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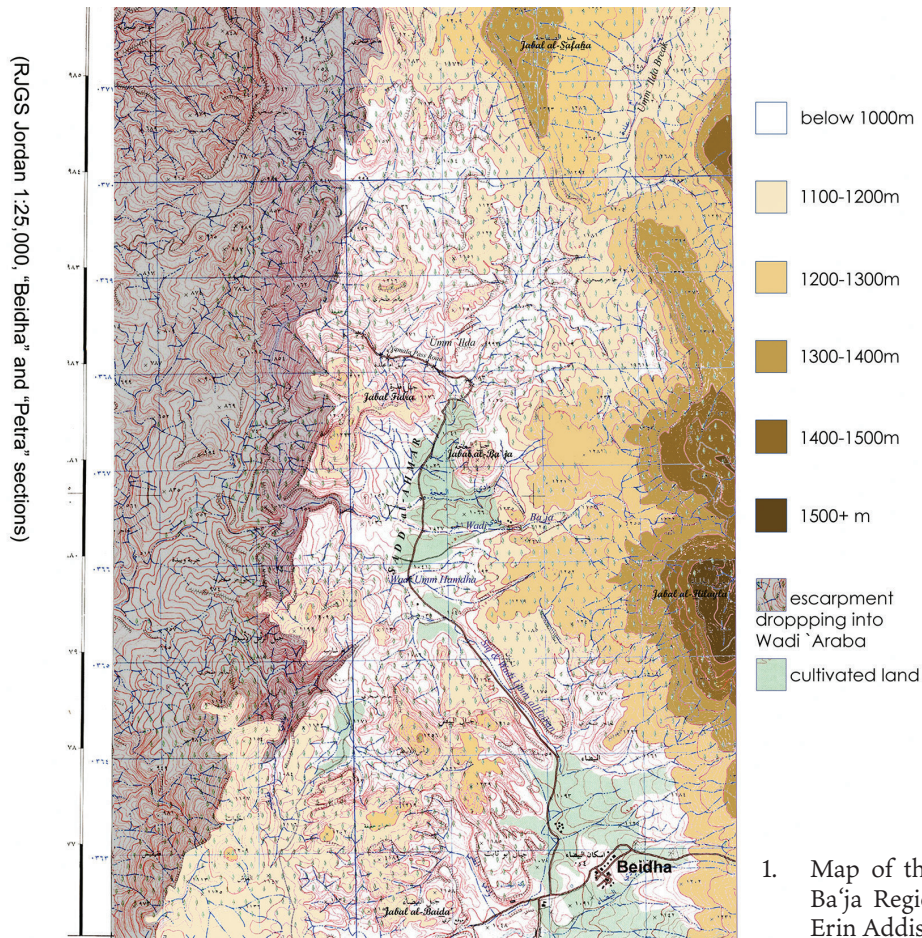
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The Nabataean Crocodile Shrine near al-Bayḍā

Introduction

During the 2017 excavations at Umm Hamtha located on the southern edge of the Baʿja massif, just a few kilometers north of al-Bayḍā (FIG. 1), Ayman Amarin, a member of the Sela work crew, brought to my attention a cultic niche with a depiction of a crocodile stretched vertically across the niche. It was located just north of al-Bayḍā inside a cave in the Raqqabta Abu Thabet area, to the west of the entrance to Siq Umm al-Ḥirān on the Namala Road (FIGS. 2–4). According to Ayman, after the discovery, the crocodile was chiseled off the cultic niche (FIG. 5). The photo Ayman provided appears to justify his claim. The relief seems to have been executed with some precision. The depiction of a crocodile in a cultic niche is unique as far as I can determine. In 1997, Robert Wenning and the late H. Merklein launched the “Petra Niche Project” which has already documented 840 votive niches

in the eastern half of Petra alone, two-thirds of which were previously unrecorded, with an estimated total of over 1,200 for the Petra region (Wenning 2013: 343–50). The vast majority are aniconic, with only a few figurative or anthropomorphic representations (*e.g.*, Isis, Dhusharā-bust), but there also are eagles depicted in cultic niches in a valley just below Jabal al-Khubtha at Petra (Lindner 2003: 155–64). In addition to the enigmatic snake monument near Rās Sulaymān/Wādī ath-Thughra, there are snakes associated with votive niches at al-Qanṭara, along the stairs leading up to Umm al-Bīyarā, and at Jabal al-Barra, perhaps serving a protective-apotropaic function and possibly reflecting a Nabataean snake cult (Wenning 2012: 246–50; *cf.* 2019: 562). The crocodile at Raqqabat Abu Thabet may now be added to these other depictions of birds and animals that appear with cultic niches.



1. Map of the al-Baydā-Ba'ja Region (map by Erin Addison).

2. Raqqabta Abu Thabet, view to west. The cave with the shrine is located in the middle of the photo between the two mounds (photo by D.F. Graf).



THE NABATAEAN CROCODILE SHRINE NEAR AL-BAYḌĀ



3. Cave with shrine at Raqqabta Abu Thabet (photo by D.F. Graf).

4. Crocodile relief at Raqqabta Abu Thabet (photo by Ayman Amarin).

5. Shrine after relief was damaged (photo by D.F. Graf).



Terminology

The interpretation of the fairly common aniconic representations of Nabataean deities is traditionally connected with a statement in Philo of Byblos that the Greek *baitulia*, or “betyls,” were designated by the god Ouranos as “animated stones” (*lithoi empsuchoi*) which fell from the heavens and possessed magical or divine powers (FGrH 790 F 2, 23). But no such myth, explicit or implicit, is known to have existed in the Nabataean realm (cf. Wenning 2001: 80), and the tangled web of Philo of Byblos’ *Phoenician History* remains controversial. *Phoenician History* was produced during the Hadrianic period and was allegedly based on the earlier writings of the Phoenician priest Sanchuniathon. Sanchuniathon lived before the Homeric age, and his works are primarily preserved in Eusebius’ *Praeparatio Evangelica* dating to the 4th c. AD. The authenticity of Sanchuniathon was infused with some credibility by the discoveries of mythological texts at Ugarit and Boghazköi (1400–1200 BC), but the subsequent comparative critical analysis of these texts with Philo reveals that they conflict and are in tension with his fragmentary texts (Barr 1974: 59). As a result, the mixed and muddled tradition of Philo has been aptly called a *farrago*—a “confused mixture.” With earlier elements, there are fragments that suggest some of Philo’s sources date after the Persian period (Lipiński 1983: 305–10), and that he represents, or follows in, the Hellenistic tradition of Manethos’ *Aegyptiaca* and Berossus’ *Babylonica* (Ogden 1978: 122–6; Edwards 1991: 219). The distortions and anachronisms in Philo’s garbled account makes it a precarious guide for understanding religious phenomena in Nabataea. In sum, the terminology of “betyl” is both misleading and artificial.

In fact, no Semitic text ever refers to the representations of deities in cultic niches as “betyls.” The standard precise terminology in Nabataean Aramaic texts

for the monumental stones displayed in the cultic niches is “stela” (*nšybt*, *nšyb*, *nšb*, and *mšb*), designating an “erected or raised votive stone, idol or statue” (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 749–51; cf. Monferrer-Sala and Ferrer 2017: 64, 68).¹ At al-Khubtha in Petra, the monuments in the niche are designated as “the stelae (*nšyby*) of al-‘Uzzā and the Lord of the House (Temple)” (RES 1088, *lh nšyby l’z’wmr’ byt*). At Qaṭṭār al-Dayr at Petra, another text mentions “the stela which is at Bošra” (Milik 1958: 246–7, *mšb’ dy Bšr*). Finally, a third text at ‘Ayn Shallaley in Wādī Ramm designates the cultic stone as the “stela of the goddess Allat” (Milik 1958: 247, *nšbty l’t lht*). There is not the slightest indication in any of these Nabataean texts (or elsewhere in Semitic texts) that the depictions in stone possessed divine or supernatural powers (see the catalogue of Wenning 2008: 613–5). Furthermore, it seems best to take the “aniconic” and “iconic” not as representations in opposition reflecting evolutionary stages, *i.e.*, the primitive versus the more “advanced” anthropomorphic (Patrich 1990; cf. Parlasca 1993: 279–81), but as complementary forms of representation attempting to evoke the divine (Gordon 1979: 11–3; Donohue 1997: 31–45; Basile 2002: 255–8; Gaifman 2012: 9–26).

Even in the presumed biblical antecedent (Genesis 28:10–2; cf. 35:6–8), the “pillar” is designated as a *maššebah* (35:7) and the “place” where the gate to heaven and God appeared in a dream is given the name of *byt-l* or Bethel (Genesis 28:16–7; 35: 7), as frequently observed (from Moore 1903: 206–8 to Gaifman 2008: 45–50; *contra* Zuntz 1947: 169–219). The Greek *baetyl*/*baitulos* is clearly of Semitic origin, but rather than the corrupted interpretation of Philo, the original “House of God” should

¹ See also Philo of Byblos FGrH 790 F6 = Stephanos of Byzantium s.v. Nisibis: “Philo says *nisibis* means ‘stelae.’”

be understood as the aniconic stone block/pillar/shape representing and embodying the god. In fact, many of the cultic niches are framed with the pillars of a house (called a *aediculum*, “little house”), lending credence to the niche representing a “house of god,” or, as has been suggested, “windows,” functioning “as a passage to the outer world with the gods as protecting guides” (Drijvers 1990: 76). But the representations of the deity represented inside the cultic niche are always designated in Nabataean Aramaic as a “stele.” For this reason, I have chosen to reject the controversial term of “betyl” in favor of the more customary and neutral word “shrine.”

The Interpretation of the Crocodile

Just as troublesome as the terminology is the meaning of the crocodile image. In the Augustan era, the crocodile was clearly a symbol of Egypt. After Octavian’s victory at Actium, he issued coins in 28/27 BC with the legend AEGYPTO CAPTA above a crocodile (FIG. 6; RIC I² 275a, 544–5 = BMCRE 650). In similar fashion, at Nemausus (Nîmes in France), where veterans of the campaign were settled, the military colony became the location of an important imperial mint and immediately began issuing coins with the legend COL(onia) NEM(aus) above a crocodile chained to a palm tree (RIC I² 155–7), known popularly as the “As de Nîmes” (Puech *et al.* 2014: 58–66). In addition, reflecting Augustan political propaganda, *terra sigillata* were produced in fairly large quantities depicting a nude Cleopatra holding a victory palm while engaged in debauchery with a crocodile. The pottery circulated broadly in legionary camps and elsewhere (Paunier 2005: 349–55). But this hostile demagoguery is designed for a particular political objective, lacking currency in other more popular contexts, and far afield from Petra in Arabia.

Internally, within Egypt, the crocodile



6. Coin of Nemausus (Nîmes), 27 BC: Obverse: Augustus and Agrippa; Reverse: Crocodile and palm beneath legend COL NEM.

metaphor is linked to the cult of Sobek (Greek *Souchos*)—the crocodile god *par excellence* (Brovarski 1984: 995–1031). The center of the worship of Sobek was the Fayum capital at Shedet, known in Ptolemaic times as Arsinoe and in Roman times Krokodilopolis. This fertile land with its marshes was an ideal habitat for crocodiles (Brovarski 1981: 792–801). The priests of the cult produced what is called the “Book of the Fayum,” which identified Lake Moeris as the primordial ocean and listed the various local cult centers of Sobek. At Tebtunis in the Fayum, thousands of votive crocodile mummies attest the popularity of the cult, the dedications perhaps reflecting that the Fayum was the location of large-scale crocodile breeding enterprises (Molcho 2014: 181–93). Sobek was a syncretistic god, with the cult assimilating at an early stage the features of Re, Hapi (“Lord of the Nile”), Osiris, Horus, and others at an early stage. The pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period chose Sobek as their personal god and divine patron, and made his name part of their royal name. These relations raised the status of Sobek to a state god and established him as a symbol of power and part of royal ideology (Koenen 1981: 801–11). As such, Sobek became a primeval deity, a manifestation of Re on earth, as well as Osiris, the living god and son of Re, known as the “king of Shedet,” accompanied by his spouse Isis and son Sobek-Horus (*cf.*

Tallet 2012: 139–63). Horus, the royal and state deity, was known in the Fayum as “Horus of Shedat,” *i.e.* “residing in Shebat.” The so-called *cippi* amulets of Horus are of apotropaic character and depict him with his feet firmly placed on a crocodile (Seele 1947: 43–52; Bakry 1967: 15–8). *Cippi* amulets were circulated widely through the Near East and are attested as far as Iran (Draycott 2011: 123–33). The cult of Sobek of the Fayum also extended throughout the whole Nile region. The magnificent temple of Kom Ombo, built by the Ptolemies on the foundations of the smaller pharaonic temple, gradually became the most important temple of Sobek in Upper Egypt (Gutbub 1982: 675–83; Brovarski 1984: 1010–1). In a relief at Dendera from the reign of the emperor Claudius, Horus of Edfu is depicted being reconciled with Sobek of the Fayum (Cauville 2007: 29–39), a late reflection of the union that was consummated much earlier in the Middle Kingdom (Brovarski 1984: 1008). With Sobek’s assimilation to Hapi, the “Lord of the Nile,” the crocodile god also became the god of water and marshes, with power over the inundation, bringing forth the flood, fertility, and rebirth to the land of the Nile (Koemoth 2010: 258–89). Since there was a well-established Arab community in the Fayum in the early Hellenistic period (Graf 2018a), it is entirely possible that a migrant Arab from the Petra region had adopted adherence to the cult of Sobek and honored

his new Egyptian god in the crocodile relief in the shrine at Raqqabta Abu Thabet, but even more attractive possibilities need to be explored.

Isis and the Crocodile

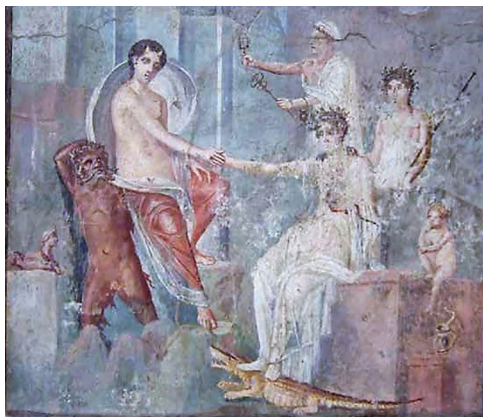
The union of Sobek and Isis is a product of the myth of their combined effort to unite the dismembered limbs of Osiris, Isis’ deceased husband. As a result, Sobek became a healer and a protective deity (Zecchi 2010: 3). The connection between Sobek and Isis is reflected in reliefs of the pair together (FIG. 7), and in some instance, Sobek even supports the coffin of Osiris (FIG. 8; *e.g.*, in the reliefs of the Temple of Isis at Philae: Vassilika 1989: pls. 1–44). In similar fashion, in the Temple of Isis at Pompeii, there is a fresco (likely originally painted in the Second Pompeian Style) on the southern wall of the *Ekklesiasterion* that depicts the Greek goddess Io, identified by the horns on her head, carried by a personification of the Nile and being received by Isis in her sanctuary at Canopus near Alexandria (FIG. 9). In this scene, Isis is seated with a cobra wrapped around her left arm and a crocodile at her feet. A small Harpocrates sits below Isis on an urn with water. Above Isis there is a priestess with a sistrum, a ritual rattle, and a priest who shakes a sistrum and a caduceus, a herald’s staff and a symbol of Hermanubis (Moorman 2007: 151–3). On the lower left there is a small statue of a sphinx, and in the background a great altar with horns, disclosing that the scene is in the sanctuary where worshippers of Isis gathered for ritual banquets (Museo Archeologico Nazionale,



7. Relief with goddess Isis (left) and Sobek, the crocodile-headed god (right).



8. Relief from Temple of Isis at Philae. A crocodile with Osiris mummy on his back with Isis (left) and a solar disk above (Wikipedia Commons 2009).



9. Pompeii. Fresco of Isis receiving Io from the temple of Isis at Pompeii (permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo - Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli).

Naples inv. 9558).² After the earthquake of AD 62, the freedman Numerius rebuilt the Temple of Isis (*ILS* 6367), evidently restoring the paintings in the Fourth Style (Nappo 1998: 89–91), including the Io-Isis fresco (Tinh 1990: 781–2, 794).

The fresco in the Temple of Isis at Pompeii is not the only fresco scene in which the crocodile is associated with Isis in the port city. For example, in the *Casa de Centenario*, an Isiac procession is depicted with two women carrying a crocodile on their left shoulders and is probably of Alexandrian inspiration (FIG. 10; De Vos

² For a discussion of the fresco, see Tinh 1964: 81–2, 128 no. 15 pl. XVI, 2; cf. Merkelbach 1965: 14. See also Grenier 1994: 22–6 on *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 1380 and Moormann 2007: 137–54 in general.



fig. 15 267 (1:2,5)

10. Pompeii, Casa de Centenario, woman carrying a crocodile on her left shoulder in an Isiac procession (De Vos 1980: 38 fig. 15).

1980: 35–47 fig. 15). By the Augustan era, Isis was a normal feature even of the imperial landscape at Rome. On the Palatine, the houses of Augustus and Livia—as well as in the Villa Farnesina nearby in Rome that is associated traditionally with Augustus’ associate, Agrippa—contain wall paintings that feature Isis in her various roles (De Vos 1991: 121–7; 1984: 59–71). In Augustus’ Palatine House, the fresco in Room 15 on the upper floor reflects the Isis cult and many Egyptian symbols, such as obelisks and lotus flowers. The new style of room 15 was painted between 30 and 28 BC, probably by an Alexandrian artist (Carettoni 1983: 67–92 Taf. 18–22). In the adjacent House of Livia, there is a painting of Io/Isis (ca. 30 BC with Augustus symbolically offering Isis

the land of Nubia: Takács 1995: 100). In the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta, there is also a depiction of Isis (Cubiculo B, right wall: Di Mino 1994: 208–13; 1998: pl. 76). In the nearby Villa della Farnesina in Rome, there is a representation of Zeus Ammon and Isis (Di Mino 1994: 215–35; 1998: pls. 24, 75). In the *Aula Isiaca* discovered beneath the Flavian Palace (Iacopi 1997), the paintings of the late Second and early Third Pompeian Style include a female figure with the Isiac headdress or sistrum identified as a priestess of Isis surrounded with Nilotic scenes (Aerae 2015: 88–91). This “Egyptomania” in the decoration of the Augustan Palatine represents a distinct cultural change that appears to have its roots in Ptolemaic Alexandria, which was perhaps perceived as the “primeval paradise” (Aerae 2015: 93), divorced from religious and political motivations (see Dio Cassius 53.2.4 with Orlin 2008: 251–3; Malaise 2011: 185–99). But within the Nabataean realm, the cult of Isis was a vital and real force.

Isis at Petra

As we have seen, the cult of Isis penetrated Petra by at least by the late 1st c. BC (Merklein and Wenning 1998; Healey 2001: 137–140; Vaelske 2013: 351–61), but maybe even earlier, given the intimate connections with Ptolemaic Egypt (Graf 2006). This was certainly the case elsewhere in the Levant. The onomasticon of the 4th c. BC Idumaeen ostraca in Palestine has numerous Arab names, with several theophoric “servant names” with the Egyptian deity for Isis.³ A Nabataean inscription also mentions the goddess Isis at Si’ in the Ḥaurān in the year

³ For Isis, see ‘BD-SY (A14: 3) and ‘BD-’S (A215.1), and even several for Osiris, ‘BD-’WSYR’ (EN 96. JA 86.A215.1 and more) Porten and Yardeni 2014: 244; texts cited in Yardeni 2016: 652 for both names, including Eph’al and Naveh 1996: nos. 96, 98, 182. Note that ‘bdys also appears at Beersheeba: Naveh 1979: nos. 37, 45.

108/7 BC (Milik 2003, 269–74, correcting his date of 104/3 BC). At Petra, the signs of the adoption of the cult are later, attested first in a dedication to Isis at el-Mreriyye in Wādī es-Siyyagh in a relief of the goddess dated to 25 BC (Milik and Starcky 1975, 120–4 = Bricault 2005: 513 no. 404/0501; Merklein and Wenning 2001; cf. Janif 2004). The possible presence of Osiris in the relief at el-Mreriyye has led to the suggestion that the mysteries of Osiris were celebrated at Petra and that Isis herself had a small temple at the Nabataean capital (Bricault 1992: 39, 45). Significant monuments and evidence of the worship of Isis have been found scattered across Petra (recently summarized by Wenning 2016: 519–24). The concentration of Isis statuettes at the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra shows the popularity of the cult (Roche 1987: 218). There also are some 20 or more terracotta and stone figurines, primarily from domestic contexts, scattered throughout the civic center (El-Khourī 2002: 11, 52–4), demonstrating the widespread popularity of the cult at Petra. A much later Greek inscription of AD 257 mentions a priest of Isis at Petra, who must have had precursors (Milik and Starcky 1975: 123 = Bricault 2005: 514 no. 404/0502).

This penetration of Isis into Petra is supported by sculptures of Osiris, Harpocrates, Sarapis, sphinxes, and Dionysus found at the Nabataean capital (Wenning 2019: 562). Nevertheless, in spite of abundant evidence for the cult of Isis at Petra, the Nabataean onomasticon reveals only few anthroponyms with the name of the goddess Isis in theophoric personal names (‘*Abd-Isis*, ‘*bd-ʿsy*). As far as I can determine, there are only four such cases: 1) the gorge of el-Jerra (Dalman 1912: n. 87 = RES 1431; reading by Littmann 1914: 275), 2) the path to the so-called “Obodas chapel” (Dalman 1912: no. 3 = RES 1382; reading by Lidzbarski 1915: 276–7), 3) cistern D. 523 at Jabal al-Mʿīysrah West (Dalman

1912: no. 93 = RES 1435 = Littmann 1914: 276), and 4) the Wādī Shuʿb Qays (Milik and Starcky 1975: 122). Their scarcity is somewhat surprising given the prevalence and pervasiveness of the Isis cult at Petra.

A similar absence exists for the presence of the Isis cult elsewhere in Nabataea, suggesting the evidence at Petra is an isolated phenomenon. Elsewhere, the evidence for the Isis cult appears to be later and fragmentary. At Gerasa in the Decapolis, statues of Sarapis and Isis were dedicated in AD 142/3 (Bricault 2005: 512 no. 404/0401) and an inscribed bust of Sarapis decorated with Isis crowns and headdresses is attested from Umm al-Jimāl in the 2nd or 3rd c. AD (Weber 2006: 82 no. 61). In contrast, in Palestine to the west, the evidence is much earlier. The wall paintings at Tomb I at Marisa have been interpreted as having Dionysiac and Egyptian overtones (Jacobson 2007: 46–9) and the reference to a Dionysiac festival at Jerusalem in 2 Macc. 6:7, regarded traditionally as suspicious, has been recently determined to be authentic (Amitay 2017: 265–70). There is also inscribed Isis-type pottery at Samaria-Sebaste of the late Hellenistic period (Magnez 2001: 158–65; Bricault 2005: 510 no. 403/0501; cf. Bricault 1999). For the Augustan period, there is a dedication to Sarapis and Dionysos at Nysa-Scythopolis (Bricault 2005: 509 no. 403/0301; Belayche 2017: 12–5). This evidence for Palestine and Arabia is just a reflection of the widespread popularity of the Isis cult across the Mediterranean in the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Bricault 2001: see Map I for the diffusion across the Mediterranean world; for the epigraphic evidence: Bricault 2005; for the numismatic evidence: Bricault 2008). The substantial and extensive evidence of Isis at Petra and elsewhere is then not merely a local phenomenon (*pace* Alpass 2010: 107), but rather a phenomenon of large-scale proportions generated by Ptolemaic influence and the attraction of

the Isis cult.

In similar fashion, the Nabataean queens are represented as the Tyche (fortune deity) of their realm, with a raised open palm, and a headdress decorated in the front with an Isis ornament. The same Isis iconographic elements are reflected in the representation of the goddess al-‘Uzza (Zayadine 1981: 117; 1991: 283–306; cf. Schwentzel 2005: 162; Kropp 2013a: 242–43). The Isis headdress appears first with Queen Huldu in the reign of Aretas IV in AD 15 and later with Queen Shuqilat in AD 27 (Hoover and Barkay 2010: 204; Schwentzel 2010: 241–3; cf. Kropp 2013a: 26). It continues with the later queens of Rabbel II, Gamilat, and Hagiru (Kropp 2013b; Schwentzel 2014: 156–58; Barkay 2016: 19, 22). These depictions suggest the numismatic images of Nabataean kings and queens have been infused with the divine symbols of Dionysos and Isis. The influence of Ptolemaic royal portraiture in Nabataean coinage is rather explicit, but not unusual for the period.

These royal portraits are a reflection of the Ptolemaic dynasty, where the queens identified themselves with Isis. Arsinoe II Philadelphos in the 3rd c. BC identified herself with a host of female deities, including Isis, Aphrodite, and Hathor (Müller 2009: 280–99; Caneva 2012: 12; cf. Quaegebeur 1978). But by the reign of Cleopatra III (161–101 BC), Isis is predominant (Smith 1991: 208–9; Van Nuffelen 1999: 179). The latter queen even represented herself as the “Sacred foal of Isis, the Great Mother of the gods,” a clear attestation that the Ptolemaic queen identified herself with Isis (Fraser 1972: 221 n. 249; cf. Colin 1994: 272–83; Plantzos 2011: 395). By the 1st c. BC, the ruling king and queen were now thoroughly divinized, the *Königspaar* (Colin 1994: 293), and incorporated into the Egyptian cult “during their lifetime” (Quaegebuhr 1989: 107). This culminates with Antony and Cleopatra, identifying themselves as the *Neos Dionysos* and the *Nea Isis* (Fraser 1972:

I 245–6; Quaegebeur 1998: 53; cf. Roller 2010: 114–7). Cleopatra VII was not only the representative of Isis in Egypt, but the protector and preserver of her cult from the beginning of her reign (Bernand 1992: no. 21, dated to 51 BC). It is precisely this time that the Nabataean dynasts begin portraying themselves as Dionysos and Isis.

The attestation of *thiasoi* and symposia at Petra confirm the reality of this iconography. At Wādī al-Amti, just northeast of Siq al-Bared at al-Bayḍā, 9 km north of Petra, a Nabataean inscription mentions “Ganamu, the *rab marzeh*, and his son Wa’ilu,” i.e., the symposiarch of a *marzeh* (Zayadine 1976: 139–42; 1986: 465–74). As we have seen, al-Bayḍā was the center of wine production, and Wādī al-Amti is adjacent to an elaborately decorated building discovered in 2006 with a colonnaded hall and triclinium dating to the reign of Malichus I (59/58–30 BC). It has been identified as a “Dionysiac” banquet hall, based on the Dionysian-like styled human-headed capitals associated with the structure (Bikai *et al.* 2008: 465–507). The nearby “Painted House” at al-Bayḍā depicting grapes and vines (McKenzie 1990: 114–5), perhaps with an Isis figure, has recently been interpreted as a banquet complex and Isis sanctuary (Twaissi *et al.* 2010: 31–42 fig. 10). Both ritual areas are located at the center of the numerous winepresses in the al-Bayḍā-Ba‘ja region, which I have designated “Dionysiac lands” of the Nabataean dynasty, perhaps comprising their royal vineyards (Graf 2018a; cf. Schmid 2017; Bellwald 2020). This would be an appropriate setting for an adherent of the Dionysos-Isis cult to create a votive shrine with a sculpted crocodile at nearby Raqqabta Abu Thabet symbolizing his devotion to the Egyptian gods. Without epigraphic support associated with the shrine, there is no absolute certainty for this proposal, but I hope the case presented is at least reasonable if not plausible.

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