. This is a very complex question and it needs some simplification to go along with. When asking for the chance or the danger caused by the impact of the trade it concerns particular economic, social, and political changes which allowed the Nabataean society to develop themselves into a higher standard and to become part of a system of Near Eastern powers.

What is to be described is the effect of the profit the Nabataeans gained by their trade and are aspects of Nabataean society and history. Could wealth have been a factor which affected Nabataean identity and became a threat to Nabataean society or can wealth be seen as a great potential to strengthen Nabataean identity? How did the Nabataeans manage to overcome these problems in their greater world?

The Nabataeans gained a great knowledge of the trade routes, the areas, the people, and their cultures along these routes. We have to assume innumerable agreements and interactions. Nevertheless, I can see no direct influence caused by the trade relations of the Nabataeans. I do not understand Hellenization of the Nabataeans as an effect of trade relations with the Mediterranean world, but rather an embedded embodiment into of a greater development which we find all over the Near East. This development began as a process of sedentarization when the royal family and the Nabataean nobility decided to settle down at Petra around the middle of the second century BC and reached its full flowering in the period of Augustus (Schmid 2001a; Wenning 2003a). It is possible to follow the stages of the Hellenization of the Nabataeans and it is interesting that it resulted in a particularly Nabataean style and shaped culture.

The Early History of the Nabataeans

We know absolutely nothing about the origins of the Nabataeans. There is a possibility to connect the rise of the Nabataeans with the revolt of Euagoras of Salamis in 385/380BC who was supported by the Qedar, then the privileged Arabs in the incense trade. It seems that the Persians replaced the Qedar with the Nabataeans after the suppression of the revolt (Wenning forthcoming).

The description of the Nabataeans by the Greek

historian Hieronymus of Kardia, recorded in the works of Diodorus Siculus, is still the source for ideas about the early period of the Nabataeans (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 431-434, 439-453). Hieronymus refers to the situation of 311BC when Greek troops twice pillaged Petra, but failed to take their booty home. I agree with Fawzi Zayadine and others, who identify this Petra with Khirbat as-Sala further to the north (Zayadine 1999). Despite all problems in the report of Hieronymus and its interpretation four statements are essential to understand early Nabataean society:

1. The Nabataeans were a relatively small people of some 10.000, small in comparison with the large tribal league of the Qedar.
2. They were nomads, grazing camels and sheep. In technical terms they practiced an enclosed nomadism (Staubli 1991: 13-15).
3. They were tradesmen on the incense road on its upper part from Dedan to Gaza.
4. They became wealthy via the transport, protection and sale of trade goods, not only incense and spices, but many other goods.

The richness of the Nabataeans must have been become legendary in that period among other Arabs and the Greeks in the area. Already the Greek historian Arrian refers to the richness of the Arabs who defended Gaza together with the Persians when attacked by Alexander the Great. These Arabs are none other than Nabataeans. In 311BC the Nabataeans had established their part of the incense trade for some 60-70 years.

The effects of the trade privileges meant a great change for the Nabataeans. From an unknown small tribe they started to become the most important Arab power between Syria and South Arabia in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. We are not informed about changes in the social levels, but may assume that it happened. Probably the highest *shaykh* of the tribe was called *malik*, king, as were the rulers of the Qedar and other tribes. The oldest evidence for a Nabataean king may date back to the third century BC (Milik 2003). The Nabataeans secured supremacy in the region. But there was no reason for the Nabataeans to give up their nomadic way of life. Although there could have been early villages of the Nabataeans in Midian (Wenning 1987: 107; Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 279, 437) this does not conflict with nomadism, as nomadism still allows dimorphic societies (Staubli 1991: 14-15).

In that period there seems to have been no great influence on the Nabataeans by the Hellenistic world and the wider region. The early contacts of the Nabataeans with the Mediterranean world had no effect on the tribe itself. In the third century BC Palestine was ruled by the Ptolemies. There was no more interest by them to develop the country and even less to deal with the desert fringes and the nomads there. The Zenon Papyri illustrate the situation very well (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 363-367). It was only in the trade on the Red Sea that there was conflict between the Ptolemies and the Nabataeans (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 355-356, 437-438), but it seems that the Ptolemies either could not obtain the upper hand or they could develop their ports on the Red Sea significantly for maritime trade.

The situation in Palestine changed under Seleucid rule. Antioch IV tried to strengthen Palestine via colonies of veterans and the support of Greek cities. This became the background for the Hellenization of the area. This Hellenization seems to have been stronger than previously assumed (Thiel 2002). The results of this development became clearer by the late second century BC. These developments did not affect the Nabataeans as long as they did not come into conflict over their trade activities and trade routes. The archaeological evidence at Petra and at the sites of the Petra-Gaza-road illustrates the growing stabilization of Nabataean trade and trading posts. Notably Rhodian amphorae appear at Petra, Moje Awad, Oboda and Elusa since 220BC (Wenning 1987: 200-201, 132, 160, 141).

Sedentarization

Petra, near Wādī Mūsā, called *Reqem* by the Nabataeans, was established as a place to store goods at least from the third century BC onwards on the basis of archaeological evidence. But there are no indications for a larger group of people living here in that period. The finds up to the middle of the second century BC indicate storage facilities rather than a settlement. In any case, the place was used by the Nabataeans for a much longer time once their tribal nobility decided to settle down at Petra, making it the seat of the tribe. That happened about the third quarter of the second century BC on the basis of indirect indications such as more prevalent material culture, literary sources, and the fact that there was a requirement for the production of objects not needed by the Nabataeans before, like

their own coinage and pottery, all of which point to larger settled population. The place seems to be chosen so well that it remained the seat of the tribe and the centre of the Nabataeans until the end of the Nabataean kingdom in 106AD. I do not accept the hypothesis that the capital moved to Bosra under Rabbel II.

This new development could be called a dimorphic chiefdom (Staubli 1991: 15), if my reconstruction fits the evidence. It seems to be a normal process of nomadism that nomads are shaped by their environment and that a polity among the nomads, often the rich and influential group, otherwise called the nobility, tended to prefer a permanent stationing. Parts of the polity were still wandering nomads, other parts mostly stationed. The term 'semi nomads' seems not to describe the situation. The quality of living could have changed a bit, but the way of living did not change so quickly. Most Nabataeans still lived in tents. Petra remained for a long time a tent site. The excavations at az-Zanṭūr yielded fragments of painted wall plaster, dated by the excavators to the early first century BC, which indicate early buildings (Schmid 2001b: 432-433). Flavius Josephus mentioned the *basileia* of Aretas III at Petra (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 479). Therefore, the impression of a great tent site down to the middle of the first century BC, as stated in the past (Stucky 1996: 14-17), might need to be corrected as more data become available via excavations like the French excavations at the Temenos of the Qaṣr al-Bint.

There is an inscription from Priene in Asia Minor dated after 129BC, probably the earliest Greek source referring to our Petra. Moschion of Priene was honoured for leading various delegations of that city to different courts and places. Concerning Alexandria and Petra it is said he went to these places *kata tēn chreian*, because of the special interests of his city. It is suggested that Priene or Moschion himself was interested in trade relations with the Nabataeans. The reason for the delegation to Petra could have been the new situation. Probably Moschion was interested to see the new court, and of course he wanted to learn if Petra would still admit the same conditions as before. There must have been a lot of such contacts between the Nabataeans and the Greek world (cf. the inscriptions from Tenos and Rheneia; Wenning 1987: 23). Having a permanent seat to meet the authorities of Nabataean trade made these contacts much easier

than having market days at a few occasions, and possibly at different places. It is not known why the Nabataean king took residency at Petra, but such considerations may have contributed to his decision. Another reason may have been the expansion of the tribe, and especially growing wealth and political importance that encouraged the Nabataean nobility to display this wealth to other Arabs and the Greek world. The internal tribal factors which reflected status, like the increasing of herds or the accumulation of riches by individuals, were no longer sufficient for the Nabataeans as a great regional power. If this assumption is correct this meant a new conception of the Nabataeans and the first steps towards an integration into the Hellenistic world. Therefore, these changes were the second serious social-cultural impact of the incense trade.

Neither the Royal court itself nor the Hellenistic titles of the court administration were a new element because the position of a king was not a new concept. The tribal structure did not change but the first architectural elements appear: the new type of monumental family tombs with the famous rock-cut façades. These façades reflected the status of their owners. The many façades point to a greater group of rich Nabataeans, possibly even greater than the tribal nobility. At the beginning the façades are simple and equal in the decoration, indicating a kind of equality among the tribesmen, but later the owners tried to demonstrate their wealth by exaggeration of the decoration. The Crowstep tombs are believed to be the oldest façades. Their conception follows Eastern traditions, while the Step tombs are related to Hellenistic influence. That the Step tombs are about 50 years or even younger than the Crowstep tombs (Netzer 2003: 39-47) can be doubted. It cannot be excluded that both types are more or less contemporary and they could be dated to the end rather than to the middle of the second century. It is the period around 100BC which saw a great breakthrough of new developments: coins minted for the first time by the Nabataeans, pottery produced the first time by the Nabataeans, the oldest dated Nabataean inscription at Petra is from around these years and so on. The Aslah inscription of 96/95BC demonstrates that large rock-cut halls and triclinia can be dated into this period. The oldest tombs should not be placed too far from these developments.

How can the sudden need for such objects be explained? It can be assumed that after the nobility

settled down at Petra other parts of the tribe followed and Petra became gradually more and more populated. The loyalty of the tribesmen to the polity-group was very strong and can explain why not only the nobility settled down but large groups related to the polity as well. The same argument explains why the Nabataean dynasty was so strong. A greater population seems to be indicated by olive plantations that were traced by the az-Zanṭūr team around this period (Karg 1996: 356-357; Schmid 2001b: 431-432). Petra was now the centre of the tribe, not only in tribal and political matters, but especially in religious ones (Wenning 2003b and 2004b). The area around the valley of Petra is full of meeting places of sections of the tribe, clans and others (Dalman 1908).

A closer look upon the oldest real Nabataean products shows that in the beginning the Nabataeans imitated Hellenistic prototypes. That can be demonstrated by the oldest coins, those attributed to Aretas II, and by the oldest Nabataean pottery. The Nabataeans had no native tradition for such products. The coins of Aretas II are widespread and support the assumption of the expansion of the Nabataeans at this period (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 559). The coins seem to have been used primarily for internal purposes, as it was usual for local minted money and not in the overseas trade. The importance of pottery has been discussed by Stephan Schmid in various contributions (see especially Schmid 2001b).

Set-backs

In the late second and the early first centuries BC some dramatic set-backs struck the Nabataean trade activities. After the collapse of the Minaean Kingdom in South Arabia the rulers of Saba attacked or even blocked the overland incense road (Schippmann 1998: 50, 60-62). It is not known if the Nabataeans at that time shipped their goods through the Red Sea to the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome (as they did at least since the late first century BC) or if they had to accept an overland route via the Persian Gulf (Gherra). That could have been one of the reasons that the Nabataeans began to take possession of territories instead of securing only the caravan routes, but their expansion resulted in many conflicts with the Hasmonaeans, who were also expanding. The Hasmonaeans were able to occupy Nabataean territories east of the Jordan, bands around the shores of the Dead Sea and all

of the northern Negev. By this the Nabataeans had lost the bitumen industry at the Dead Sea and important trade stations such as Elusa and the port of Gaza (97/96BC). They had to choose Rhinocoulura (El-Arish) as the new port at the end of the incense road. Whether Gaza became the main port again at a later period is debated (Johnson 1987). Although Aretas III could rule Damascus from 84 to 72BC as Seleucid king of *Koile Syria* he did not win back the occupied territories. No great Nabataean influence can be detected in southern Syria, nor does there seem to be any particular new Hellenistic influence upon Petra in this period. The Damascus affair remained a passing phase without any great effect.

The arrival of Pompey in the Near East changed the political structures completely. The Seleucid kingdom was transformed into the Roman *provincia Syria*, and Hasmonaeans and Nabataeans both became clients of Rome. On the other hand Rome created a balance of power in the East with these developments. Later Cleopatra VII tried to disturb this balance when Herod I and Malichus I fought each other. After the victory of Octavian over Marc Antony in the battle of Actium the status quo between the two kingdoms was confirmed, and was the basis for a long prosperous period in both kingdoms. But in 23, respectively 20BC Augustus gave the Southern Syria to Herod I. This affected Nabataean clans in the Auranitis and provided Herod with a degree of control of the trade routes.

The use of the monsoon winds in the second half of the first century B.C. allowed maritime trade directly from India and South Arabia to Egypt by the Red Sea. The eastern harbours of Egypt grew in importance. This meant a new competition for the Nabataeans but it caused no commercial decline and did not weaken the overland route. On the contrary, the demand for spices and aromatics had grown to the extent that all parties could make profits. Trade remained the main factor of the Nabataean economy until 106AD, when the Nabataean Kingdom was transformed into the Roman *provincia Arabia* (Fiema 2003: 39-43).

Important as these political events and changes were there are also no recognizable effects on the development of Nabataean material culture and the consolidation of the Nabataean society. Schmid reported that around the middle of the first century BC a strong innovation in the pottery production can be noticed (his phase 2 of the Nabataean pottery) and he suggested a first monumentalisation

of the city (Schmid 2000: 157-159). That may or may not have been so, but there was a change in the conception of products. Instead of a simple imitation of Hellenistic prototypes, the Nabataean artists started to make their own, but had not yet achieved the typical 'Nabataean style'.

Petra, The *Metropolis*

The turning point towards a full Hellenization with Hellenistic forms and a particular Nabataean style seems to be the Khazna, which I have dated to the third quarter of the first century BC, or around 30BC, for a long time. I have since learned from the new excavations by Suleiman Farajat that we have to date the Khazna possibly a little bit later. There is no doubt about the strong Alexandrian style of this façade. Alexandrian influence in the last third of the first century BC can be found in some other monuments at Petra (Wenning 2003a: 162-163). The Khazna is followed by the Qaşr al-Bint and other buildings in the centre of Petra. Under Obodas III and/or Aretas IV the city of Petra changed totally. Beside the well-known Qaşr al-Bint there are still difficulties in describing how the centre looked in that period. The decoration of the buildings were now shaped in a particular Nabataean style, which owed much to Alexandrian influence, but was open for other influences as well.

It was the first time that the Nabataeans adopted temples, and it was the first time that deities are shown in Greek anthropomorphic prototypes in the decoration of these buildings. Usually the Nabataeans venerated their deities in betyls (Wenning 2001). It was not only the centre of Petra which had a new appearance, the whole atmosphere had changed. The report by Strabo demonstrates this (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 604-606, 615-617), although there are many wrong statements in it. Strabo called Petra a *metropolis*, a real capital. There are two main factors as the background for this development, one is the *pax Augustiana*, the political stabilization of the Imperium Romanum and its cultural and religious development under the long reign of Augustus, the other is the impact of the Roman campaign against Saba under Aelius Gallus in 25/24BC (Hackl, Jenni and Schneider 2003: 606-615) The latter is important in the sense of the increase of trade possibilities. Saba was defeated and it seems the Nabataeans could control the overland incense road now from Najran at the border to South Arabia northwards. Strabo com-

pared the traffic on the incense road with that of an army, which gives a hint of the extent of the Nabataean trade. The income from this trade must have increased to new unbelievable heights.

Petra became strongly hellenized in this period. Strabo reported about many foreigners at the Royal court. The newly build temenos with the temple cannot be understood without regard to what happened at other places in the Roman East: e.g. Palmyra, Baalbek, Gerasa, and Jerusalem in the same period (Freyberger 1998). It was a kind of contest to have the most splendid sanctuary: self-representation by prestige monuments and pride on the one hand, loyalty to Augustus and his ideas on the other. The Nabataeans were already part of this great community and had to act in the same way.

Change and Chance

But did the Nabataeans really follow the same path? It is interesting to note that there were no donations made by Nabataean kings known outside their realm (unlike Herod, who is known to have made many). At first glance the Qaşr al-Bint seems to be like one of the temples of that period, but if one takes a closer look there are a lot of differences in comparison with Greek and Roman temples, even Graeco-Roman temples in the East. The masonry decoration of the walls and the stucco elements contradict Greek understanding of temple architecture. Inside the temple a *motab* probably with a betyl can be seen, an element which fits with the traditional veneration of the deity by the Nabataeans. The busts of 'Greek deities' in the metopes of the Doric frieze which decorated the building might reflect the benefits of the Nabataean deity who owned the temple but are not representations of this god. Beside the famous bust of Helios no other deities can be identified due to iconoclasm. However, it cannot be excluded, that the busts reflect a particular programme like those at other younger Nabataean temples, where such deities are embedded into the zodiac or the seven planets (Villeneuve and Al-Muheisen 2000: 1546-1554; McKenzie, Gibson and Reyes 2002: 59-63). These 'Greek deities' are not Greek deities and not venerated as Greek deities from which they took their face, but Nabataean deities or at least deities in contexts familiar to the Nabataeans (Wenning 1989). There are quite a lot of such busts at Petra belonging to various structures (Wenning 2004a). These sculptures should not be taken to assume the introduction of foreign

deities and cults as it happens with Isis (Merklein and Wenning 1998 and 2001).

Taking this as another example — and there are many others — one may consider whether the socio-cultural impact of the trade was an opportunity or a threat to the Nabataeans? If I understand the situation of the Augustean period mainly as an impact of the incense trade it was a great chance for the Nabataeans, the third time. Praised by the foreigners and historians, and not overcome by the Romans, the Nabataean kingdom reached its full flowering. That concerns the political and economic level. In the social level the tribal organization still stands unchanged, as indicated by Strabo (Wenning 1997: 180-182). Despite the strong influences from the Greek and Roman world and from the East the Nabataeans managed to retain their identity and the essential issues in their tradition. This allowed the polity to accept such Hellenistic features as temples and statues by which the polity participated in the general cultural movement of the Near East. Therefore, the impact of trade and the wealth of the Nabataeans caused no danger for their identity. The danger which brought the Nabataean kingdom to an end was not a decline in trade, but other political constellations or even a revolt (Wenning 1993), and we are not informed about the circumstances which led Rome to occupy Nabataea in 106AD.

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