

# Nabataean Votive Niches

## An Important Place of Worship

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**W**ith this article I am going to extend my series on the Nabataean culture and cover an interesting subject on which little is written. Votive niches played an important part in Nabataean worship and Bedouin religious belief in the so-called "dark ages" before the spreading of Islam.

For this purpose I have revisited Petra and its many places of sacrifice normal tourists never see, as they are very focused on and so overwhelmed by the unique monumental Nabataean tomb facades. In my research I have looked at over 200 niches including about 20 in Mada'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia.

All votive niches in Petra lie along major mountain trails and in narrow canyons such as Wadi el-Modlem, Wadi en-Nmer, Qattar ed-Deir and Siq Wadi Musa, as these wadi canyons were regarded as holy and spiritual

places.

When you enter Petra you will find various votive niches in a row in the rocks opposite and overlooking the siq entrance. These were possibly created during the rule of Nabataean King Malichus II between 40-70AD.

Very interesting are also the three votive obelisk steles measuring 80cm in heights carved in the wadi side wall just before the tunnel on the right of the Petra siq entrance.

One of these steles features five lines of Nabataean inscription reading "this is the nefesh of Petraios son of Threptos he was honored because he died in Garshu who was an inhabitant of Reqmu this was done by Taimu his adoptive father".

There are a couple of interesting comments to be made about

this remarkable inscription. First the meaning of nefesh will be explained later on.

Secondly it was common practice for Nabataeans to use Greek names, this is one of the problems for researchers, as they found very little written sources of Nabataean history. But much has been written about citing important men and their deeds living in the Near East with Greek names, which by default have to be assumed to be Greek and not for example Nabataeans. In this inscription Garshu means ancient Gerasa, being today's Jerash and Reqem or Reqmu was the Nabataean name of their capital Petra.

Thirdly it proves, that the Nabataean trading network was well established, with traders living in various parts of the region, such as Gerasa. Nabataean traders were even





Niche & crescent, Petra



Single betyle, Petra



Dhushare betyle, Petra



Niche, Mada'in Saleh

#### Mada'in Saleh

reported to have established a colony in Rome.

Fourthly it is interesting to note the fact that adoption was already taking place 2,000 years ago in antiquity in Petra; another reference to adoption we can also find in a tomb text in Madain Saleh.

If you enter the Petra canyon you can see after a few meters, that the siq entrance was previously bridged with a high man-made arch, which collapsed in 1896 during an earthquake. Both side walls below the arch feature the rests of sizable votive niches with side pillars and a rounded carp top.

Along the one kilometer long siq you might find, if you look carefully, over 50 votive niches, with groups of three and more betyles, as well as some inscriptions.

Half way down the canyon, a small monolithic rock has a face betyle and an additional idol on its back side. You will also see further on an unknown god standing on two lions depicted in the typical Mesopotamian style and an inscription names a certain Sabinus as the donor.

#### What is a Betyle and a Nefesh?

At the early stages Nabataean deities were not given any human form, because they were of pure spiritual nature representing specific attributes and giving protection for various purposes. Those deities were symbolized by a small stone stele called betyle, which was regarded as housing and representing the respective and dedicated god.

These stones were very simple with no carvings at all, that they

could be easily regarded as a rounded off stone for household grain grinding purposes. Only in Petra under the Greco-Roman influence at a later stage in their history, step by step human form statues of gods were created.

You have to distinguish between a cult stele being a betyle, representing the presence or house of a deity and a commemorative small stone column called a nefesh representing a deceased person to be remembered and honored.

A betyle was carved as a rectangular stele or square stone normally within a niche. A nefesh was done as conical obelisk type

small stone column or later even depicted in human form.

Nefesh in Aramaic means body and soul being one or united, therefore it was mostly used in death cults and present in ceremonial dining rooms called triclinium. This name comes from the Greek and Roman dining being done lying down and therefore those dining rooms had carved rock benches on three sides therefore best described as triclinium. Those rooms were close or right next to important tombs and family members regularly met for feasts to honor and remember their dead family members.

In addition Nabataeans used many places of worship next to votive niches including monolithic rock altars combined with carved rock pools and channels for animal and even human sacrifices. Rock carved stairs led up to these holy mountain plateaus in Petra such as el-Medras, el-Hubta, Zibb el-Atuf, el-Habis, Umm el-Biyara, Jebel en-Nmer and Jebel Harun.

Greek historian Strabo reported when visiting Petra 2,000 years ago, that Nabataeans also used altars on top of their houses to worship the sun with food and drink libations and sacrifices. This is interesting as all mountain tops around Petra again were regarded as holy places and are covered with many altars and other religious idols such as obelisks, which were adopted from Egyptians with whom they had close trading contacts.

#### Nabataean Worshipping

Now let me describe a bit more





Huge niche at Petra siq



Famous niche gorge, Petra



Tomb like niche, Petra



Famous niche gorge, Petra

in detail the worshipping practices of Nabataean caravan leaders and the use of votive niches and pocket betyles. The Nabataean economy and enormous wealth was built on long distance transport of valuable goods from Arabia Felix, today's Yemen. The six Yemini kingdoms were the main source of Nabataean trading goods such as frankincense, coffee and spices.

The famous kingdom of Saba with its capital Sirwah and later Marib, was situated in southwest Yemen. The kingdom of Ma'in with its capital Yathill and later Qanawu or Qarnaw ruled over the northwestern mountains. Further important kingdoms were Hadramaut with its capital Shabwa and Himyar with its first capital Zafar and later Marib when they conquered their neighbors. Of lesser importance were the

kingdoms of Qataban in Timna and Aswan in Hagar Yahirr.

These camel caravans took over 60 days to travel from the six different ancient Yemeni kingdoms to Petra. Despite taxes of up to 25%, Nabataean traders made a profit of US\$4,000 in today's monetary terms per camel load. Not a bad business when a camel caravan could consist of one to three hundred heads.

These trips were a strain on men and animals and very dangerous in three ways - difficult mountain terrain, desert heat and bandits. Therefore caravan leaders were praying to desert gods, which were different to the gods worshipped in Petra, to protect them against all possible dangers. For this purpose they carried these stone betyles with them like amulets.

The main Arab desert god was

Shi'a al-Qaum, the ancient god of war, night and guardian of nomads and caravans. This cult was developed by caravan tribes moving in the Arabian Peninsula and stood in contrast to the Petra based city Nabataeans, who worshiped their main deity Dushara. This god also was represented by a betyle in form of a rectangular flat stone with two eyes.

Outside his main temple in Petra, Dushara was symbolized by a black stone stele on a golden raised platform on a huge altar. You have to remember that altars in all Greek temples did not stand inside, but in front of the temple. Just look at the Nabataean tomb facades and the huge Hellenistic influence and the origin of using outside altars is clear.

Actually this way of divine representation in the form of



Monolith stone block with tomb entrance type double betyle niche at Petra





*Various niches & triclinium banquet hall with niches in Wadi Metaha*

stone steles comes from the ancient megalithic and archaic Sumerian, as well as old Egyptian cultures. Once caravans arrived their leaders took their pocket betyles and placed them into the small holes in the niche's window sill to worship their gods in a respectful environment during their stay. Various niches were adorned with written dedications naming the persons in Aramaic Nabataean script.

Pre-Nabataean desert Arabs only worshipped two gods, Alilat who was associated with Greek goddess Aphrodite same as Assyrian goddess Mylitta, or Persian goddess Mitra, and Orotalt, who was associated with Greek god Dionysus.

They believed that deities had special forces dominating and directing their lives and therefore were seeking their daily omnipresence by carving their symbols into stone and later also tombs. Death rituals also played an important part and it is possibly that they believed in a life after death like Egyptians did. Through strong Greek influence they started to build shrines and votive niches as places of sacrifice, later

followed by temples.

#### **Unique Mada'in Saleh Niches**

Our own key UNESCO heritage site in Saudi Arabia features over 100 niches and some are unique in the Nabataean empire. They are concentrated around the holy district of Jabal Ithlib. Here you find the only Nabataean niche with additional betyles, one carved into each window frame side wall, in addition to the two main betyles cut into the niches back wall.

Another interesting feature are the water basin niches, which were carved in rock walls, and possibly used in antiquity for ritual washings, which were already common in pre-Islamic times, or during the "dark ages" as Muslim scholars would call it.

So far we have always assumed that niches have to be carved in vertical walls. Well here comes the ultimate surprise, why not carve them horizontal into the ground on top of hill, which serve as holy place for rituals. This is exactly what the ancient Nabataeans did in Mada'in Saleh. They carved "lying" niches into the ground with and without betyle

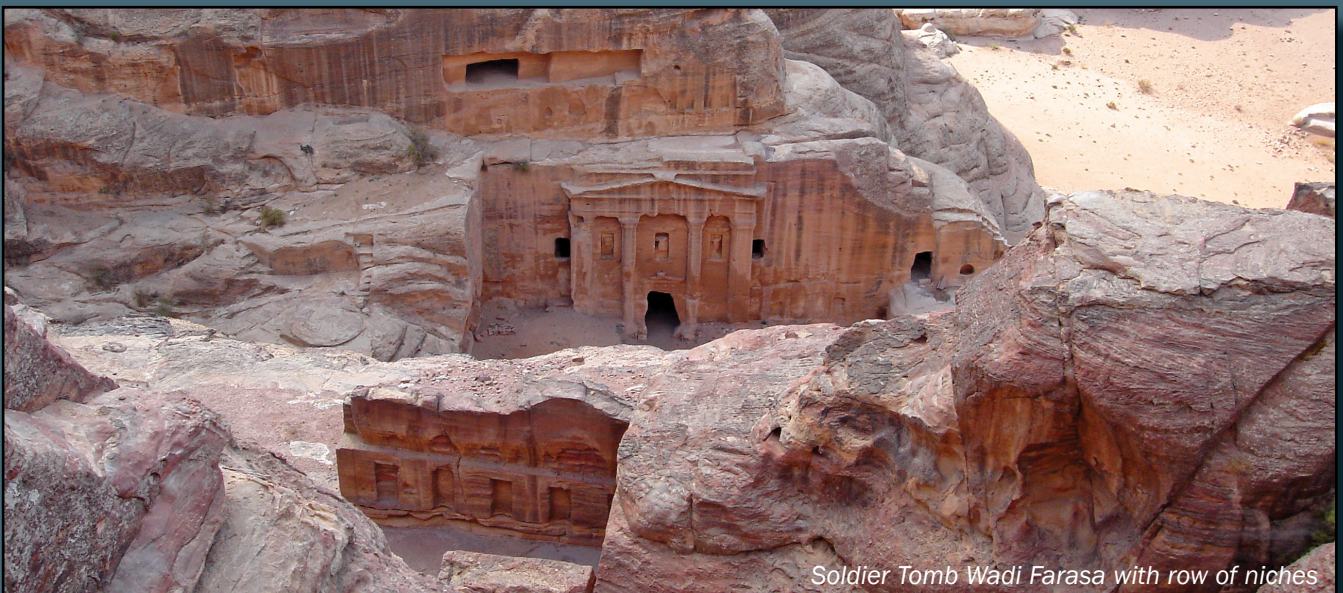
and, for ease of practice, added a hole for the libation ritual with a small canal, which takes care of the eventual overflow.

The libation ceremony is a drink sacrifice often performed for gods and in commemoration of deceased family members. It is not surprising further that the only open air triclinium, a triple benched banquet hall, is found on the same hill top here.

#### **Important Petra Niches**

Let's return to the votive niches in Petra. Wadi el-Modlem, also called the Small Siq is a rather narrow and one kilometer long gorge with tall walls ending up in Wadi Metaha. It starts at the Petra main siq entrance tunnel, which is 86m long and was built in antiquity by Nabataeans to divert the Wadi Musa flood waters away from the main Petra access siq. It was possibly built during King Rabbel II rule between 70AD to 116 AD.

The famous Eagle Niche can be found just a few hundred meters after the tunnel with various niches next to it. Towards the end of the gorge Nabataeans built an arch, which unfortunately was



*Soldier Tomb Wadi Farasa with row of niches*



destroyed, and possibly featured a metal grid to ward off intruders. The structural rests of a small watch tower above plus caves to house wardens can still be seen today.

The end of Sidd el-Maadshin or Sidd el-Ma'ajin gorge, which is only two to three meters wide, has many votive niches in different forms and sizes, plus some Nabataean inscriptions carved into the surrounding walls.

This area, which can be entered best from its far end via Wadi Metaha, is simply called the Niche Gorge. It is a worthwhile one hour stroll starting at the famous row of king tombs passing the Sextius Florentinus Tomb along the right side of Wadi Metaha. This trail also passes the interesting so-called Dorotheos House with 20 interlinked rooms on two floors carved into the rock. Just follow the trail and when the canyon gets narrow you will see a two meter wide opening that is the way into the Niche Gorge, which you reach after 100m.

Wadi Waghit is another important holy gorge area with various votive niches. One of the most important niches shows a carved seated statue of goddess Isis, unfortunately her head is missing. Possibly a small peristyle temple was built in front of this niche later, but is not in situ any longer today. The importance of the site is supported by over fifteen Nabataean inscriptions, plus certain animal depictions including a snake and the so-called pilgrim foot print.

A further interesting niche with a betyle measuring 68cm by 30cm can be seen on the right side. This double betyle niche is fitted with a hole on the left for a removable pocket betyle. It is possible, that this was meant for a so-called face betyle with two eyes and nose, but no mouth.

All these face betyles are assumed to depict the important goddess al-Uzza. This assumption is based on other double betyles found in Petra at the Winged Lion Temple and a residential home

on the slopes of the ez-Zantur hill, plus in a votive niche in Wadi Rum some 100km to the south of Petra. For those visitors, who have not been to Wadi Rum, this is the site with a stunning setting where the famous film of "Lawrence of Arabia" was filmed.

### Main Goddess al-Uzza

Goddess al-Uzza was worshipped by Arab tribes since 900BC and is first mentioned in an inscription dated 400BC in the ancient capital of the Dedan kingdom, being today's al-'Ula in Saudi Arabia close to Madain Saleh.

She was worshipped in pre-Islamic times as goddess of fertility and love, depicted only in a very schematic human form on stone steles. As the main female deity of Petra, she was also seen as goddess of the people and the lion was her symbol animal.

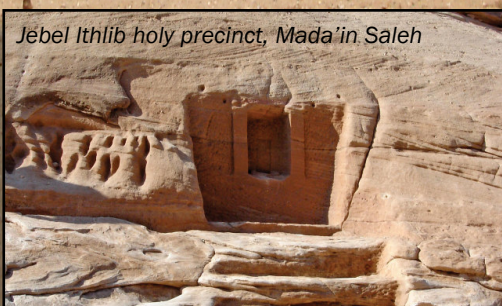
Al-Uzza was assumed to be the virgin mother, who gave birth to main Nabataean deity Dushara. She was part of the trinity of moon deities representing the three



Row of niches opposite Petra siq



Jebel Ithlib sacrifice site



Jebel Ithlib holy precinct, Mada'in Saleh



Jebel Ithlib 3 niches & altar



different moon phases. Al-Uzza represented the full moon phase equal to the mother position, goddess Allat the crescent moon phase and goddess Manat the waning moon phase. Al-Uzza depiction can be seen in Petra at the famous Treasury, Lion Temple and in niches in Wadi Siyyagh and in Wadi Waghit.

Statuettes of al-Uzza were also excavated at the Lion Temple and in the ez-Zantur residential district in Petra.

#### Niche Forms and Differences

Now let us look at the different forms of Nabataean niches as demonstrated by my pictures illustrating this article. In my research, I took a closer look at and photographed over 100 niches, half of them are simple square niches and the rest feature a rounded some times decorated carp top, which is very seldom found in Petra tombs.

Out of the 800 Petra tombs I have seen during various visits, only half a dozen tombs have a carped facade. The majority of

niches are also empty without any betyle, so it can be assumed that pocket betyles with a flat footing were placed there, not needing a hole in the window sill to hold them.

Most niches contain only one betyle. If they are empty, only have space for one. A few niches have two, three or more betyles, some are same size, but often they are very different in size.

Most niches with two betyles have a large and a small one being half the size of the larger one. Normally betyles are carved in rock standing out. Very few niches have negative or inverted betyle carvings.

If we look at the sizes of Nabataean niches we see that small niches measure about 30cm by 30cm and large niches can go up to 1m in width and 2m in height. Those niches are some times also found in back walls of tombs. The most magnificent niches are those resembling tomb facades and can have various levels of carvings with up to three

pillared frames.

Very peculiar are those niches, which feature betyles with carved mini niches in the betyle itself. The meaning of this and the practice connected to it is not yet known. In Petra, few niches have inscriptions next to them. In Madain Saleh and other places, more written dedications are found.

A further special feature found are small holes above some niches on the Umm el-Biyara mountain plateau in Petra. Some experts assume these were used to attach items sacrificed to the god, others say it might have been used to cover niches for various purposes.

Normal betyles were rectangular and flat. But if we look at the unique shapes, the most intriguing is a mushroom shape, which is only shown in negative carved out form, of which I have encountered only two. Unfortunately this mushroom symbol has not yet been deciphered.

The moon crescent shape was



*Niche with 4 platforms for holy statues or betyles in the back wall of Urn Tomb, Petra  
After 300BC this tomb was used by Petra inhabitants as a Byzantine church*



also found in few niches depicted on top of a betyle which, based on my earlier comments, can be attributed to goddess al-Uzza. The god of writing al-Kutba is symbolized with star shaped eyes and shown on a betyle next to al-Uzza.

The vast reaching Nabataean trading activity and contacts resulted in an ongoing importing and mixing of deities and cults. This developed over time in a complex interrelation of various gods and rituals. The cultural changes increased through enhanced agricultural activities in first century AD, resulting in new gods entering the picture. These were worshipped for good harvests and sufficient rainfalls.

### The Isis Niches

Then there are two remarkable niches showing the goddess Isis

in human form sitting on a throne, so we can assume that those niches are dated towards the end of Nabataean independence around 100AD, when the Romans took over control of Petra.

Goddess Isis was adopted from Egypt and played a more important role in the Nabataean culture then in Egypt and was also exported into other cultures in the region. Isis was the wife of Egyptian death god Osiris, and therefore had the role of goddess of death and life, symbolized in the Nabataean culture by a sun disc surrounded by horns and corn bundles. Isis is depicted on the Treasury facade and in votive niches at Wadi Siyagh and Wadi Abu Olleqa, one actually is dated as early as 25BC.

### Great Temple Betyles

Most betyles are found in

votive niches, but some were also discovered at major Petra buildings and temples such as the Great Temple. Here excavators unearthed a double limestone betyle consisting of a nefesh combined with a betyle on a white limestone slab, with an incised obelisk carved above square cut removable betyle block measuring 80cm by 60cm. The obelisk shaped nefesh is much smaller at 20cm by 10cm, approximately. A separate free standing rectilinear betyle was placed next to it.

### Nabataean Script

As we can see various niches with written devotions, I will give you some background on the Nabataean script as well. Nabataeans were very secretive with the intent not to divulge their trading routes and sources of goods. They went to extremes



*Jebel Ithlib niche without betyle*

*Petra*



*Lion fountain, Wadi Farasa Petra*



*Various niches, Petra*



to ensure this secrecy, as seen from the failed Roman expedition to Arabia Felix. Nabataean Sillaus misled the Romans very successfully to ensure this expedition ended up in disaster.

Therefore they did not capture any written history, despite having developed an elaborate own Nabataean script. All knowledge was disguised in tales and passed on from father to son. The lack of written Nabataean records makes any research difficult, if not impossible.

The Nabataean script is an off shoot of the imperial Aramaic, closer to the western Aramaic dialects, but their spoken language was more Arabic based. Their alphabet was developed from the Aramaic alphabet with

high Arabic influence seen by the loaning and importing of Arabic words.

The Arabic alphabet developed out of the cursive variants of Nabataean script around 500AD. Nabataean script used 22 consonants and inferred vowel sounds. The Nabataean language shifted seamlessly into Arabic after 400AD. Just as for Arabic, the Nabataean script was written from right to left. It is important to remember that the Nabataean were the first to start to write letters together.

Nabataean stone inscriptions have been discovered at over 4,000 sites in the Middle East. The most southern inscriptions were found in Saudi Arabia at the

archeological site al-Fau, south of Wadi al-Dawasser. Nabataeans wrote on scrolls of leather and papyrus like the Egyptians, therefore only very limited fragments were excavated.

As I said earlier, Nabataean were very secretive and therefore 80% of stone inscriptions found in Petra are only signatures of devotion created using hammer and chisel. Again in Saudi Arabia an important inscription by created by the then Roman governor of Arabia in both Nabataean and Greek script was discovered on the walls of the Rawwafa temple at Tayma. Finally it was German Eduard Beer from the University of Leipzig who first deciphered the Nabataean script.



*Jebel Ithlib siq holy precinct, Mada'in Saleh*



*Niche with eagle & 2 urns & inscription, Mada'in Saleh*



*Nabataean inscription next to niche, Mada'in Saleh*