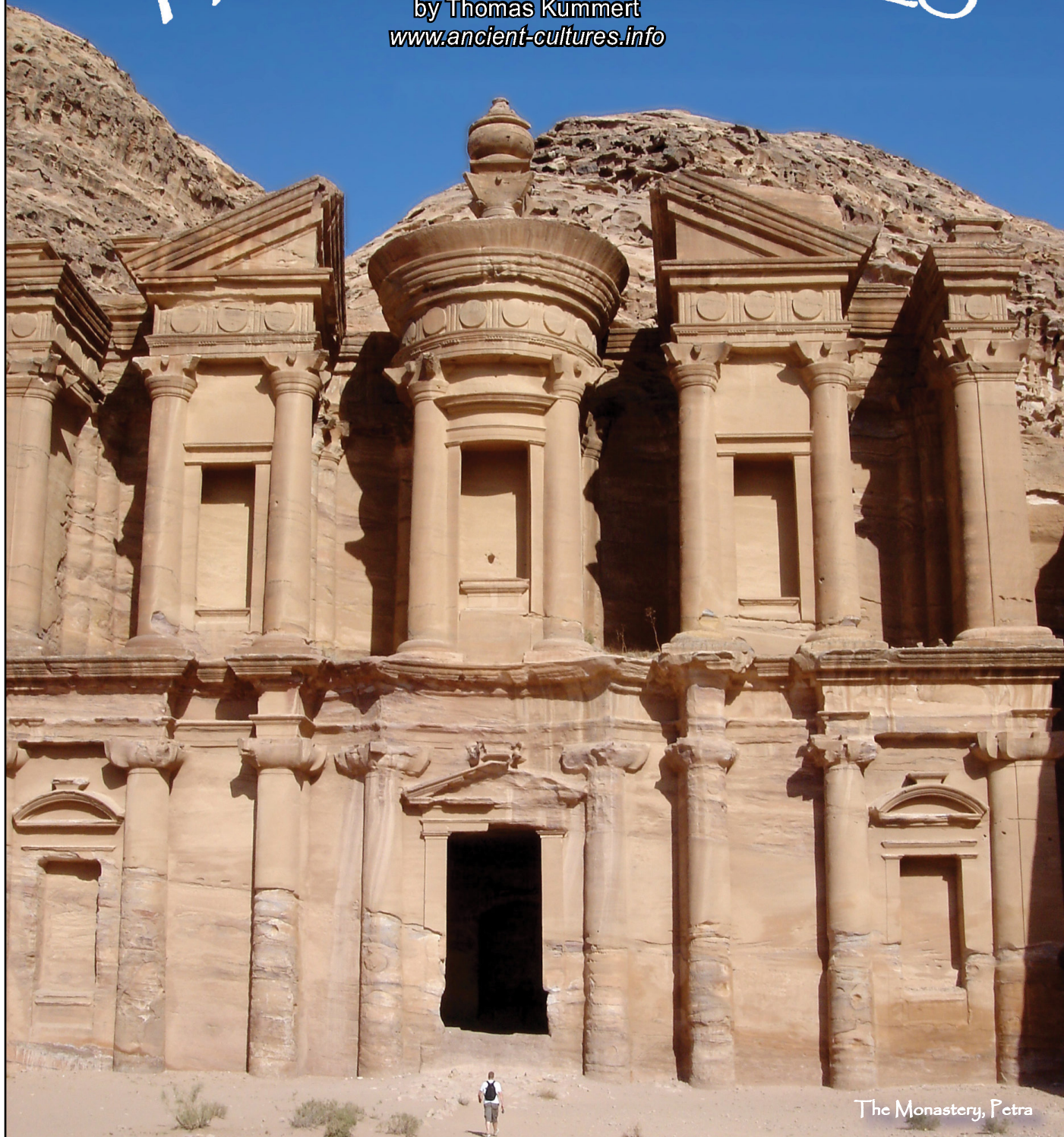


NABATAEAN TRADING ACTIVITIES

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The Monastery, Petra

Today you will get an intriguing insight into Nabataean history and it's lineage of Kings, as well as Nabataean trading activities, revealing some surprising facts

about the range of commodities with which they were involved - as well as the regions, often well beyond the Arabian Peninsula, reached by their traders...

Because Nabataeans were so secretive with the intent not to divulge their trading routes and sources of goods, they did not capture any written history, despite having developed an elaborate Nabataean script. Therefore little is known about the Nabataean culture and their wide spread trading activities for which they were so famous. But recent detailed research and scanning of ancient sources reveals an interesting new picture.

Until now the Nabataeans were seen as a mediocre regional trading nation under Roman influence and in existence only for 10 generations from about 200BC to 100AD. And Petra their capital with impressive buildings really doesn't fit the big picture and the little we know so far about their culture. But now it can be assumed that the Nabataeans had control over 25% of total Roman trade, dominating the Red Sea and East Mediterranean and extending as far as East Africa, India and even China.

Let's take a step back and look at the beginnings. Some incense trading was already taking place some 2,600 years ago by Babylonians and Assyrians, but the Nabataeans were the first to start organized and regular caravan trading, creating the famous Incense Route 300 years later and monopolized the trade in these goods.

With their heritage descending from Arab nomad tribes, the Nabataeans used their knowledge of desert survival, traveling along a string of oases and creating huge secret water cisterns in arid areas at 40km intervals. These bottle shaped cisterns with a diameter of up to 30m were lined with waterproof cement and it can be said, that the Nabataeans were the inventors of waterproof cement, a specialist expertise which they had perfected over time.

Initially the Nabataeans established tented camps as a trading basis near major regional capitals such as Madain Saleh near the Lihyanite capital Dedan (al'Ula), Jenysos south of Gaza and Selah (Petra) near the Edomite capital Busheira. These later became permanent cities.

Lessons in Basic Economics

It took a camel caravan between 62-64 days to move goods on camel back from Yemen to Petra. Experts have calculated that it needed approximately 4,000 camels to move the 3,000 tons of incense used per annum in Egyptian, Roman and Greek temples at the time. It further was established, that a camel load in today's monetary terms generated a profit of up to US\$4,000. Moving caravans had to pay fees for shelter, water, tolls for safe passage and tax on goods.



One ancient source mentioned a 25% tax on goods trans-shipped through the important Nabataean Red Sea port of Leuce Come north of Yanbu. It was a risky, but also a highly profitable business.

Important Role of Yemeni Kingdoms

To secure a steady flow of goods the Nabataeans helped the Himyarites in western Yemen to take full control of the important Incense Route for 200 years from 100BC to 100AD. And their Hadramite and Minean competitors in central and eastern Yemen were consequently degraded to pure incense manufacturers.

Being of Arab descent, the Nabataean traders were smart and demanded high prizes, pretending that they had to pay a lot for buying the goods at source and made little profit. To support this argument

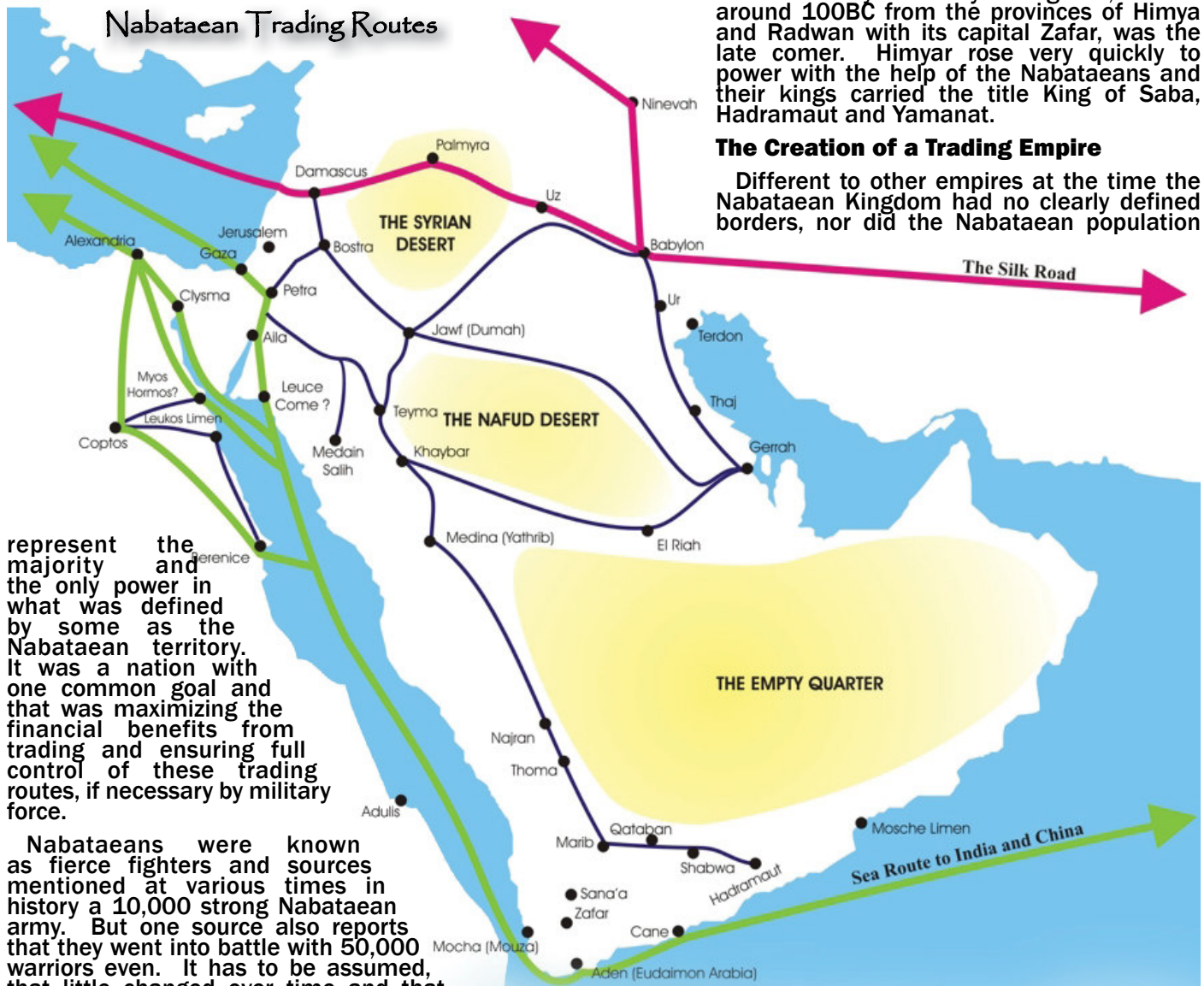
Nabataeans were known to dress simply despite their wealth.

These stories about prosperous kingdoms in Yemen later created the Roman desire to venture further south and conquer those golden cities. At the time there were six Yemeni kingdoms, some even stretching across the Red Sea into Africa like the Sabaeen Kingdom with the famous Queen of Sheba.

They all started around 1,000-800BC with Saba and it's capital Marib in the southwest, the Minean Kingdom with it's capital Yathill and later Qanawu in the northwest. The Awsan Kingdom with it's capital Hagar Yahirr was the first kingdom to end in 450BC being conquered by Saba, the Qataban Kingdom with it's capital Timna. Eastern neighbors of Saba, the Hadramaut Kingdom with it's capital Shabwa, was the east most kingdom reaching into Oman. Finally the Himyar Kingdom, formed around 100BC from the provinces of Himya and Radwan with its capital Zafar, was the late comer. Himyar rose very quickly to power with the help of the Nabataeans and their kings carried the title King of Saba, Hadramaut and Yamanat.

The Creation of a Trading Empire

Different to other empires at the time the Nabataean Kingdom had no clearly defined borders, nor did the Nabataean population



represent the majority and the only power in what was defined by some as the Nabataean territory. It was a nation with one common goal and that was maximizing the financial benefits from trading and ensuring full control of these trading routes, if necessary by military force.

Nabataeans were known as fierce fighters and sources mentioned at various times in history a 10,000 strong Nabataean army. But one source also reports that they went into battle with 50,000 warriors even. It has to be assumed, that little changed over time and that every man was a fighter, as seen in the film Lawrence of Arabia.

But how did they establish the required good trading relations to regularly supply a long list of goods from so many different and far away countries? Today we know that Nabataean merchant families moved with their entire clans to important ports and cities to live there permanently to foster better trading relationships. They also formed trading companies in Egypt, Sidon (Lebanon), Pozzuoli (Naples) and in Rome itself.

As smart traders they successfully blended in with the local population, even taking on Greek and Roman names. That is one of the reasons, why so little is

known about the Nabataeans, as ancient sources did not recognize them as such. It was based on their local names that the important Nabataean contributions were therefore credited by historian writers to the Greek and Romans.

Control of Important Trading Routes

Most ancient sources indicate that Nabataean goods were frankincense, myrrh and perfumes. It might have started on that small scale, but the list grew to over 100 different goods very quickly by the 1st century BC. The Nabataeans also traded many spices, which came into demand for the growing diversified Greek and Roman cuisine, as demonstrated in early Roman

cook books. Various minerals and precious metals, fine cloth and jewelry and finally plants for agricultural purposes were all part of the bargain.

All these goods were moved using two main over land routes, and for each a faster sea route was developed as well to handle growing demand and volumes. On the central Arabian route goods from Hadramaut were transported by camel via Shabwa, Qataban, Marib, the capital of the Kingdom of Saba, Najran, Yathrib (Madinah) and Madain Saleh to Petra and via Damascus and Sidon on to Greece, or via Gaza and Alexandria on to Rome.

The alternative sea route started in the ports of Cane (Qana), Eudae (Aden) and Al Mokha (Muza) in Yemen and via the Red Sea on to the port of Aila (Aqaba).

On the eastern Arabian land route, goods were transported from Oman to Gerrha and on to the various Mesopotamian Kingdoms and the Parthian Empire (Iran). But this route, as well as the alternative Gulf sea route was less frequently used. At the time the Nabataeans and the Gerraheans were the only experienced Arab seafarers.

From Pirates to Active Commercial Sailors

The Nabataeans were first described in ancient sources as pirates, both active on the Mediterranean, as well as the Red Sea. At some stage their pirate activities made navigating the Red Sea so dangerous that the Egyptians stopped sailing all together and resorted to trade with Nabataeans in their own Red Sea ports of Berenice, named after a Ptolemaic queen, at Ras Banas, at Philotera (Safarga), named after Ptolemy's mother, and at the port of Myos Hormos (Quseir al-Qadim).

Most importantly the smaller Nabataean dhows with triangular sails had a real advantage on the Red Sea with many dangerous riffs and fast changing winds,

especially in the Gulf of Aqaba with it's dangerous cross winds, making it impossible for the bigger and heavier Egyptian and Roman ships with square sails to navigate safely.

By 100BC trade had grown to such an extent that with camels alone the huge volumes could not be handled any longer. Sea transport turned out to be faster and more economical, resulting in the majority of goods now being transported by sea. Gaza as a Mediterranean port became less important and its loss to the Hasmoneans in Judea did not really affect Nabataean trade very much, as their trade with Rome was now moved through the bigger port of Alexandria.

By dominating the bitumen trade from the Dead Sea, the Nabataeans were able to build up a large fleet and started sailing now regularly to India and Ceylon. At the time Ceylon had become a key trans-shipment destination, where traders from the Far East and China met to exchange goods.

Did Nabataeans Trade Directly with China?

The knowledge of the monsoon winds were kept as a secret and it took two years for a round trip sailing to China. The big surprise question is: did the Nabataeans traded directly with the Chinese? Consider this: ancient reports mentioned a Chinese trade envoy named Chang Chien to have visited Petra in 138BC and 122BC. He was the first recorded Chinese trade visitor to the region and certainly at the time used the newly established over land Silk Road.

Reqem the Nabataean name for Petra was also mentioned in ancient Chinese records found at the famous silk city of Tseng.

But the most interesting report to give proof to the direct trade theory with China is the following. In 300AD it was reported in Chinese sources that a large Arab trading community of 600 merchants lived out side the important port of Canton at the

Perl River mouth.

Considering a Chinese culture at the time with a high level of reservations towards foreigners, this settlement on their territory would have only been allowed with friendly trading relations being built up over a very long period of time, and in Chinese terms this means possibly over some hundreds of years.

It is interesting to look at the goods which were traded in return with China. Besides incense, these included olive and sesame oil, various grains, wine, ghee, cane sugar, dates, tools, metals, oral and clothing. Also included were two types of silk produced by using a different type of weaving techniques created locally, the heavier damask produced in Damascus and light gauze silk created for hot climates in the workshops of Gaza.

Whilst not using slaves themselves, this did not preclude the Nabataeans from participating in the slave trade and making money from it. One ancient source even mentioned that they carried prostitutes on their ships, certainly a good negotiating tool to facilitate closing deals at lower prices and again making money.

Incense the Backbone of Nabataean Trade

What do we know about the different ancient trading items and what were they used for? Frankincense is gained from an evergreen tree and scrub in Yemen, Oman and parts of Somalia. The yellowish, semi-transparent gum resin is collected from small cuts in the bark and was used besides for embalming purposes, also as medicine and to dress wounds.

Burning incense was not only done in temples, but also in Roman houses and at crematories to mask the bad smell. To get an idea about the volumes used, archeologists have calculated that the Egyptians alone have embalmed



approximately 730 million bodies until 700AD, when the ritual was stopped.

Myrrh comes from trees in Arabia, has a pungent taste and is used for perfumes, ointments, as well as stimulant tonic and is today still used as antiseptic in mouthwash to treat sore gums and teeth. Romans used it as medicine for worm infestations, against cough and other infections. A special type of myrrh came from the Makkah area and was sold at much higher prices. Bitter aloe sap produced from plants in Yemen and Oman was used as a drug as far back as the 10th century BC.

The initial ud (oud) coming from the rare aquilaria tree is one of those very interesting trading items, as the market for it was created by the Nabataeans. The aquilaria tree is only found in the jungles of the Far East, in Borneo, Vietnam and Cambodia. Ud was produced by the tree as an immune response to certain fungus and smelled like cedar, sandalwood with traces of roses and balsam. Its quality was tested in water, good quality ud sinks because of its heavier weight, bad quality ud floats.

Today many different hard woods for incense burning are called generally oud and come from different countries. But the best oud sold in Saudi Arabia today still comes from Cambodia and is very expensive with some families spending as much as 10,000 Riyal for a Ramadan supply I have been told.

Already for Greek ladies cosmetics were important and very thought after items. So purple powder, indigo, aromatic resins, precious oils, cosmetic powders, eye shadow, skin gloss, face paint and even hair dye were important merchandise along with tridacna shells only found in the Red Sea and used as cosmetic containers. Nabataeans also mass produced ceramic flacons for perfumes and high quality ceramics, which were eggshell thin and nevertheless very hard.

Pearls, oyster shells, tortoise and ivory were used as jewelry items and for amulets, together with gemstones such as, diamonds, sapphire, lapis lazuli, topaz, turquoise, agate and obsidian,

as well as silver and gold of course.

Most Spices came from Far East

The long list of spices Nabataeans sourced from as far as Asia, is an indication of the diversity of the cuisine at the time. Before 1,000BC already cinnamon, cassia, senna and black pepper were in use. Cinnamon was the dried bark of the laurel tree and came from Ceylon and was also used as medicine.

Black pepper came from India and was very expensive and only used by the truly rich in Rome. Later cardamom, storax, cloves, ginger, nutmeg and vanilla became important too. Liquid storax an aromatic gum, was obtained from cutting the bark of the storax tree coming from Borneo, Java and Malaysia.

Cloves originated from the Moluccan islands in Indonesia and their oil was used as antiseptic, anesthetic in dentistry and for perfumes and soaps. Nutmeg was also sourced from the Moluccans and its red coat produced a second spice called mace.

Other spices found on the Nabataean trading lists in the book by Periplus of the Erythraean Sea written during the 40-70AD reign of Malichus II include: sage, costus root oil from the Himalayan mountains, coconut, aloe soccatrina, nimal, sugar, coffee, gum Arabic used for sweets and musk.

Musk came from the abdominal gland of the male musk deer in high mountains in Asia and was used as a long lasting odor for perfumes, important aphrodisiac and was first mentioned about 200BC.

Mining was a Big Business

The Nabataean business skills and drive to make money did not stop at pure trading. Little is being published until now about their immense mining activities. Some sources reported about their total control of the Dead Sea bitumen harvest and trading. At the time bitumen was very valuable as it was used for ship building and Egyptians also used it for embalming.



Bitumen raised in large quantities but at irregular intervals from the bottom of the Dead Sea to the surface and was collected by small reed rafts. It was also used as cement and as a binding material.

Different to other powers at the time, the Nabataeans did not use slaves for their heavy work and performed these tasks themselves, such as construction of tombs and buildings, agriculture and mining.

The mining activities and trading were widespread and included copper, bronze, tin, iron, arsenic and precious metals. Copper smelting was done close to Petra at Khirbet Nahas and at Timna in Wadi Araba in the same area of the famous King Solomon mines. Bronze was composed with a majority of copper, 7% arsenic and 3% tin. The Nabataeans produced three different kinds, normal copper, arsenical copper and tin bronze. Tin was scarce at the time and came from Asia.

The iron manufacturing know how was derived from refining of copper and bronze. To maintain permanent high temperatures, tall furnaces were needed. The iron was easily found in surface deposits, which we could still see on our trip through the mountains of Wadi Araba, the only place in the Middle East to have surface iron and copper deposits I was told.

Arsenic was produced by heating common arsenopyrite ore and was used to harden metals, as well as in the manufacture of glass and as medicine to treat syphilis and as poison. Some mining and smelting activity also took place at the town of Sabara some 8km south of Petra, where heaps of copper ore slag and kilns were found.

Glass was produced by heating sand, soda and lime

stone to 1,300°C. Glass was used in the area as early as 3,000BC and was already perfected by 1,500BC and the first glass blowing was done by 50BC.

Lapis Lazuli was already known by 5,000BC and was a gemstone traded by the Nabataeans which they sourced from Afghanistan. It contains calcite and pyroxene with small pyrite particles giving it the typical golden sparkles.

Turquoise is an opaque gemstone a cryptocrystalline with hydrated aluminum phosphate found in Iran and the Sinai desert. Other gemstones traded by the Nabataeans were diamonds, sapphire and obsidian all sourced from within the Arabian peninsular.

Why did it slowly end with Roman Rule?

There are interesting theories surfacing lately and as some make common sense, I am sharing those with you, but it needs to be said, they are still theories.

Let's summarize the Nabataean characteristics: they were excellent businessmen; they solved many conflicts with other powers trying to subject them with huge payments in silver; they spread out and lived without problems in various parts of the ancient world; they were highly skilled diplomats and could maintain more independence than others; they adopted other cultures and blended in well with Greek and later Romans.

Why then did the 500 year old and still strong Nabataean culture slowly disappear with Roman rule? Well the argument is, it did not disappear, Nabataeans just found more benefit in fully blending in and becoming true Romans.

One theory maintains that King Rabbel II struck a deal with Roman Emperor Trajan, that after his death the Nabataean Kingdom will become part of the Roman Empire and therefore all Nabataeans would become Roman citizens.

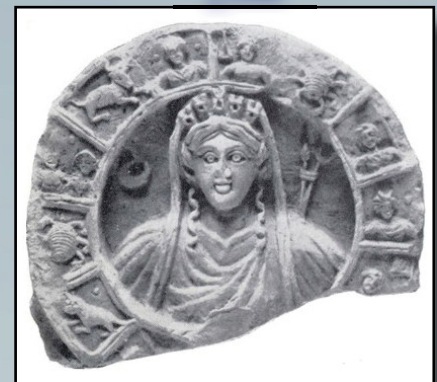
No need to pay huge amounts for independence and to



Aretas IV
King of Nabataean
9BC-40CE



Nabataean
Zodiac



maintain a huge army to defend their bitumen and mining business, no need to have annual military confrontations with their arch rivals the Hasmonean and Herod dynasty. Trade is so much easier if you are true Roman especially if you has a 25% market share, isn't it?



Al Khuraimat Tombs, Madain Saleh