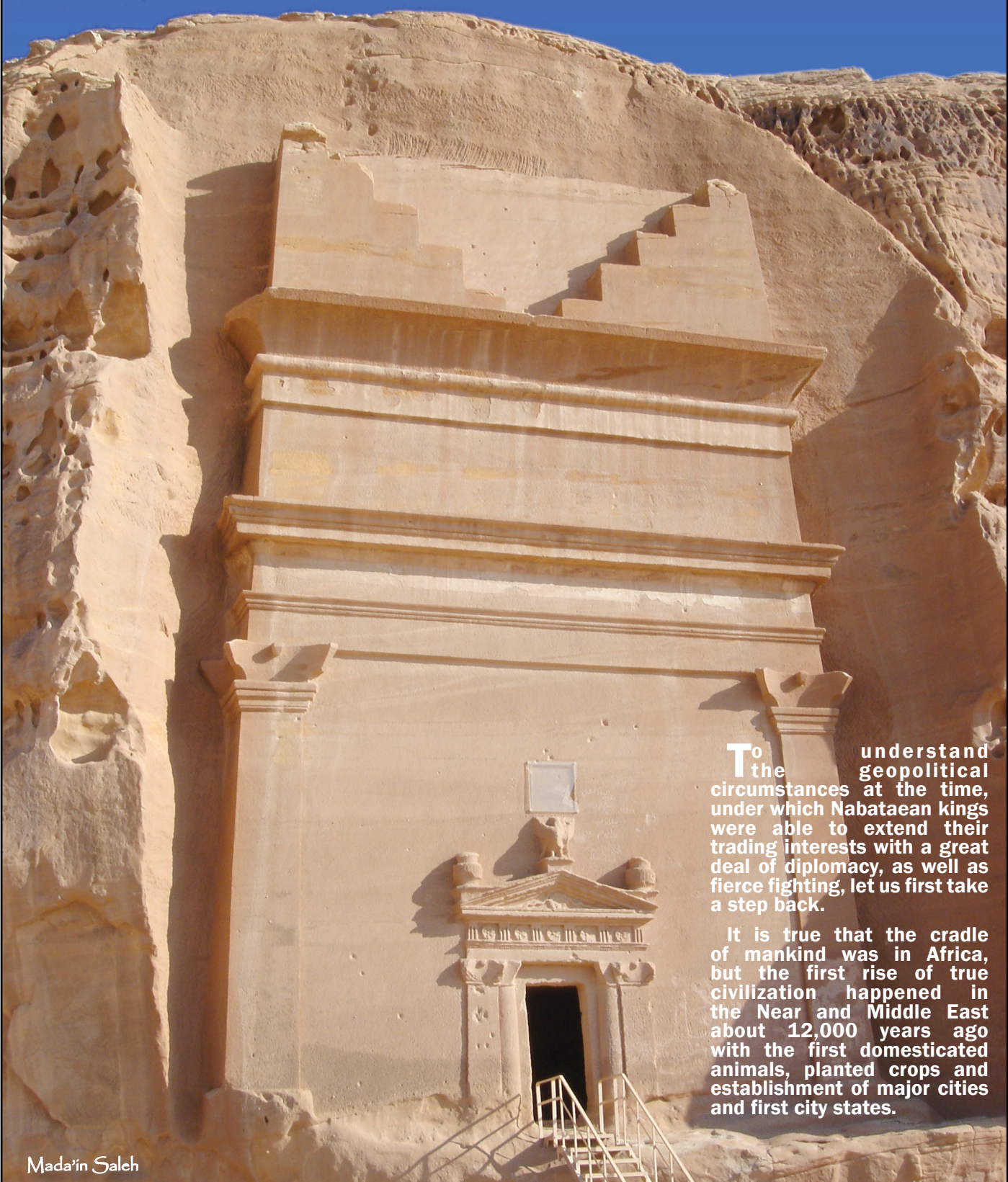


NABATAEAN HISTORY & THEIR KINGS

by Thomas Kummert
www.ancient-cultures.info

A large Nabataean temple carved into a sandstone cliff. The temple features a prominent staircase leading up to a series of horizontal steps, followed by a large rectangular facade with a central entrance. The entrance is framed by a pediment supported by two columns. A small square window is visible above the entrance. The surrounding rock is weathered and shows signs of erosion.

To understand the geopolitical circumstances at the time, under which Nabataean kings were able to extend their trading interests with a great deal of diplomacy, as well as fierce fighting, let us first take a step back.

It is true that the cradle of mankind was in Africa, but the first rise of true civilization happened in the Near and Middle East about 12,000 years ago with the first domesticated animals, planted crops and establishment of major cities and first city states.

When the Nabataeans were first mentioned in history in the 4th century BC, the region was strongly influenced by the dominating power of Greek super ruler Alexander the Great. With his death in 323BC and split up of this vast empire into various new empires ruled by his former generals, the two most important in the area being the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire in Iraq and Syria. Those centuries were unstable times with permanent battles fought internally to stay in power and externally for regional dominance resulting in frequent changes of rulers.

Towards the 1st century BC Roman rule became more influential and taking full control of the region 100 years later with the Nabataeans becoming a Roman province in 106AD, but this was not the end of Nabataean existence and influence.

To put the surprising greatness of its architectural work into perspective, it is important to understand, that the Nabataean culture was created as a melting pot of various cultures dominant in the area at the time, such as: Greek, Egyptian, Roman and Arabian. The immense extent of Nabataean trading interests, with goods being sourced from as far as India and China, were crucial factors for shaping the only demonstration left of their cultural importance, the impressive Nabataean architecture in Petra, Bosra and Madain Saleh.

The Nabataeans were very secretive and despite their own developed script, they did not keep any historic records to disguise their trade secrets, such as their caravan routes and most importantly their secret desert water cisterns along the way. Therefore little is still known about them and most information comes from the few sources available in antiquity. So this article combines carefully collected and researched information from various antique and recent sources as well as new findings.

As Nabataean wealth from trade grew, they started to build up a strong army to defend their trading interests. This article will give you some insight into the astonishing development

of the Nabataean Kingdom, its little known kings and their surprising diplomatic skills and high level of political and military activities.

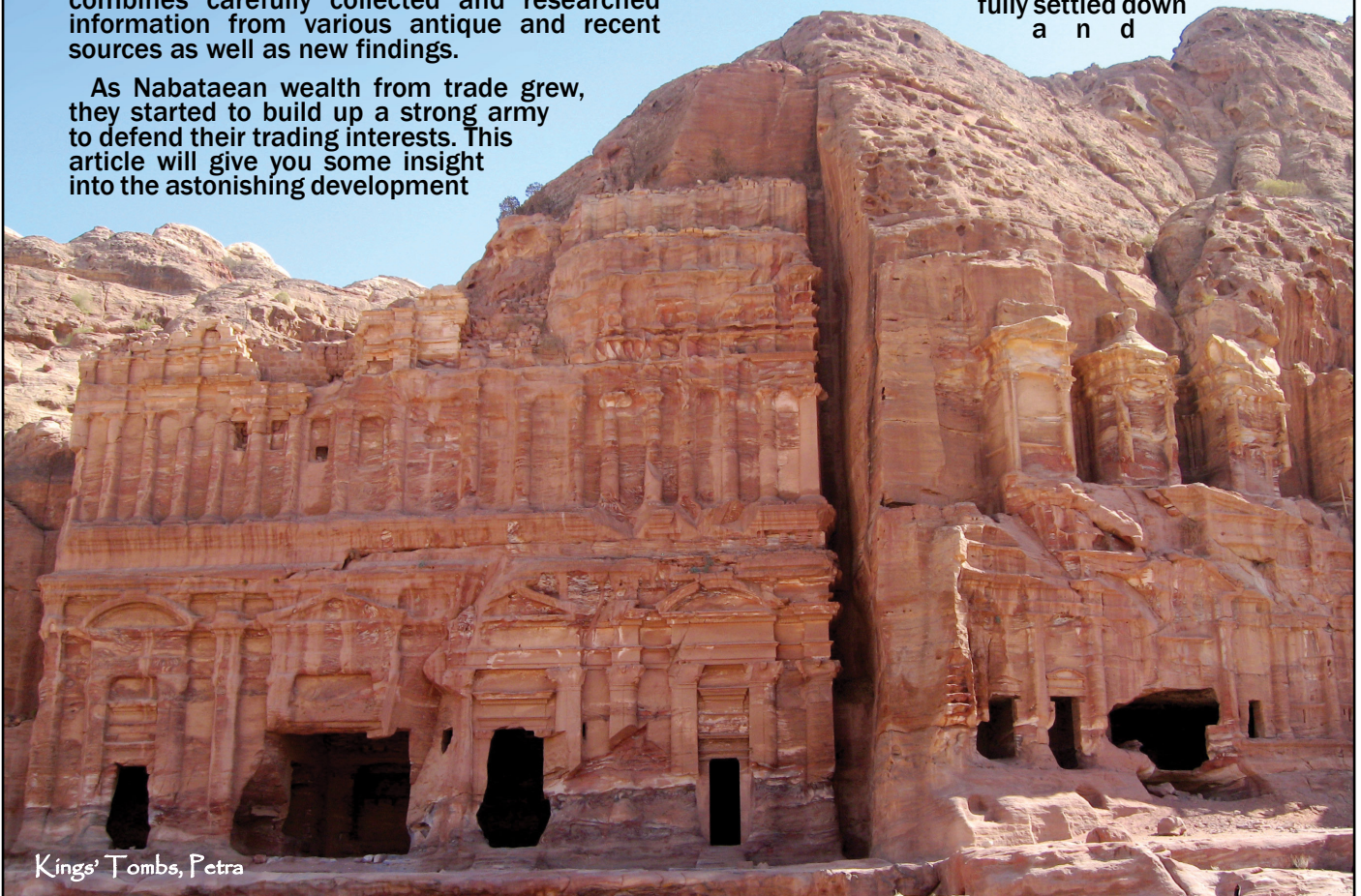
Even before the first kings were mentioned in any historic sources, Nabataeans took part in military action when they allied with Persian King Cambyses in 525BC to overthrow the 26th Egyptian dynasty. Nabataeans also had to defend their valuable trading interests twice in 312BC against Greek Antigonos Cyclops or Monophtalmos "the one eyed" and his son Demetrios Poliorcetes.

In the first attack 4,000 soldiers and 600 cavalry easily overpowered old men, women and children left behind when Nabataean men were out of town to trade on regional markets. The Greek army took a huge booty of frankincense, myrrh and 500 talents in silver. The Nabataean men came back at night and killed all but 50 soldiers, who could escape.

To appease Antigonos for his big loss and to avoid further confrontations Nabataeans offered a financial peace arrangement to Antigonos. But Antigonos was so offended by the loss of part of his army, that he send his son Demetrios to attack and destroy the Nabataeans with 4,000 soldiers and this time a 4,000 strong cavalry. Nabataeans could successfully defend themselves in the mountain terrain they knew well and the Greek were beaten again.

But the Greek did not give up and attacked the Nabataeans later again, this time in a sea battle on the Dead Sea to take control of their important bitumen trade in which Hieronymus of Cardia acting for Antigonos was again defeated.

This demonstrates that for over 200 years Nabataeans had been already an important and dominant force in the region, before they fully settled down
a n d



Kings' Tombs, Petra

started major constructions in Petra. The next known attack followed in 277BC by Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II who destroyed the Nabataean trading fleet to control the growing Red Sea trade.

But Nabataeans took revenge later using pirate tactics and made the Red Sea so unsafe for all other seafarers, that Egyptians stopped sailing the Red Sea altogether and returned to trading with Nabataeans in their own Red Sea ports of Myos Hormos close to Quseir al-Qadim, Berenice at Ras Banas and Philotera today's Safarga. The first Nabataean king was referred to, without giving his name, around 300BC on a stone column, which today is in the Damascus Museum.

The first detailed Nabataean ruler list starts with Aretas I who was mentioned around 169BC in an inscription found in Elusa in the Negev area. The Old Testament in Maccabaeus II also mentioned Aretas I who gave exile to a pro Hellenistic Jewish high priest called Jason, who fled the neighbouring Hasmonean Kingdom. Other sources at the time still described the Nabataeans as living in tents.

They only started settling permanently down in Petra and building houses around 100BC after they gathered sufficient wealth from their trading activities to finance and maintain a 10,000 strong defence force using camels with two warriors on top and fast horses they bred.

The Nabataean merchants and their rulers cherished their independence and therefore it was previously forbidden by the death penalty to build houses and start farming. Their nomad living, being permanently on the move, saved them in the past many times from being subjected by powerful regional empires at the time, such as their arch rivals the Hasmoneans living west of the Jordan river, the Egyptians, the Parthians in Iran or the Mesopotamian kingdoms.

The next known Nabataean king was Rabbel I who governed around 100BC and was mentioned in the famous papyrus inscription of Zenon, which was created by Appolonios, the finance minister of Egyptian King Ptolemy II. Little is known about Rabbel I and it is not certain, if he immediately followed on Aretas I and again, if Aretas II followed



The Amphitheatre, Petra

Rabbel I but assuming a twenty five year reign, the gap between 169BC and 120BC might well be thus filled.

Aretas II ruled for twenty four years from 120BC to 96BC and was the first king to mint elaborate silver coins with a high silver content of 97% equal to the content of Roman silver coins. At the time Nabataeans became a more dominant force and aggressively expanded their trading empire. After supporting the Hasmonean Kingdom in the past in their ongoing struggle against Seleucid kings in Iraq and Syria, they started to attack their neighbours for the first around 100BC, but unfortunately lost control over certain trade routes and the important port of

Gaza to Hasmonean King Alexander Jannaeus.

Obodas I son of Aretas II was only in power for nine years from 96-87BC. But he was very actively expanding Nabataean trading interests by defeating in 93BC Alexander Jannaeus and destroying the Hasmonean army near Garada.

Aretas III son of Obodas I governed for 25 years from 87-62BC. He also called himself Aretas Philhellenos "friend of the Greek". The Nabataeans had over a long time on and off wars with their main rivals and neighbours the Hasmoneans. At some stage Aretas III besieged Jerusalem, but had to withdraw when Roman Triumvirate Pompey arrived.



Eye Idol



God Qaws



Alexandros

Subsequently he established again peace with the Hasmoneans after they had occupied the Nabataean cities of Moab and Gilead plus twelve of their regional trading centres. At the time Nabataean eyes were set on the biggest and most profitable trading city in the whole region which was Damascus.

Therefore Aretas III first occupied the Hauran Kingdom in Coele-Syria in 85BC and quickly moved on north to conquer Damascus. As a consequence Aretas III made Damascus the new Nabataean capital and resided there for thirteen years. He minted coins in the Greek language with Seleucidian emblems to demonstrate his power, these were also the first coins depicting the name of a king.

Nabataean kings in comparison to other regional rulers at the time were in power longer and did not experience the internal power struggles common in other empires. Only one king was poisoned by his successor.

In 72BC Aretas III had to withdraw to Petra, when Tigranes King of Armenia conquered Damascus. On his way back to

Petra he also lost the important battle for the control of Philadelphia (Amman). Thereafter the Nabataeans refrained for 15 years from major war activities.

During his last year of rule in 62BC Roman General Marcus Aemilius Scaurus besieged Petra and forced Aretas III in a peace treaty to pay a yearly tribute to Rome in form of 300 silver talents (6,000 kilograms). He had coins minted showing Aretas III presenting a twig as sign of submission to Rome. The tribute was later relieved and more autonomy given to Nabataeans again.

Obodas II ruled only for two years from 62-60BC, because of his advanced age. He was possibly the brother of Aretas III and had good relations to the Romans, who were a growing trading partner at the time with the Nabataeans controlling 25% of Roman trade. He minted coins again in Nabataean language, but these coins were in little use, as most trading was done on the newly established Silver Talent basis.

Surprisingly today it is not yet clear in which Petra tombs the various Nabataean kings were

buried.

Malichus I was in power for thirty years from 60-30BC. After the bitter defeats of his predecessors in 70BC he now felt strong enough again to start a war in 55BC against his main rivals the Hasmoneans by joined forces with the Parthians against King Herod. By supporting the Parthians against Aulus Gabinius Roman governor of Syria and Palestine, Malichus I hoped to increase future trading volumes with different goods coming in from Asia via the famous Silk Road, which was Parthian controlled.

But Herod was a Roman ally, who could count on strong Roman support. The quest for more power failed and the Nabataeans subsequently became a vassal to Herod and Rome. For their rebellion against Roman interests they had to pay a huge fine in silver. During Malichus I's reign silver coins with his name and a falcon emblem on reverse side were minted.

During the reign of Malichus I political events became rather complicated. To support Julius Caesar in Egypt he sent his Nabataean cavalry, but at the



Eagle



Medusa

same time he was secretly helping Hasmoneans to reduce looming Egyptian influence, preventing the loss of valuable Nabataean Dead Sea balm and bitumen trade to Egypt.

Some years later Cleopatra, wife of Roman Emperor Marcus Antonius, wanted to reduce the growing power of Roman vassal Hasmonean King Herod and demanded from him certain parts of the Hasmonean kingdom. Therefore Marcus Antonius gave her control over the important city of Jericho, which was leased for 200 silver talents to Malichus I. But when he defaulted on the payments, Marcus Antonius ordered Herod to attack the Nabataeans and in a battle in 32BC at the Decapolis Dion they were defeated. Herod followed the Nabataeans to Kanatha, where in a new battle Malichus I would destroy the majority of Herod's army.

Herod spent the winter with smaller partisan attacks and in the following year the Nabataeans mobilized 50,000 warriors near Philadelphia (Amman) where they were in various battles to be finally defeated by Herod. At the time Marcus Antonius had lost the important battle of Actium and took his own life in Alexandria before Octavian arrived to take him prisoner. Therefore his surviving wife Cleopatra had to flee the Romans in 30BC and transported seven ships over land from the Nile to the Red Sea, where the Nabataeans in support of the Romans set her fleet on fire, so that she saw no other way out than to commit suicide.

So much about politics and intrigue, but unfortunately it did not stop here. Obodas III was a Roman vassal for twenty years from 30-9BC, when he was poisoned by his successor. He minted two types of coins, the so called Ptolemaic coins, which had the same weight as the original Egyptian coins. They were minted during his early years and showed his picture on the one side and a falcon on the reverse. The second type were known as the Greek coins with his name and picture and on the reverse for the first time both king and queen. At the time the silver content was dropped to 60-75% following the Roman example, so the basics of monetary policy were already understood. Around this time Nabataeans gave exile to forty Hasmonian



rebel leaders and therefore Herod destroyed the Nabataean city of Raepta and later the castle of Ajlun north of Jerash killing its commander Naqib.

Trading relations with the Roman Empire strengthened further and the Nabataeans participated in the famous Roman expedition into the Arabian Peninsula with 1,000 men under the command of Nabataean leader Syllaeus. As Roman Emperor Octavian, later renamed Augustus, wanted full control over the key Nabataean trade routes, he sent a 10,000 strong army to explore the way to the main source of Nabataean trading goods to Arabia Felix in Yemen. Not to loose their most important income Obodas III devised a plan with his advisor Syllaeus. They offered to guide the Roman army and convinced them that there was no over land route for the first stage. Therefore the Roman army transported 120 ships over land from the Mediterranean coast to Egyptian Red Sea port of Cleopatra (Suez). Intentional faulty navigation resulted in the loss of some ships and deliberate bad food supplies forced the army to spend the summer and next winter in the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome north of Yanbu.

In spring Syllaeus led the Roman army deep into the desert, far from any important city, such as Yathrib today's Madinah and circumvented the Nabataean trade routes with their secret water cisterns. Six months later a rather depleted and very weak Roman army arrived in front of Marib the capital of the Kingdom of Sheba in Yemen, a trip which normally lasted only six weeks.

For these successes Obodas III was a declared god like king by his people, the only Nabataean king achieving this status, although it is not certain whether or not this was not self proclaimed. It can be assumed from inscriptions, that the famous Monastery in Petra was built as a worship site for him. He was also the only king buried outside Petra in the Negev town of Avedat, which was renamed Obodas in honour.

Aretas IV was also called Aretas Philpatris or Philodemos "father or lover of his people" and came into power in 9BC and ruled for forty nine years until 40AD. For reasons not handed down Aeneas a relative of



Malichus I had poisoned Obodas III who did not have a family successor, to become Aretas IV.

During his reign he was married twice, to Queen Khaldah and to Queen Shaqilah. He was supported by Roman Emperor Augustus and his forty nine years reign was the most stable and prosperous for the Nabataean Kingdom. The main Nabataean cities of Petra, Bosra and Madain Saleh experienced major growth and architectural development. He built the important Treasury, Lion Temple, Great Temple, Amphitheatre and Qasr al-Bint temple.

The important economic growth during his reign allowed him to mint various types of coins, but the silver content dropped to 54%, a good indication of the cost impact of the enormous building activity during his reign. Out of ten examples found, eight coins depicted him and the two queens, until 16AD with Queen Khaldah and after 18AD with Queen Shaqilah. On some coins also the name of one of his sons Fasi-el was minted. He also dedicated one coin to the architectural developments of Madain Saleh.

In 34AD he started and won a war against Herod Antipas, which was caused by Herod Antipas' divorce from Aretas' daughter. Nabataeans were known for their marriage diplomacy, but unfortunately this attempt to find peace with their arch rivals did not work out. Another known marriage was that of Nabataean Princess Cypros to Herod's father.

Malichus II son of Aretas IV reigned for thirty years from 40-70AD and died at the high age of 84. He supported Roman

Vespasian with
1,000 camel
warriors
and
500

archers in their war against Judaea in 67AD and Vespasian's son Titus in 70AD in his attack of Jerusalem.

But during his time the fortune of the Nabataean Kingdom was declining, one reason being that Romans had started to sail to India regularly. This decline was manifested through fewer coins being minted with a lower silver content going down to 20%. During the last six years of Malichus II's rule no further coins were minted.

The minted coins showed him and the queen, which seemed to have now become a Nabataean standard and showed the influence women gained in society. Certain family tree information was found showing only female names, which suggests female heading important families and merchant businesses with possible female inheritance as well. It is possible that too many men died in military action in the frequent battles.

The last true Nabataean ruler was Rabbel II with Queen Gamilath. He was later called Rabbel Soter "the saviour". He was a young son of Malichus II and during his first five years his mother Queen Shaqilah II actually ruled the Nabataean Kingdom. During that time silver coins with the Queens picture were minted. There is no record of any coins being minted after 75AD when his mother stepped back and Rabbel II took up reign. At the time the Nabataean state was the only kingdom in the region under Roman influence with great autonomy and was not subjected under direct Roman rule.

Following growing Roman demands and to maintain this autonomy Rabbel II concluded a non attack treaty thinking of buying time and promised that Romans will rule after his death. Roman emperor Trajan nevertheless reneged on the treaty and attacked Petra in 106AD, subsequently killing

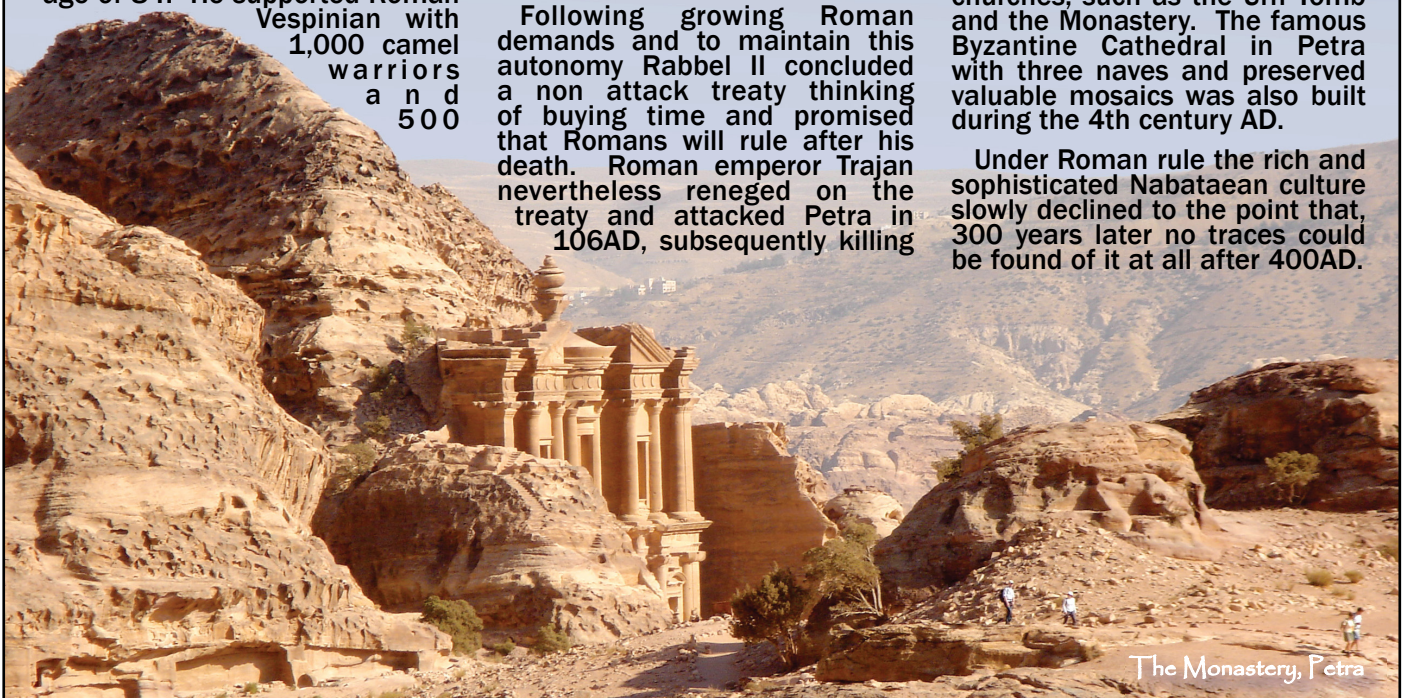
Rabbel II. Recent excavations found over 400 ballista balls in one area of the Great Temple in Petra and the temple's collapse can be dated to this time. After his death on 22 March 106AD the Romans annexed the Nabataean Kingdom to their Province Arabia and renamed it Arabia Petraea. Cornelius Paulus governor of Syria became ruler of Nabataea. On Nabataean coins the words Arabia Capta were changed to Arabia Adquista.

At this time, the Romans had also gained control of the Red Sea shipping route and up to 120 ships sailed from the Egyptian port of Myos Hormos to India annually. Therefore the southern Arabian land route was given up by the Nabataeans. The land route along the Gulf coast itself was not controlled by the Romans and therefore some Nabataean caravans started to use it as their main trading route.

The Nabataean capital was moved from Petra to Bosra in south Syria. Bosra was renamed Nova Traiana and Petra was later granted a status of Metropolis. During Trajan rule the Roman Empire was at its greatest extent and he also built a road from Damascus to the Red Sea port of Aila (Eilat) via Bosra and Petra called Via Nova Traiana. Roman Emperor Hadrian changed Petra's name to Hadiane and seventy years later Petras status was raised to that of a Colony and Capital of the new province Palaestina Tertia.

After the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine I made Constantinople (Istanbul) the new Roman capital, Petra got its first Byzantine Bishop and various major tombs were converted to churches, such as the Urn Tomb and the Monastery. The famous Byzantine Cathedral in Petra with three naves and preserved valuable mosaics was also built during the 4th century AD.

Under Roman rule the rich and sophisticated Nabataean culture slowly declined to the point that, 300 years later no traces could be found of it at all after 400AD.



The Monastery, Petra