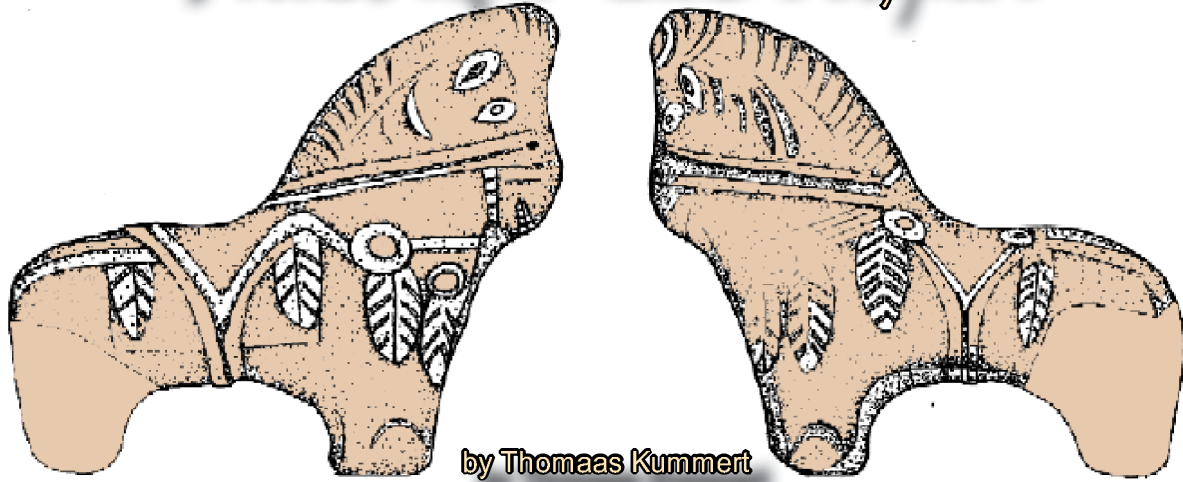


# Nabataean Figurines

## Pocket Idols - Like Betyles?



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**T**he existence and wide spread usage of votive figurines by Nabataean citizens are evidence of the wide cultural connections of this important empire with Greek, Egyptians, Parthians and southern Arabian cultures, who all used figurines for the same purpose dedicated to deities with similar roles and attributes.

But what is different and intriguing is the fact that Nabataean figurines were created in unique styles and forms, were rather personal items and genuine in character. Nevertheless they were produced in vast numbers, most of them were small figurines dedicated to the various deities of the Nabataean pantheon.

As they were personal and daily use items, they were found mostly in the residential quarters of the Nabataean capital Petra and at Mada'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia. Some were discovered in temples and few even in tombs, but those found in temples and tombs were no different to those

unearthed in the houses on the Katute hill slopes.

Nabataeans used these votive figurines as intermediaries for sacred acts, such as offerings to their gods and for demands of blessings and protection for business and trips. This included also any expressions of thanks and was a way to keep in regular touch with gods.

So we can assume that this religious habit spread and that every Nabataean citizen owned at least one figurine and this was the reason why they were later mass produced losing their uniqueness and genuine character.

Possibly this was the first mass production of any pottery



item at the time in the region. Most figurines were female, but also some male versions were found during excavations. Other human motifs used were for example models of musicians.

But animals such as camels and horses, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, were another favorite item. These animal figurines were either produced with or without a stand and a rider on top from the 1st century BC onwards.

The main period of figurine production took place during the rule of King Aretas IV. and Malichus II. Nabataean figurine production went on for over 400 years well into the 3rd and 4th century AD, but the quality declined over time and from Roman rule over Nabataea at the beginning of the 2nd century AD the statuettes were rather crude.

### Figurine Types & Styles

It was already mentioned that the main motif were human depictions. So the main figurine types included nude enthroned

goddesses such as al Uzza or Nabataean main god Dhu Shara for example sculptured as a standing nude boy.

The typical female figurine style was done in a draped partly nude pose as seated enthroned goddess. A perfect example is a figurine of goddess Isis shown enthroned and partly draped. Other divine depictions identified were those of goddess Aphrodite and a winged version of Nike.

Most male figurines were all standing partly nude and draped, including in addition to the previously mentioned Dhu Shara gods such as Harpocrates, Dionysus and Bes. There was a wide range of animals used as motif for votive figurines, including horse, camel, ibex, goat, gazelle, deer, ram, monkey, donkey, eagle and dove, as this was the holy animal of key goddess Isis.

In this context we have to remember the tomb like structure called columbarium in Petra with its many small compartments assumed to be pigeon holes. It is no surprise therefore to find human figures holding a bird most likely a holy dove.

It is unique to all Nabataean figurines, that humans were only created in a frontal pose, not showing any small details, and possessing a certain asymmetry of body parts. The typical mass producing molds showed the arms held close to the body, necks were short and somewhat plump, faces were rather rounded with short fore head and stubby nose, full chin, giving an overall calm facial expression.

### Female Figurines

The nude depiction of female goddesses was a common attribute linked to fertility. Most of these figurines were created during the time of King Aretas

IV. There was a large variety of shapes, types and techniques used, resulting in anything from crude to finely crafted figurines.

Normally they were small in size measuring between 7-12 cm, as they were destined for personal ritual use at home. The local red, pink, or orange colored clay was used, and painted red brown with the same color used for household pottery items.

The most common type was a female goddess in frontal pose with the right arm holding a palm branch as sign of blessing. This figurine type could also be shown with bare breasts, in a pregnant state or feeding a baby, as fertility goddess used by women to pray for the wanted family growth.

The fertility attribute of goddesses was also depicted by holding tambourines, birds, fruits and wheat spikes. An interesting motif is that of a mourning Isis with her right hand on her chin, wearing a long fringed chiton dress tied over her breast, with her left hand holding either a sistrum, a rattle like instrument linked to a cobra, which was the holy animal of Isis, or a feather or situla, a little vessel of holy water.

The other two goddesses crafted as figurines were a winged Nike and al-Uzza, both were seated and usually draped in a flowing dress, with a crown of plaits or palm leaves, holding either stick or vessel. They were usually in company of god Zeus or Atena.

But Nike also appears often on silver coins together with King Aretas III. and Aretas IV. Particular to Nike is that she is also shown on ceramic lamps and most importantly on the facade of the famous treasury in Petra. Aphrodite the Greco-Roman counter part of goddess al-Uzza is only depicted once



in Petra as an enthroned partly draped goddess.

The typical female hairstyle at the time was parted in the middle with hair drawn to arrange in plaits on each side covering both ears and falling to the shoulder.

### Male Figurines

Male figurines were produced in fewer numbers and lesser variation in shape and type compared to female figurines. The reason was that male gods were represented through their sacred animal.

The few male figurines were most common shown in standing pose and found in temples, tombs and residential quarters. The clay used was red or pink in color dating from 1st to 2nd century AD during the times of King Aretas IV., King Malichus II. and the last Nabataean king Rabbel II.

These mini statuettes normally were nude in a stiff frontal pose with a stout body and short legs. The head sat on a short and fat neck, had a round face and overall calm look.

The hairstyle was short with curly locks in a grid pattern. Typically the left hand was raised straight from elbow to the front and holding an object. The right hand sported a bracelet and was raised close to the chest with the palm gesture of blessing.

The feet were adorned with anklets, the neck usually with a necklace of large beads and a lunar shaped amulet, which was only found depicted on male figurines and was an indication of childhood. These figurines were quite similar to those of temple boys found in Cyprus temples, which function still is uncertain to archaeologists.

What we know is that Arabs in Duma Hauran sacrificed a boy

annually and buried him under the temple altars, so it is possible that these figurines were used instead of human sacrifice. Harpocrates figurines in Petra for example were few and were distinguished by a crown to indicate the divine status.



But also the image of putting a finger in the mouth was a typical indication of youth and in this context also god Harpocrates. Another of his attributes was holding a full horn in his left arm. Dionysus the son of Zeus and Semele was identified and linked with Nabataean main deity Dhu Shara, and considered next to his main attributes to be the



protector of theatre, tragedy and comedy, plus the god of wine and vineyards.

Another god was Bes the Egyptian dwarf god tasked to avert evils, but was also the god of dance, fertility, health and

magic. He was represented in various forms, naked, dressed, as a dancer, warrior, and on lamps and in bottle form.

In this context also priests were shown in striking pose as bearded male in stiff frontal pose with girdled around hips, holding their beards and crowned with a conical headgear indicating their higher service status.

### Musicians

Musicians were another customary figurine object showing them playing the following instruments common at the time were flute, harp, lyre, tambourine and flat drum. These figurines measured between 8-12 centimeters in heights.

What is interesting to note is the fact that always three seated musicians formed part of the group. One male flanked by two females with the male musician playing the double flute, and the right hand side female the harp or lyre, and on the left side the other female musician playing another small string instrument.

In addition the male musician has a castanet like instrument hanging on a strap on his left side. These were the typical compositions during the times of King Aretas IV. Greek historian Strabo also mentioned two female singers to be present at banquets.

But it could be assumed that the female musicians were also singing. From the figurines we also know how the typical Nabataean dress looked like. Few standing draped figurines were found in Petra temples and residential quarters, which were wearing a long pleated himation dress extending right down to the ankles.

These were closely wrapped around the body leaving right shoulder and parts of the chest

free. The Nabataean dress falls inclined down from the left shoulder to the waist and was adorned with an engraved border.

### Masks

If we look at masks it needs to be said that most are found in stone reliefs in Petra, Oboda and the Hauran area. They are typically masks showing tragedy and death indicating a human desire to identify with the divine and link up with the dead or reach spiritual immortality.

Therefore many masks are those of gods, Isis, Dionysus, Medusa and often created with exaggerated facial features, such as: large mouth, wide nose,



large rounded eyes, projected curved eyebrows. In this context also the various monkey masks can be explained. But all masks are very similar to the Hellenistic masks used at Alexandria.

### Orans

Orans were votive figurines sitting on the ground, typically lifting their hands with palms turning forward in a pose of prayer and adoration and devotion of gods.

These oran figurines were wide spread in Egypt at the time and assumed to have been copied by Nabataeans in Petra. They were never male but either women, girls and boys and all dated around the 2nd to 4th century AD.

### Animals

Animals by far were the most numerous with various shapes, sizes, types, but the general size of animal figurines was approximately eight centimeters, so rather small again to fit in



bags and pockets.

These figurines were crude to finely crafted, made of local red, pink and orange clay evenly fired. There were more horse than camel motifs with an intrinsic beauty and striking characteristics.

These figurines were produced already in the 1st century BC. Horses did actually symbolize the solar deity, nevertheless few horses were created with riders on top, an interesting concept, but interpreted as the deity riding his sacred animal.



Most horse figurines are depicted standing, only one shown in gallop and another in a jumping position. Unfortunately proportions were not quite correct with short thick legs, larger heads, eyes rounded or almond shaped giving a staring expression, ears rounded, big

mouth, short solid neck and a flat belly.

But hoses sport a remarkable amount of ornaments and decorations including detailed indications of saddles, girths, bridles, reins and horizontal strap with pendants. These decorations were created with different tools after the molding.

Saddles were rectangular with girth straps of two lined ropes, two incised parallel lines, screw like girth, braided or indented, but surprisingly no stirrups depicted. Hoses were important animals and therefore adorned with protective pendants, some in front, others situated behind the saddle, either large or long oval shaped.



Riders were dressed differently depending on intended meaning and representations. Normal riders were dressed with a typical Greco-Roman tunic, but riding gods were shown half naked.

Interestingly horses found in Petra and Oboda were all very similar and it can be assumed with certainty that they all were mass produced in Petra like other pottery items.

### Camels

Same as horse figurines some camel statuettes also were created with riders on top. And again proportions were not quite correct with short thick legs, short solid neck, larger heads, but typical for camels with big half open mouth and wide lips.

Camels as well were adorned with rich decorations and ornaments. But different to horses all camels were shown with weapons, such as daggers, swords and shields.

The detailed riding equipment included trappings, saddle with cushion, padded bow, decorated bag, tassels, girth, breast strap, crupper, pendants, quiver and various forms of medallions.

The saddle form and style was similar the Assyrian camels, which were fixed with a thick straps over the hump. The weaponry included three types of daggers with hilts usually made from wood, ivory or metal and highly decorated. Swords were normally of the typical Arab curved form.

### Other Animals

Horns were the symbols of power and strength and horned animals used in this context were ibex, goat, gazelle and ram, but the artisans showed limited artistic skills in the process.

Horns were also an attribute of many deities including Ashtar and the mother goddess. Goats in antiquity were worshiped as symbol of fertility and monkeys for example to ward off evil spirits. Doves were considered sacred representing goddess Isis, nevertheless it was common to sacrifice doves.

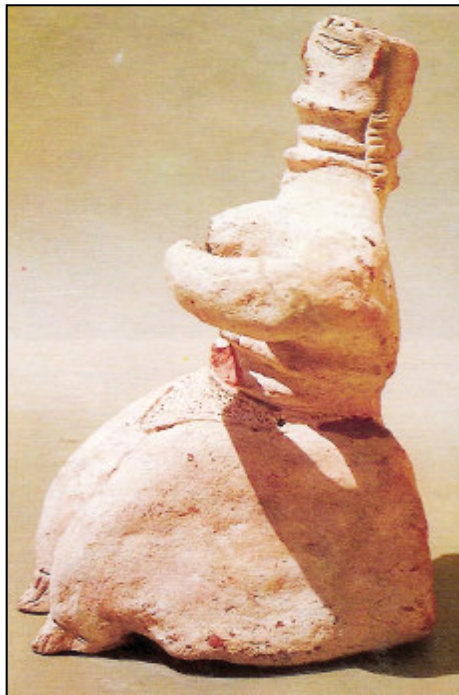
Eagle sculptures can be seen at Petra's famous treasury, at the Khirbet et-Tannur temple and above many tomb entrances as guardians of the deceased and as representatives of Nabataean main deity Dhu Shara.

The eagle is the only animal not bound by gods to the earth, as he could fly up into the higher skies to reach god Dhushara linked to Greek Zeus in the religious beliefs of Nabataeans.

### Technique

As kaolin forms fine crystals it was used to obtain the best clay qualities to form small figurines. Ash, sand, organic material and mica was added as temper to reduce shrinkage and break up during the pottery backing process.

Three techniques were used for figurine production. The first was a simple fully manual process, the second used a single and third a double mold or any combination thereof by adding clay to certain parts after the molding, such as increasing breasts or creating pregnant figurines to depict fertility.



### Clay Molding

The red clay color comes from iron hematite compounds, hydrated forms of ferric oxide and goethite and limonite produced the orange coloring. Molds were produced in plaque type and consisted of one solid mold, only molding the front portion with a flat back and no hollow inside.

Often finger marks were found on the back side pressing the clay into mold. For human

figures two molds were used consisting of a front and back side, but for animal figurines artisans used right and left side molds.

### Production Steps

The different steps of the pottery production have not changed much until today. First a model was created in wax, wood or clay, thereafter the model was covered with a layer of clay to create a matrix mold.

The next step was that this mold was used to press a thin layer of wet clay into it, once this clay dried the half figure was removed from mold.

Now both parts were joined together by using wet clay as binding material and finally certain details were added and decorations done by incisions and puncturing.

Figurines were all colored using a slip coat and well fired at between 750°C to 950°C degrees. Experts established that Nabataeans did not use more than four molds for one figurine and that animal heads were done separately.

### Summary

Votive figurines were highly common objects in the Nabataean day-to-day life and religious practises. They were mass produced like most of the Nabataean pottery household items. Some were quite specific and neatly formed and decorated in detail, others were rather crude in style and finish.

### Comment

Please note that due to the lack of available pictures and Nabataean figurines being rarely exhibited at museums, most of the pictures used are from Saudi Arabian excavations of related cultures.