

THE EGYPTIAN STATUETTE IN PETRA AND THE ISIS CULT CONNECTION ¹

by

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Among other cultic objects, a fragment of an Egyptian votive statuette was unearthed during the 1975 excavations of The American Expedition to Petra (Amman JAM 16193, Figs. 1,8,11). The fragment lacks its head, part of the shoulders, and its base; it measures 20.5 x 13.4 cm, and it is made of a fine, polished black-green schist. The main figure, a priest, is holding a small figure of the mummiform god Osiris with the agricultural implements in his hands and his arms crossed over his chest (Fig. 1). The smoothness of the material and the velvet polished surface of the piece enhances the outline of the priest's legs under the transparent dress.² The style of dress, attitude, and material are similar to statues which belong to the last king of Dynasty XXV or to Psamentik I, the first king of Dynasty XXVI (Bothmer 1960: 32).

The importance of this find, as an artifact deposited out of its primary context, or place of origin, is twofold: first, egyptological and second, anthropological. The egyptological importance of the artifact is that, besides being a beautiful piece of art, it is inscribed with three lines of hieroglyphs that give us information about the statuette's owner and his family. The anthropological importance of the find is that it opens a door for new research on the cultural interaction between Ancient Egypt and Jordan during the Nabataean time.

The statuette was found in the cella of the temple of "The Winged Lions" in Petra and its presence in this particular place was attributed by the excavator, Philip Hammond, to a possible diffusion of the "Osirian cult" from Egypt (Hammond 1977: 81-101). Hammond also recovered two terracotta figurines, one in the same temple and another in a Nabataean house, that were identified by



1. The Osiride statuette, front view.

1. My deepest thanks go to Dr Fawzi Zayadine, for providing me with information for my research and to Muna Zaghoul, Juliette Jabaji and Siham Balqar for their assistance.
2. The style of costume and the priest's attitude, holding the Osiride figure, first appear in Egyptian iconography during the New Kingdom (Vandier

1958: 470, 490). Both features continued to be in use in sculpture in the round throughout the Late Period of Egyptian history. The fragment's material also indicates a Late Period manufacture, since black-green schist was almost exclusively used at this time. (Bothmer 1960:32-33, Figs. 2-3).

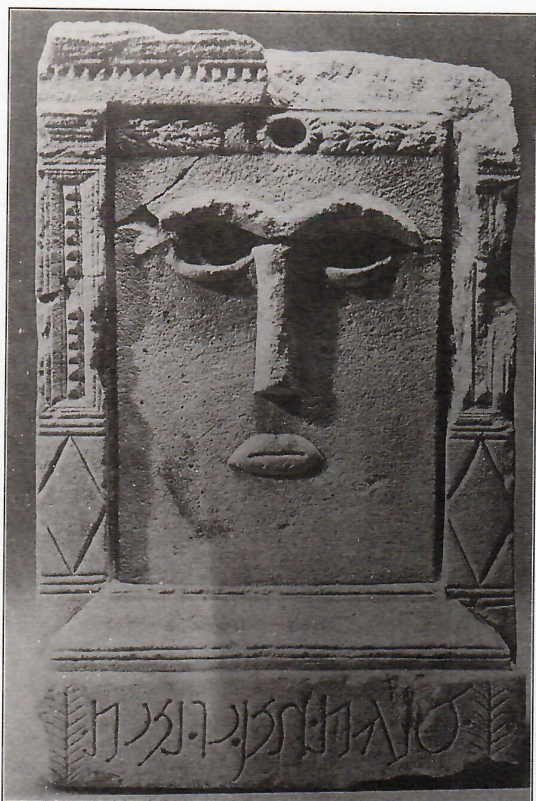
him as the goddess Atargatis, but which were listed in his registry book as wearing a “cloak gathered in front and secured by Isis knot” (pers. comm.). Another parallel figurine was also found in a potters’ kiln in Petra by Zayadine (1982: 386-88 see Fig. 2a). This figurine, as the other two, is seated and draped in a long mantle that has a rounded fringe in the front. Her right hand is raised to her chin and she wears a crown consisting of a disc amid a trefoil plant (Fig. 2). This figurine is described by Zayadine as a “mourning Isis” and not as the goddess Atargatis, since an inscription found at Wādi aṣ-Ṣiyyagh reads “Atargatis of Manbig” (Hierapolis in Ancient Syria) demonstrating that the goddess was not at home in Petra. According to Zayadine (1991: 283), fifteen cities dedicated to the Isis cult are listed in the Oxyrinchus papyrus from Upper Egypt. This papyrus is dated as of the beginning of the second century AD but it probably is of a much earlier date. Petra is mentioned as the most important of these centers, being located in the caravan route to Eastern Asia. The

city presents innumerable niches of sacred stones or “baetyls” that belong to the cult of several gods and goddesses such as al-Kutba and al-‘Uzza. One such a “baetyl” interpreted as belonging to Isis was found at az-Zanṭūr, Petra (Zayadine 1991: 284-306). It presents two stars as eyes and on the top a crown or frieze with a solar disc between two palmettes or spikes of wheat. The star-eyes are a common feature on the baetyls of Wādi Rumm and Petra (Fig. 3). Al-‘Uzza is also identified as al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite who is the main goddess of Petra.

At Delos, Greece, Isis and Aphrodite are also identified with each other. A niche with a phallic stone, attributed to Osiris is also located, near a niche dedicated to Isis, at Wādi aṣ-Ṣiyyagh. At Wādi Abū ‘Ullaqah the goddess is depicted with her feet upon a stepped platform, which may symbolize a throne. I am tempted to identify this type of stairs or steps which are located above different monuments carved on the rock in Petra (Fig. 4), with the hieroglyphic sign for “3st” or Isis and “st”, seat, throne (Fig.5). The stair, the



2. Mourning Isis.



3. Goddess with star eyes.

symbol of the Isis crown in Egyptian representation, is also used to write the word "Wsir" or Osiris (Fig.6).

There is another representation of Isis, as Isis-Tyche, on the Treasury of Petra (Fig.7). Here, she carries a cornucopia in her left hand. At the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, there is a statue without head (unpublished), which presents the knotted, pleated garment and has a cornucopia in her left hand, similar to the Isis-Tyche of Petra. According to an article by R. Bianchi (1980:9-31), we should not identify every sculpture with a knotted garment under her breasts with Isis, since that particular type of dress originated during the XVIII Dynasty and it was later worn by Greek women, who may have copied such style from the Egyptians. The so-called Isis knot is a misnomer since it does not resemble the "tye" amulet which has been identified with a tie or straps and is often associated with Isis. Nev-



4. The steps carved on top of tombs at Petra.

ertheless, the figurines identified with the mourning goddess and the Isis-Tyche present that type of knotted garment.

The figure carved above the Tholos of al-Khaznah, at Petra, and which has been attributed to Aretas III, 85-62 BC, or Aretas IV, 9 BC to 40 AD, is a representation of Isis-Tyche, and is sculptured in this manner, may be to honor the Nabataean queen. This type of depiction follows the Ptolomaic costume of representing their queens in the role of Isis-Tyche. According to Fiema and Jones, (1990:34), Arab tribes were installed in the Delta and helped Cambyses during his conquest of Egypt in 525 BC, since a dedication of a temple by Malikus I was found at Tall ash-Suqafiya, west of Ismailiya. This same king sent his calvary to help Julius Caesar to conquer Alexandria. According to Zayadine (pers. comm.), numerous graffiti were also found in the Sinai proving an occupation by the Nabataeans from the first to the third cen-



5. Isis' crown with stepped platform.



6. Stepped platform to write the Osiris' name in Ancient Egyptian.

tury AD.

The depiction of Isis, mourning the death of Osiris, in the Nabataean city of Petra may account for the appearance of the votive statuette within the cella of the Winged Lions' Temple, if this temple was dedicated to the Isis cult. Furthermore, the inscription on the statuette gives us a clue on its possible place of origin, name and function of the priest offering the Osiris statuette, as well as its immediate genealogy.

Two broken lines of vertical hieroglyphic inscription are next to the left leg of the priest who is presenting the Osiris statuette (Fig.8). The text reads:

Left column:

S3 n hbs-diw p3 `s3 hr [...]

"The son of the *hbs-diw* priest, Pashahor [...]" (Fig.9).

The priestly title "*Hbs-diw*" or 'robing priest' is a specific title of the Osirian cult in

Athribis (Vernus 1978:444-47). The explanation for the five strokes written in a group with the word "*Hbs*", is more complicated, since it is a word that presents diverse variants in writing. According to Vernus, this word and the five strokes were related to the Osirian cult in the city of Edfu and later in Athribis throughout Dynasty XXX. Their possible meanings are, "...he who covers the five gods"; "...he who covers the god with five stripes". The exact significance is obscure, but its origin can be traced to sarcophagi of the Middle Kingdom. Later on, the concept was subsequently used in the title of Athribis (Vernus 1978:446-47). Vernus, in his footnotes, cites references to the five strokes, which have been interpreted as a designation for the god Geb (Fairman 1945:107; Faulkner 1958:14, line 20: 5). The word "*hbs*" has also been interpreted as a participle that not only involves the person who executes the action but also



7. The Treasury of Petra with Isis-Tyche on top, center.

the occasion on which the action is executed (Gardiner 1911:42). Although the title “*Hbs*” with the five strokes had been employed earlier, its official use seems to have been consolidated during Dynasty XXV and in connection with Athribis, as mentioned above.

The bird interpreted as being a falcon for the word “*Hr*” could also be a vulture and be read as an alif completing the word *Pa-`sha* [...]. This interpretation is closer to the name “*s3.t*” listed in *Personennamen*, (Ranke 1952:71), where “*s3*” is written with the “*s3*” sign followed by the vulture to complement the word with the alif sign. In page 103, number 14, a name from the Turin Papyrus is listed: “*p3-s3-`imn*”; here the “*p3*” sign is written with the flying duck followed by an alif and the “*s3*” sign which is followed by a “*t*” and three strokes before the “*imn*” word. This could be a plausible interpretation for reading the priest name as either *Pa-`sha-Hor*, *Hr* being in place of



8. Left side of the priest holding the statuette.

“*imn*” as cited in Ranke, or taking the whole group as standing for the word *pa-`sha*, the rest of the name being lost.

The right column reads:

S3 n hm-ntr tpy n Hr Mnt [...]

“The son of the first prophet of Horus, “Montu[...]” (Fig. 10).

The rest of the name could be *Montuhotepw* since in Ranke (1952, Band I:154-55), there are four instances where the name Montu (the name is written with the “*mn*” sign followed by the “*n*” sign and then the “*T*” sign) is followed by the word “*Htpw*” written with the plural “*w*”. This is a very plausible possibility since a flat sign followed by three strokes can be distinguished in the inscription. Perhaps the flat sign is a mistake for the “*htp*” sign followed by the three strokes standing for the plural “*w*”, “*htpw*”, as written in Ranke. The name is also quoted in Vernus’ Athribis (Vernus

position of the statuette in its temple, namely looking left, its secondary context is unclear. Since the statuette was already broken when found and mixed with other artifacts, there is no way of knowing if it had been placed in the temple as a votive object or if it had just been discarded there.

We cannot say with any assurance that, because this object was found in a Nabataean temple, the Nabataeans worshipped Osiris. An Egyptian may have carried it from his native land or a Greek or a Roman soldier may have left it there.

Dynasty XXV ended approximately 665 BC after the Assyrian invasion of Egypt, which swept through the area of Palestine as well, and a new dynasty emerged in Egypt in 664 BC: Dynasty XXVI (Smith 1988:395-416). During these turbulent times, the Edomites were living in the Petra area and the Nabataeans were yet to come. According to Starcky (1964), the Nabataeans moved into the land of Edom in about 600 BC and into the Petra area about 400 BC.

According to an article by M. Smith (1991:101-109), Psamentik I may have died abroad after having been 55 years on the throne of Egypt. In describing the circumstances in which the king may have died abroad, Smith indicates that during the last two decades of the seventh century BC there was intensive Egyptian involvement in Asia. Assyrian power was declining and the Babylonians were gaining strength at the end of the reign of Psamentik I. Egyptian armies were positioned in Western Asia in 616 BC and again in 610 BC, according to the Babylonian Chronicles. The Egyptian armies remained in this region even after the defeat of Assyria by the Babylonians in 605 BC. During the years of 610 BC, or an earlier date, Psamentik I may have crossed Egypt's borders in order to accompany his army, even if not to battle, than to raise the troops' moral

or to collect tribute. Psamentik I journeys to Asia were recorded by Herodotus and Diodorus indicating other motives as well (Smith 1991:108;109). Curiously enough, this same time period is the one that fits the Egyptian statuette's type of inscription and its manufacture. Perhaps as I hinted above, during the Egyptian involvement in Asia someone, associated with the progress of the Egyptian army in this region, carried the statuette to Petra, where an earlier sanctuary dedicated to Isis may have already existed. Or perhaps, this was just the action of a pilgrim who went to the temple dedicated to Isis mourning Osiris. Nevertheless, can we say with assurance that the Nabataeans worshipped Osiris? There is not enough proof, since this is the only Osirian artifact that has been found in Petra. Other Egyptian artifacts have been found throughout the Palestine area (Schulman 1990:235). Scarabs from Dynasty XVIII were found in the Petra area (Ward 1964:45-46). At al-Bālū'a in Jordan, a Moabite site, a basalt stele was found on which three figures are depicted (today in the Jordan Archaeological Museum, 'Amman), one of them an Egyptian king wearing the crown of Upper Egypt. The other two are not very clear; but one of them is a goddess which wears the "atef crown" of Egypt. The central figure is a king who is receiving a commanding staff from the Egyptian king.³

The Egyptian influence on the culture of Palestine while this area was under Egyptian control is undeniable. It is equally obvious that there was also an Asiatic influence upon Egyptian culture; and although there were many cross-cultural contacts, we cannot assert that a cult of Osiris had been established in Petra. One possible cultural contact is the Isis cult described in Zayadine's article (1991:300), and which may have preceded the actual Winged Lions' Temple. The votive statuette may have been deposited in

3. The Bālū'a stele was first published in an article by Ward and Martine (1964: 5-22). The Osiris statuette from Petra was first published by Ham-

mond (1977-78: 81-101), with the caption, "Site II fragment of Egyptian funerary statuette used as offering, cella area".

this way in the Isis temple as a token of piety toward the goddess' deceased husband.

Nevertheless, the presence of the Egyptian statuette in Petra is significant for two reasons. First, it is proof of the exchange of material culture between Egypt and Jordan, although the specific reasons for its transport and deposit in the Nabataean temple are unknown. And second, it gives an important basis for further research. Since the statuette is much earlier than the temple, this find could have been part of an earlier temple's

foundation when it was uncovered by the Nabataeans who reused it as a votive object. Only future archaeological work and research may provide us with answers to the questions and speculations formulated above.

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