



The Nabataean Pantheon & Their Gods

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In the previous articles about the Nabataeans you have read a lot about their history, the different kings, the many wars and their wide spread trading activities all for which they were most famous. But so far we have not covered the subject of their religion and gods.

Well this is not an easy subject, as again very little is known about it. Remember that despite the elaborate script which the Nabataeans developed, unlike other cultures they were very secretive and purposely did not keep any records about their history, rituals and other details.

As this makes research difficult, if not impossible, this article is based on various ancient sources and more recent expert research and conclusions with cross references to other regional cultures and deities, to create a better understanding and big picture of the Nabataean pantheon.

In the 3rd century BC through the strong rule of Alexander the Great, Hellenistic influence on regional kingdoms with regards to culture and religion were immense. The best proof of this you can see in the Greek temple style architecture of Nabataean tomb facades, which are very alien to a culture of Arab desert nomads living in tents.

The Treasury (Al Khazneh),
Viewed from the Siq, Petra



Votive Niche, Jebel Ithlib Mada'in Saleh



Three Votive Niches, Jebel Ithlib Mada'in Saleh

The vast Nabataean trading activities, involving many empires and spanning over 6,000km west to east, eased the adoption of other deities, resulting in Egyptian, Greek and later Roman gods and rituals being mixed and integrated with Arab deities and cults. Details of the Nabataean pantheon are not yet fully clear as different names were used for possibly the same gods and gods had various powers and it must be assumed, that sub-epithets were given to main gods.

A low tendency to monotheism or unification of various powers and attributes gods that were worshiped, complicates research. Therefore the Nabataean mythology remains hypothetic and can only be based on comparison of other known regional gods of cultures with which they were in regular contact.

The Nabataeans were pagans and worshiped various deities depicted by stone idols and gods were not given human form, because they were of a spiritual nature. They believed that their deities had special powers and carved niches into rocks and created altars and cult steles as houses for their gods. These symbolized cult steles were rather small from 20cm to just over one meter and were called "betyle". They were an important part of Nabataean cult ceremonies and were carved as square stones or pyramid like with steps at their base. The only human form they were given on the flat stone surface, were the depiction of two eyes and a mouth.

We have to distinguish "betyles" from the commemorative small stone columns called "nefesh", which in the past were often referred to as the same, but a "nefesh" is representing a deceased. A "nefesh" is a conical obelisque type small stone column and in Nabataean Aramaic means body and soul being one or united. They were used in death cults and therefore found at the numerous banquet halls or tricliniums close to major tombs.

These death rituals played an important role in the Nabataean culture and they must have believed in a life after death, judging from the enormous and spacious tombs they built.

Most "betyles" and "nefesh" were found along busy and frequented passages and mountain trails in Petra and were often grouped and worshiped together. In Madain Saleh votive niches were found without "betyles", but those niches had holes at their base. It can be assumed that passing caravans carried their idols with them for protection and used those niches for their worshiping, when resting at Madain Saleh.

This theory is supported by typical "betyle" stones being found along the Incense Route, which probably were lost by accident or when attacked, thrown away as useless stone. Only in Petra under increasing Greco-Roman cultural influence over time, human form statues were created to depict and represent Nabataean gods.

That same influence also led to major temples and shrines being built. It is interesting, that in all Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures gods, like humans, were related to each other with complete family structures and also had their liaisons and conflicts.

Despite the three major temple complexes at Petra, Qasr el-Bint, the Great Temple and the Lion Temple, other important Nabataean temples and places of worship were found across the region. Situated 90km north of Petra at Khirbat et-Tannur on the 300m high Jebel el-Tannur overlooking Wadi el-Hasa, was an important temple dedicated to various deities, such as Atargatis, queen of heaven symbolized by a dolphin and Hadad the weather god.

The sun and fertility cult used in Petra came from Mesopotamia. The provenance of the lunar cult is not clear, but lunar shaped amulets are found on figurines of gods and fixed to horse bridles. This is interesting, because horses represented normally a solar deity and were important to Nabataeans and bred in great numbers. The amulet possibly sought protection, when moving by night.

But we will talk about the role of animals in religious beliefs later. Now think about this, some papyrus rolls found in Egypt mention that the Greek goddess Isis was more popular in Petra than in her territory of origin Greece and Egypt.

Most interesting is also the fact, that the Nabataean Zodiac is the



Votive Niche, The Diwan Mada'in Saleh



Eye Idol, Jebel Ithlib Mada'in Saleh



Votive Niche, Madain Saleh



Votive Niche, Petra Siq



Votive Niche, Madain Saleh

only one being quite different from those of other important cultures at the time. It used 12 Zodiac constellations suggesting divine control over the cosmos, but the Nabataean Zodiac disk is unique with an unusual order in two columns, opposite direction top down with two yearly cycles. Further the ram of Aries and the goat of Capricorn are shown in an abbreviated version as busts and Nabataeans also had integrated Tyche and Nike to symbolize abundance and prosperity, which was an important element of their trading culture. Remember the strange rule, that at some stage Nabataean merchants were taxed, when their business fortunes did not grow.

Coming back to the Nabataean pantheon, it consisted like many other regional cultures, such as Egypt, Babylonia or Greece, of a trinity of main gods. These were the principal deity Dhu'shara and the two goddesses al-Uzza and al-Lat.

Dhu'shara was given various meanings such as, lord of the world, protector of the king, the one who separates day and night, or he of Shara, a mountain range north of Petra. He was responsible for seasonal cycles and rainfall and linked to Greek god Zeus and his son Dionysus, as well as

equated to Assyrian and Babylonian god Nabu, Aries, Mars and Hadad. As such his symbol animal was the bull.

Later Dhu'shara was also linked to attributes and powers of Athene. Dhu'shara was the god of the Nabataean leaders and the official cult, therefore his main place of worship in Petra was a walled area in front of the important Qasr el-Bint Faroun temple with a huge altar, where he was symbolized by a black stone stele on a raised golden platform.

The stone stele symbolization originates from ancient megalithic, archaic Sumerian and older Egyptian cults. It is assumed that a Dhu'shara stele was also placed at the back niche in the Monastery. His presence was also commonly depicted by an eagle above tomb entrances. The most famous religious attraction in Petra was the Dhu'shara festival, which took place on 25th December to mark the birthday of the sun.

Based on the strong influence he had on Nabataean culture, the Dhu'shara cult spread to other

areas in Phoenicia, Asia Minor and even Rome. Dhu'shara temples were also found in Madain Saleh at Jebel Ithlib, on Rhodes Island and at Puteoli (Pozzuoli) near Naples in Italy. These temples were not built by occasional travelers, but by Nabataean merchants, who were permanent residents there.

Al-Uzza described as the all powerful one, or the mightiest one, is the main goddess in Petra and assumed to be the virgin mother who gave birth to Dhu'shara and therefore represents the sun. In contrast to Dhu'shara she was the peoples deity, and was associated with Isis the Egyptian goddess of fertility, mother of Harpocrates and further assimilated with Aphrodite, Venus, or Tyche.

References to other goddesses were made, such as: Ashtar in Mesopotamia, Ashtaroth in Phoenicia and Atargatis in Seleucidia (Syria). Al-Uzza was first mentioned in an inscription at Dedan (al-'Ula) in the 4th century BC and later in the Qur'an as well. With al-Lat and Manat, she was regarded as one of the three daughters of god and in pre-Islamic times belonged to the trinity of Makkah goddesses, each with a different shrine. Al-Uzza was the most prominent with her shrine at Nakhlah, Manat near Qudayd and al-Lat at Taif.



Block tomb with burial on top, Petra



Other sources also mention the three goddesses in connection with the moon cult similar to Demeter. Each representing the three different moon phases: al-Lat the crescent or maiden phase, al-Uzza the full moon phase symbol of the mother role, and Manat the waning moon phase as symbol of the wise woman. As such al-Uzza was also worshipped at the ancient Kaaba site and served by seven female priests (seven circumventions).

As a superior goddess al-Uzza was depicted also on coins, oil lamps used in temples and at many sites in Petra, at the Treasury, Lion Temple and in many niches along Wadi Siyyagh and Wadi Waghrit. Al-Uzza was normally shown as an enthroned naked goddess. Statuettes of her were also found at the Lion Temple and at the ez-Zantur mountain plateau.

Now brace yourself for a really big surprise, which so far has not been widely reported. Proof has been found that Nabataeans were worshipping al-Uzza with human sacrifices. Young boys were sacrificed annually at a cult site at Duma in the Hauran region close to their later capital Bosra and buried under the altar.

References of human sacrifices were also found in inscriptions at Mada'in Saleh, so it can be assumed that those sacrifices also took place at other sites. We also know that the slaughtering of black camels and white sheep was done with their blood sprinkled all over as substitution for human sacrifices.

The last member of the Nabataean trinity of gods was al-Lat goddess of water, natural springs and fertility. Al-Lat was called mother of gods and the sun worship was also associated with her. She not only had this in common with al-Uzza, but was also associated with Aphrodite, Venus, Tyche and Minerva.

Some experts see the possibility that al-Uzza and al-Lat were the same deity, but different names



were used for different attributes or powers, or by different groups used different names for the identical deity.

Al-Lat was also mentioned as the goddess of the city of Hatra in Iraq today called al-Hadr. In this Assyrian and Mesopotamian context she was the mother of Hubal and therefore the mother-in-law of Manat. Al-Lat was also quoted later in the Qur'an and in pre-Islamic times an idol stone was worshipped at the Kaaba site in Makkah.

Manat was the goddess of destiny and fate and her cognate name was Manatu or Manawat. She equated to Nemesis, Tyche and was the wife to Hubal. As mentioned before she was one of the three city goddesses of Makkah and was mentioned later in the Qur'an. Arab fathers named their children Abd Manat or Zayd Manat.

If we go further back in history ancient Arabs only had two gods, which could be equated to Aphrodite and Dionysus. This goddess was called Alilat by Arabian worshipers and Mylitta by the Assyrians and Mitra by the Persians. The correspondent god was called Orotalt.

We have earlier mentioned the role of animals in religion. Arab tribes still today associate camels with after life and resurrection beliefs. They left one of the owner's camels on the grave of the deceased with its head turned to the rear, to die of starvation, believing that he would mount his camel on the day of resurrection.

Animals played an important part in religious beliefs and therefore Nabataeans mass produced a variety of ceramic animal figurines for worshipping. Next to horses symbolizing solar deities and camels symbolizing the demons and "jinn" spirits, horned animals such as ibex, goat, gazelle and ram symbolizing power and strength.

Goats were worshiped as symbol of fertility, monkeys to ward off evil spirits, doves were considered sacred, nevertheless they were also sacrificed. Only eagles had a special



position, as they were regarded as the only animal not bound to earth by gods. Eagles could fly high up to reach Zeus, or in the Nabataean case Dhu'shara, and were seen as connecting people or deceased with the principle deity, therefore many monumental tombs in Petra and Mada'in Saleh have eagles above their entrance. Together with eagles snakes were depicted on tomb facades as guardians of the death to ward of any intruder.

There is an interesting controversy in the Nabataean pantheon of gods. This involves Shi'a al-Qaum the ancient god of war, night time and guardian of nomads and caravans. This important god and the cult around him was created by the Arab caravan tribes and stood in contrast to the city based Nabataeans, who worshiped Dhu'shara as principal deity.

Let us summarize quickly, what was explained in earlier Sandladder articles. Nabataean origins are still unclear, but we know that they were true Arabs of multiple ethnic and tribal origin possibly from various parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Nabataea was not a kingdom like any other, it did not have clearly defined borders, nor did the Nabataeans represent the majority population in what was defined as their territory on maps. Ancient sources described the king as a person, who served his people at festivities, rather than being served.

They also mention a group of 13 persons, or assumed to be priests in some sources, which were regularly present at ceremonies in temples and at ceremonial banquets. A rather convincing theory sees Nabataea not as a kingdom, but as consensus driven merchant organization, combining nomad Bedouins, who settled down in cities to handle warehousing and transshipping, and caravan leaders responsible for the transport on the busy Incense Route. This created a difference in life style and rituals versus the true desert Bedouin life style and beliefs.

Then there was a third kind of life style which developed in the 1st century AD showing a certain transformation into a true agriculture focused community.

These Nabataeans were living further away from Petra in the fertile plains of Moab and Hauran. With the introduction of new gods responsible for good harvests, they created a new balance in the Nabataean pantheon.

These new cults developed strongly after the Roman occupation in the 2nd century AD as evidenced at the temple sites of Khirbat et-Tannur and ed-Harieh. The need for this change is explained quickly. In contrast to Romans the Nabataeans did not use slaves and were multi tasked, as merchants, camel breeders, farmers all in one, and when needed warriors. A Roman army suddenly based at Petra, plus all the administration and families, which came with it, needed to be fed.

Certainly we have not fully covered all sources, when it comes to Nabataean gods, and this list is long, because like the Greeks they had a god for every activity including writing. So this list is definitely not complete. In Mada'in Saleh a temple was found on Jebel Ithlib, following the tradition to build temples on mountain tops. This temple was dedicated to A'ara the god of the city of Bosra, which in the 2nd century AD became the capital of the Nabataeans under Roman rule.

Other deities worshiped by Nabataeans living in the Negev area also included the ancient Edom god Qawa or Qos. Goddess Qaysha was associated to Manat and a temple dedicated to her is mentioned in one of the inscriptions. Al-Kutbay was the god of writing and was equated to Hermes and Mercure. Baal Shamin was the supreme Phoenician deity and Hubalu was one of the pre-Islamic gods of the city of Makkah.

The ever present desire to expand their trading activities and grow fortunes had certainly an important influence on Nabataean worshiping and beliefs. Unfortunately little is known about their death rituals, which played the second most important role in their lives.

We know that annual ritual meals were held in specifically crafted huge banquet halls next to the most important tombs, these were also called tricliniums, as they had stone benches along three walls, as Nabataeans used to dine lying down, like the Greek and Romans did. Petra for example had over 3,000 tombs, with 800 being monumental tombs and close to 100 of those tombs had their own triclinium.

All mountain tops around Petra such as, el-Medras, el-Hubta, Zibb al-Atuf, el-Habis, Umm el-Biyara, Jebel en-Nmer and Jebel Haroun are littered with places of sacrifice, including all present hewn steps leading to the top, numerous carved votive niches, many betyltes and altars.

Close to these you also find often carved out pools and channels suggesting animal and possibly



human sacrifices being held. All wadis around Petra with small dead end canyons have been used by individuals, groups or families as places of sacrifice and are covered with votive niches. In Mada'in Saleh these votive niches often have the names of the worshippers engraved around them and some times even the names of deceased are mentioned.

Greek historian Strabo mentioned, that Nabataeans also had small altars on top of their two storey stone houses to worship the sun with sacrifices of food and drink. Similar to other regional cultures Nabataeans also used ceramic figurines as sacred votive offerings to gods.

These were used to get blessings and protection and were also an

expression of thanks and a way to keep in regular touch with their gods for their individual needs. These figurines were very small in size on average 7-12cm and could easily be carried around. The male or female figurines representing gods were normally nude, enthroned or standing and sometimes partly draped.

Besides the animal figurines we mentioned before, Nabataeans also produced miniature musicians and masks. The musicians must have played a roll in some rituals, perhaps at the burials or annual banquets.

They are depicted in a group of three seated musicians. A man in the middle is playing a rare double flute and is flanked by two women playing harp and lyre. Other known

instruments used at the time were tambourine, flat drum and castanets. In total over 360 of these figurines were found.

We know the Nabataeans were very gifted merchants, but to be able to amass such an enormous wealth from trading with the very strong empires around them, they must have been also very successful in their worshipping and securing divine support in their business endeavors.

So we hope that this last article in a series of five on the Nabataeans have all together enhanced your understanding and knowledge about this interesting and little known Arab culture and certainly raised your interest to visit Mada'in Saleh and Petra soon, if you have not been there yet.