

Identity Crises: Challenges in the Study of Nabataean Identity¹

Cultural identity has remained a critical avenue of archaeological and anthropological research for well over a decade. A central problem faced in these studies is the problem of collective identity as a measurable commodity. Groups are made up of members whose individual concerns and ideas are fluid and unpredictable. Given this inherent variability, how can we speak with any confidence of culture-wide ideas of membership and community?

The kingdom of Nabataea offers an excellent case study through which to examine this issue. Nabataea was by no means a homogeneous entity. Numerous sub-groups can be distinguished, and there seems not to have been any single factor used to determine one's status as a Nabataean. Differences in ethnicity, religion, descent, social standing and lifestyle (nomadic or sedentary) can be observed among those who claimed membership in Nabataea. Some emphasized their identity as Nabataeans by kinship, others by their geographic position within the kingdom, and others by their association with the royal house. None of these were definite qualifications, however. There are many cases in which individuals, who to all appearances would be expected to define themselves as Nabataeans, expressly designate themselves in different terms altogether.

In this paper, I first discuss the common problems confronted in studies of cultural identity. I follow with by considering the specific issues tied to the study of Nabataean cultural identity. I conclude with a dialogue about how the challenges faced when analyzing cultural identity can be effectively met, developing a model of inquiry that allows us to speak with greater confidence about how the

Nabataeans imagined and expressed themselves.

Cultural Identity: General Problems

Cultural identity is a concept freely used but infrequently defined. In the recent study edited by Gruen, *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, identity is "collective self-consciousness" (Gruen 2011: 1) and "conscious or unconscious knowledge of what [individuals and communities] are" (Hölscher 2011: 47). In my own work, I have termed it as a claim of membership, "an awareness of inclusion in a defined group or subscription to set of ideals" (Anderson 2005: 39). Ethnicity, of course, does not equate with identity. But it may be used as one of a series of criteria employed in individual cases, to which we might add language, rank, gender, religion, kinship, political or social association, and geographic setting (Insoll 2007; Meskell 2001). The prioritization of these factors in identity formation was inconsistently applied in antiquity, and often cultural identity emerges from a constellation of several. Collective self-consciousness certainly existed in the ancient world, but being 'Greek' or 'Nabataean' meant one thing to one person and often something quite different to another.

It is therefore much more profitable to think in terms of identities than identity. The very terminology we use to define groups is deeply flawed, even if words like 'Roman' are necessitated by convenience. In reality, the Roman Empire (or any other state, including Nabataea) was a conglomeration of very different sub-groups, which were themselves divided into smaller and smaller subsets. Attempting to address Roman cultural identity in any sort

¹ I wish to dedicate this article to the memory of Traianos Gagos, mentor and dear friend. Many of the ideas presented herein were

shaped during long nights of conversation together at Ashley's in Ann Arbor. His input is sorely missed, as is his warm smile.

of generalized manner is forced and perhaps pointless. There were common threads and themes, but certainly the Romans did not experience their Roman identity in the same way in a single city, much less across the empire².

Nabataean Cultural Identity: The Specific Problems

The problems outlined above are generic, and affect any study of cultural identity. In individual case studies, there are also specific challenges tied to the historical / cultural context and the archaeological record. I identify three major issues as particularly significant to the study of Nabataean cultural identity: (1) the nature of the literary sources, (2) the variability, in cultural terms, of Nabataean material and visual culture, and (3) the location of Nabataea at the junction between East and West. These three problems do not admit easy solutions, but understanding their intricacies allows, at very least, for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanics of cultural identity in Nabataea.

Literary Sources

The main problem associated with primary texts which address the Nabataeans is the fact that they are exclusively the work of outsiders. The three most important sources that describe Nabataean life and customs are found in the writings of Strabo, Diodorus Siculus and Josephus - two Greeks and a Jew. Ammianus Marcellinus, Cassius Dio and Tacitus, all Roman citizens, also mention the Nabataeans. Internal metatextual problems notwithstanding, these writings are projections of an imagined Nabataea from the perspective of authors who had little or no personal experience of it³. With the exception of epigraphic evidence, which will be discussed separately below, we have no writings about the Nabataeans that were written by the Nabataeans themselves⁴.

Seeking objectivity in any primary text is clearly a futile endeavor. Even so, there are varying degrees of subjectivity, and these externally-penned sources

are plagued by misinformation. Strabo's note that the Nabataeans treat the dead as dung (16.4.26) has been convincingly explained as a mistranslation of Nabataean *kapra* (tomb) as Greek *kopros* (dung) and serves as a good illustration of one of the most basic issues encountered by an external author. (Clermont-Ganneau 1895; Healey 2001: 28) Strabo's position as an outsider led him to misunderstand the Nabataean term and subsequently misrepresent Nabataean funeral practices - a grave mistake, but perhaps an innocent one. However, these sources are also often full of intentional misrepresentation, driven by the priorities of the author and his audience. Bosworth has shown that Hieronymus of Cardia (as epitomized in Diodorus) had strong reason to misrepresent the Nabataeans, and I have argued that both Josephus and Strabo had axes to grind as well. (Bosworth 2002: 187-209; Anderson 2009) Simply put, the primary sources are hardly what we would consider reliable.

Source criticism is nothing new, of course. But in the case of cultural identity, these sources place us in a paradox. We know the sources are misleading, contradictory, and often incorrect, but we nevertheless must use them. The information that Strabo and Diodorus provide on the Nabataean way of life may well be skewed, but aside from the archaeological record it is the only information at our disposal. Ignoring the texts would be irresponsible, but making use of them can be perilous⁵.

Inscriptions are the only primary textual source that can be confidently considered an internal Nabataean product. They alone give us Nabataeans speaking in their own voices. Most inscriptions are quite formulaic, but the formulae employed are telling, attesting as they do to the importance of lineage and kinship as well as the prominence of the royal family. Even so, they present problems that are not easily resolved. MacDonald has identified a discrepancy between the use of 'Nabataean' as an ethnic identifier in both Nabataean and Safaitic inscriptions, observing that it is only used in this way in Safaitic (MacDonald 1998). The reasons for

² There are, of course, myriad other problems encountered in the study of cultural identity, as discussed in depth in Insoll (2007) and Gruen (2011). I am intentionally restricting this consideration to those issues that have immediate bearing on Nabataean studies.

³ All of these sources incorporate or epitomize the works of other authors, works which are generally lost to us in their original form. Thus Diodorus draws on the writings of Hieronymus of Cardia, Strabo on Agatharchides and Heracleitus, and Josephus on Nicolaus of Damascus.

⁴ The closest we get to an internal source is the *Arabika* of Uranius, which is preserved only in fragments epitomized in the *Ethnika* of Stephanus of Byzantium. Uranius was reported to be from Apamea in Syria, but probably lived in the early fourth century AD. For discussion, (see Retsö 2003: 491-2).

⁵ Vickers (1994) offers a good example of an attempt to resolve the contradictions between Strabo and Diodorus, and perhaps also a lesson in the potential these texts have to mislead our conclusions.

its absence in Nabataean inscriptions are unclear, and underline the general difficulty in defining the composition of cultural and ethnic groups. We cannot be confident that Safaitic-speaking and Nabataean-speaking Nabataeans understood the concept of being Nabataean in the same way, and indeed we may well be dealing with two different strands of Nabataean identity (Graf 2004).

Variability of Material and Visual Culture

The second major problematic issue associated with Nabataea centers on the often contradictory archaeological record. In brief, surviving edifices and excavated materials tell competing stories, and make it difficult to assess the character of Nabataean identity. There seems to have been a vigorous dialogue in Petra and other Nabataean sites as to what forms of visual, religious and cultural expressions were appropriate – or at least fashionable. While it would be naïve to expect homogeneity, especially in the multi-cultural environment that characterized the Near East in the first centuries BC and AD, what we see in Nabataea is arguably more diverse than anywhere else in the contemporary Mediterranean or Near East. Sculptural styles, tomb façades and depictions of the gods are three glaring examples of the manner in which form and subject matter can take nearly opposite forms and meanings, even as they are both undeniably ‘Nabataean’ products.

The majority of Nabataean sculpture from Petra is the work of craftsmen well-versed in the techniques and visual trends of late Hellenistic style. The medallions excavated from the area of the Temenos Gate at Petra and the recently unearthed Dionysiac heads from Bayḍā are absolutely characteristic of Hellenistic sculpture: deep-set eyes, parted lips, leonine locks of hair and full rounded chins. Indeed, they may well be the work of Alexandrian or Greek craftsmen working at Petra. At adh-Dharīḥ and Khirbat at-Tannūr, however, the sculptural tradition is very different, drawing as it does on Syrian and Mesopotamian traditions (McKenzie 1988, 2003). The work is much more stylized and abstract, and has an entirely different emphasis than that from Petra. Reliefs from Mada’in Salih are similarly grounded in Near Eastern and Egyptian traditions, and lack any features we might consider Hellenistic in origin.

These sculptural divergences leave us with several questions about the nature of Nabataean art in

general. All these works are roughly contemporaneous, and all were executed within the general bounds of Nabataea. The proximity of at-Tannūr to Petra and its significance as a cultic site make it certain that the sculptural program there was known in the capital and likely *vice versa*; the stylistic variability therefore suggests intentional derivation. This same intentionality can be observed in the tomb façades and religious icons. In both cases, there were clear preferences for particular forms of representation (crenellated tombs and betyls respectively), while prominently placed and obviously elite tombs and sculptures of very different pedigree were also installed. The al-Khaznah and the half-dozen other Hellenistic / Roman tombs speak a language far removed from the several hundred crenellated tombs (Anderson 2002, 2005); likewise the busts of Mediterranean and Nabataean gods found throughout Petra counter the general non-representational tradition observed in the hundreds of betyls carved in the cliff walls (Wenning 2001; Patrich 1990). These differences are not simply variations on a central theme – they derive from completely different vocabularies and appeal to a very different set of priorities.

These selected examples, oversimplified as the treatment here may be, speak volumes about the difficulties faced when attempting to make sense of the Nabataean material and visual record in a broadly integrated context. The incongruities are not easily resolved, at least not into a neat picture. However, as I will discuss below, I find these contradictions to be quite important to the study of cultural identity. They illustrate that identity is a contested dialogue, an ever-changing series of negotiations. One of the greatest mistakes we can make in assessing cultural identity is to assume that is fixed or monolithic.

Nabataea at the Crossroads

The third major challenge specifically tied to the study of Nabataean cultural identity lies in the spatial setting of the kingdom. Nabataea straddles the liminal area between Egypt, the Near East, Arabia and the Mediterranean, and was engaged with both contemporary regional powers and the long-established traditions of these areas. To be sure, the breadth of exposure makes issues of influence and adaptation very difficult to measure in Nabataea, as many cultural expressions can be attributed to multiple avenues of inspiration. However, this dif-

ficulty is not in and of itself unique to Nabataea, and similar situations can be observed in locales such as Cyprus, Syria, or even further afield in settings like Gaul or Britain (Woolf 1998).

In the study of identity, the source of symbols and motifs is of critical importance. Knowing where an idea came from assists in consideration of influence and affinity, but in such a plural environment the pedigree of visual culture is often hopelessly tangled. Elements that may have been originally Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek or Roman were so firmly entrenched in all these cultures by the Hellenistic period that we may well question whether their original context was still known and recognized. In the Nabataean kingdom, was the rosette still conceived of as a Near Eastern motif? The palmette as Greek? What degree of their original encoded meaning remained? The highly multicultural environment obscures the reasons for selection of specific imagery, as it is doubtful that the ancients knew their significance with the same archaeological precision we are capable of today.

Approaches and Solutions

The issues outlined above, both general and specific, make it difficult to speak with confidence about Nabataean cultural identity. The number of variables, inconsistencies and uncertainties encountered in Nabataea are significant and potentially discouraging. However, I believe that by taking the following factors into account, it is possible not only to engage with Nabataean cultural identity, but even to speak about it with confidence. In brief, I argue that we must: (1) recognize the fluidity and variability of any cultural unit, (2) understand and manage the balance between generalization and specification, (3) admit and account for our own biases and (4) integrate identity subsets into the dialogue.

Recognizing Fluidity

In his study of the Romanization of Italy, Terrenato (1998) exposed a critical problem with the concept: sweeping observations of cultural change invariably break down when applied at the local scale. This observation has been echoed by a number of scholars across a range of disciplines, and the applicability of models in general has been called into question. This is absolutely correct. Society, as discussed above, is composed of a network of individuals who make their own choices for their own

reasons, and attempting to classify these individuals as a single cohesive unit is therefore a gross and inaccurate oversimplification. When we generalize, we cannot help but admit error into our model.

This does not mean, however, that we must therefore throw up our hands and abandon any hope of addressing cultural identity on a large scale. I suggest that general models are still useful and important so long as we are honest about their limitations. Did *all* Nabataeans think / feel / act in a particular way? Of course not. Following the model of structuration as outlined by Giddens (1984), social systems and individuals are reciprocal and active, constantly shaping and being shaped by one another. Indeed, structuration underscores the constant fluidity and negotiation inherent in social structures and the significance of individual contestations of identity upon them (Revell 2009). Trends and commonalities are observable and important. They tell us about the composition and priorities of groups and sub-groups. The exceptions are equally important.

Minority voices bespeak internal fractures within the larger framework, alternative approaches to seeing and experiencing identity. In many cases, they anticipate shifts (or at least attempted shifts) in the culture's overall ideological framework.

Managing Generalization and Specification

While a generalized model is inherently flawed, such models are necessary and informative. If we restrict ourselves only to a study of micro-units, we lose the ability to see and understand the bigger picture. What we are dealing with here is a matter of scale and convenience. We necessarily make compromises in order to combine data into meaningful subsets. The same problem is faced in environmental studies (land-cover and land-use mapping, for example), where the resolution of the data constricts its application. Coarse-resolution images and maps are useful in regional or global examinations, whereas fine-resolution data are better suited for local analysis. Fine-resolution data, while more detailed, are not necessarily the best choice in all applications; in some studies generalization is more informative. Attempts have been made to arrive at a universal model for use with different resolutions and scales, but these have been shown to be inadequate (Turner 1995). As a result, environmental scholars have accepted the simple maxim that any model must be understood contextually, in light

of its intended scale. We do well to bear this same concept in mind, as it allows us to – at least cautiously – engage in generalization.

Accounting for Bias

Studying cultural identity is, at its most basic level, an attempt to read minds. The study of cultural expressions ultimately leads us back to the question of how these people understood themselves and their relation to the communities in which they operated. We are interested in their self and group perceptions, their worldviews. But in doing so, it is important to be on guard against unconsciously desired outcomes. We may, for a variety of reasons, *want* the group under study to conceive themselves in a particular light, and in this case we run the risk of what Meskell so aptly terms “interpretive violence” (Meskell 2001: 188). In the same vein, we may entertain preconceptions of how groups already behave and think, as certainly was the case in old colonialist approaches to ‘primitive’ cultures. Combatting these biases is essential, but not always easy.

First and foremost, we must honestly take stock of our fixed ideas and prejudices. Nabataea is positioned at the divide between East and West, Europe and Asia, Greek and ‘barbarian’. Colonialist views of the East were elegantly challenged by Said throughout his career, and they are hopefully shelved firmly in the past. However, the Israeli / Palestinian conflict, as well as the modern organization of the region’s countries and peoples, is a more tangible and immediate source of bias. Avraham Negev was unabashed in his prioritization of Nabataean sites in Israel over those in Jordan or Saudi Arabia, a viewpoint reinforced by his own military involvement in the 1967 war (Elliot 1996). His example is naturally an extreme case, but it serves as a cautionary note about the injection of our own worldview into our scholarship.

Speaking personally, I recognize now that early in my graduate career I wanted to heroize the Nabataeans as fiercely independent and resistant to Rome’s advances. In my mind, the very Western approach I observed in the scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Parr 1978) was outmoded and required challenge. I still stand by this observation, but in my immediate charge to defend the Nabataeans from a Hellenocentric viewpoint, I created an ideology of resistance and self-actualization by, like Negev, prioritizing certain evidence. In es-

sence, I downplayed the material that conflicted with the results I sought, and highlighted that which I found agreeable to my thinking. It was only when I recognized my own preference that I was able to stop imposing it on the Nabataeans; hence a probing self-appraisal is an integral initial step to the study of identity.

Integration of Identity Subsets

To this point I have suggested basic strategies to refine our overall thinking and approach to cultural identity. In the discussion that follows, I turn to a more specific and tangible framework, the integration of what I call ‘identity subsets’. Viewing identity as a monolithic block is both clumsy and unwieldy, no matter how refined our definition may be. I suggest that it may be more profitable to segment identity into different categories according to how it was experienced or expressed. This allows a more nuanced perspective, offering specific analyses that in turn inform the general picture.

I suggest four paired subsets of cultural identity as follows: (1) Imposed vs. Self-Generated, (2) Conscious vs. Unconscious, (3) Deliberate vs. Haphazard and (4) Internally vs. Externally Focused. In the discussion to follow, I will explore the rationale behind these categories and illustrate them with examples from the Nabataean archaeological corpus. It should be emphasized that these categories themselves are fluid, and more than one may apply in any one case.

Subset 1: Imposed vs. Self-Generated

The first category concerns the origin of identity – does it emerge from within or is it created and applied from an outside source? In the former case, it is a consciousness that forms within the group and takes expression independently. In the business world, ‘brand identity’ refers to just such a self-generating process, characterized by selection of logos, slogans and advertising campaigns. The same process can be observed in communities, especially as they become self-aware. Externally applied identities are those conceived and imposed from an outside individual or group. A prisoner’s identity is shaped by an external force, and a bully actively participates in the creation of other people’s identities against their will.

In Nabataea, I suggest that the camel procession carved into the wall of the Sīq at Petra is a good example of a self-generated identity. The promi-

nent location of the carving makes it clear that it was commissioned by the Nabataeans themselves. The specific interpretation of the scene is disputed, and may well be ritual; even so it speaks eloquently as a visual representation sanctioned and approved within Nabataea (Bedal 2003: 98-99). The choice of camels is deliberate, Arabian and nomadic. If, as seems inescapable, this is an image of a Nabataean, the terms of his representation are strong indicators of a more generalized vision of self operating within Petra.

An imposed identity may be more difficult to assess within the archaeological record of Nabataea, but there is abundant literary evidence that documents the Roman characterization. Strabo's description of Arabian incest (16.4.25) or his demonization of Syllaeus' perfidy (16.4.23-4) are notable examples of the Roman perspective, which paints the Nabataeans in a middle ground between fully barbarous and fully civilized (Anderson 2009). Diodorus' account of their nomadic character (2.48) is well known and, as an epitome of the fourth century. Hieronymus of Cardia, may well have been anachronistic and misleading at the time of its inclusion in his *Bibliotheca historica* (Bosworth 2002: 187-209). Even so, it reinforced an idea of the contemporary Nabataeans as outsiders, furthering their marginalization in Rome. Indeed, the imposed identity that sources such as these illustrate was to present real and measurable challenges for the Nabataeans, as the failed embassy of Aretas IV to Augustus may illustrate. (Anderson 2005: 153-165). The significance of these imposed identities, therefore, is that it is there to contend with, driving internal responses to counter or correct it. What the Romans thought of the Nabataeans mattered, and it seems to be the case that the Nabataean kings, at very least, struggled to define themselves counter to these preconceptions.

Subset 2: Conscious vs. Unconscious

The second pair of categories concerns the degree of intentionality present in manifestations of identity. Certainly there are cases where an individual or group pushes quite deliberately to express their membership in clear and unmistakable terms; identity is also often stated unthinkingly in everyday decisions which seem natural in the context of the group. Dress can be used to illustrate both these categories; on the one hand individuals may carefully costume themselves in order to represent spe-

cific personae, on the other they may simply don the functional attire relevant to their employment or climate. Identities may be actively selected, but they may also be reflexive and automatic. The coins of Aretas III minted in Damascus clearly show that the king selected definite motifs familiar to the local population, and also that he sought to assuage any concerns through the use of 'philhellene' as an epithet (Meshorer 1975: nos. 5-8; see discussion in Anderson 2005: 133-138). This is a case of calculated creation of a specifically projected Nabataean identity – for consumption by outsiders, incidentally. (This overlaps with Subset 4, as will be discussed below.)

Unconscious choices that represent identity negotiations are also easily observed in Nabataea. Ceramic decoration, for example, is clearly an indication of Nabataean preference toward non-representational forms (Patrich 1990) and yet was likely executed routinely and, at least once it had been entrenched in the visual vocabulary, thoughtlessly. The amount of painted ceramics produced at Petra was staggering, and even after a century of active tourism their remains continue to blanket the site. These pots were painted individually by skilled craftsmen, but they were mass-produced, presumably very rapidly. And not only did the decorative scheme likely lose any significance to the craftspeople, but likewise to the consuming public as well. They were simply too ubiquitous to garner any real consideration on a daily level. They remain indicators of identity, but in daily practice unconscious ones.

Subset 3: Deliberate vs. Haphazard

The third subset is conceptually similar to the second, but differs in its focus. In the former, the emphasis of the categories rested on the act of expressing identity. Here, I turn to the form those expressions took. It is one thing to decide to represent oneself (or one's collective), but deciding how that representation will be visualized is a second stage. On the one hand, it may be deliberately constructed from a coherent set of concepts and motifs, on the other it may be the result of a haphazard agglomeration. The latter is commonly seen in the choice of art displayed in our homes – we often select images that resonate with us and seem fitting, but may not fit into a single organized schema. The assemblage is doubtless an expression of identity and membership, but it may well be contradictory and confused.

(In my own house, an old photo of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre hangs between a Munch print and a photograph of my grandfather – certainly a strange combination but constructed from personally significant elements).

Assessing the boundary between deliberate and haphazard in Nabataea requires us to consider objects in terms of their contextual significance. I suggest an example of each, but recognize in doing so that I necessarily project my own interpretation of the motives and thought-processes associated with them. Disagreement with my reading of these case studies is not unexpected; nevertheless, I maintain that the division between the categories of the subset is meaningful in and of itself.

I have elsewhere argued that the crenellated motif present on so many Nabataean tombs at Petra and Mada'in Salih was part of a carefully conceived and organized visual program (Anderson 2002). The combination of split merlons, crenellated friezes and rosette medallions work together to present a unified set of symbols linked to the great Near Eastern empires of the past, and may well indicate that the Nabataean elite viewed themselves as their successors. These motifs were heavily laden with messages of kingship and power, and were combined together in multiple monumental sites whose ruined states were still observable to nomads and traders (Persepolis, Babylon etc.). The re-use of these symbols at Petra is thematically in keeping with their original function, and may therefore be seen as evidence of a carefully orchestrated visual agenda.

I suggest that monumental façade of the al-Khaznah may be evidence of a more haphazard approach to the representation of identity. The sculptural repertoire of the al-Khaznah is well-known, and represents a combination of popular Hellenistic and Egyptian deities as well as universal motifs such as florals, eagles, griffins and felines. The architectural layout is largely in keeping with the Alexandrian baroque style, with the notable exception of the crowning obelisks and urn. Stewart (2003) has commented on the difficulty in reading a coherent narrative in the sculptural programme – it makes sense on a general level, but becomes very confusing when the component parts are analyzed in concert. The figures can be identified, to be sure, but what exactly do they have to do with each other, or with the obelisks? It seems to be the case, as Stewart observes, that we are dealing with a gen-

eral claim of 'cosmopolitan sophistication' (2003: 198), but one assembled from a *mélange* of familiar and individually meaningful icons and symbols. Inasmuch as the crenellated tombs reflect a carefully controlled combination of motifs, the assortment on the Khaznah is indicative of a looser and more generalized approach to symbols and imagery.

Subset 4: Internal vs. External Focus

The final subset considers the intended audience of expressions of identity. The manner in which we represent ourselves is highly dependent upon who observes us, and indeed the audience often serves to dictate the character of these manifestations. In this study, I emphasize the difference between constellations of identity directed by Nabataeans at Nabataeans, and those directed by Nabataeans at outsider collectives (e.g. Romans). The aforementioned coinage of Aretas III has been mentioned above, and is one good example of an attempt to market an image of Nabataea to a group which had only recently fallen under its political hegemony. To this we might add the Khaznah, which Stewart (2003: 197) notes was "designed to speak primarily to Greeks and Romans".

The notable shift in language on Nabataean coins (Greek to Nabataean) that took place in 62 BC suggests that the Nabataean kings became more interested in marketing their image within the kingdom than they had previously, as these new coins would have been legible to a very few Romans or Greeks. Likewise, the choice of the Nabataean language for honorific epithets such as Aretas IV's famous "lover of his people" meant that the projected image was for internal rather than external consumption. The coins and inscriptions bear witness to the kings looking inward at their own kingdom as they shaped a vision of collective identity under their rule (Anderson 2005: 138-147). Moving away from the political spectrum, the hundreds of aniconic betyls again bespeak an interest in expressing Nabataean identity within the context of Nabataea itself.

Naturally, much of the archaeological record can be seen as simultaneously internally and externally focused. Monumental public sculpture, palatial and religious architecture, wall paintings, impressive tombs – these would draw the attention of residents and visitors alike. Objects and structures like these were multivalent and could be interpreted in a number of different ways. In such cases, I suggest

it is most profitable to carefully consider both the internal and external significance as expressions of identity, probing their intended messages and the manner of their reception.

Conclusion

In the preceding discussion I have outlined some of the problems associated with the study of Nabataean cultural identity and have suggested some approaches we may use to mitigate them. My hope is that the subset-based approach to identity will serve as a useful addition to analyses of the intention, function and meaning of Nabataean material and visual culture. In my own work, it is a framework that underlies a much larger project, in which the Nabataean archaeological record is analyzed comprehensively in terms of cultural identity (Anderson, In prep.). The discussion herein crystallizes the challenges I have faced in the past several years as I attempt to sort out cultural identity in my own mind, as well as the approaches I have taken to remedy them. Being Nabataean was complex, contested and fluid, but even so it was meaningful and measurable.

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