Religion on the Move: Nomadic Culture Among the Nabateans and Others

Michele Murray, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Québec

(DRAFT FOR DISCUSSION: May, 2005)

1. Nomads

If you have ever visited a Middle Eastern country, you likely have seen them, their skin leathery from the sun, leading their flocks to fertile pasture; off in the distance, perhaps you noticed their tents serving as a temporary shelter from the elements, dotting the hills. Nomads, "indigenous people who under[take] regular, cyclical migrations in order to pursue pastoralism," are a prominent feature of Middle Eastern life today, and they were a significant presence in the past as well (Donner 1989: 75). Their influence on Near Eastern society has been profound. Transient and often evasive figures whose mobile lifestyle creates around them a mysterious aura, they have had an enormous impact on economic, social, political, and religious spheres of life in the Near East.

What is referred to as "nomadic life" may include the following variety of features: "[a] rhythmic, even predictable nature of movement in response to seasonal changes in pasture; [a] lack of a permanent, fixed habitation, and regular contact with settled people, especially villagers, in the course of their annual migratory cycle" (Donner 1989: 75). Their lives need to be portable, however there is great diversity reflected in modern, and ancient, nomadic lifestyles. "Contemporary observation demonstrates that there are varieties of mobile pastoralism. Many households may combine it with agriculture or hunting or fishing, and those who spend the summer in tents many return to solid houses in winter" (West 2002: 449). Indeed, if we think of "nomadic" and "sedentary" as the opposing ends of a spectrum of lifestyles, many modern groups fall somewhere in between (Donner 1989: 75); this is demonstrated to have been the case in antiquity as well. The "older, one-sided view of nomad-sedentary relations as constituting an endless struggle between 'the desert and the sown' has more recently given way to one stressing the economic interdependence of nomads and settled people" (Donner 1989: 76). As they travelled, nomadic groups encountered a variety of cultures and traditions; this interdependence led to an exchange of traditions and styles that affected every aspect of nomadic life, including the religious sphere.

This paper focuses on the religious behaviour of one nomadic group from the past: the Nabateans. Nabateans, a Semitic people who dominated the lucrative trade routes of the Arabian peninsula during the Greco-Roman period, are model nomads: it is this feature that is their most prominent and well-known characteristic. Two central issues will be addressed: how their mobile lifestyle is reflected in their religious traditions, and how their encounters with outside, non-Nabatean art and culture, due to their travels, are reflected in their religious traditions. Nabatean funerary practices will be compared with those of another nomadic group of antiquity: the Scythians.

2. Nabateans

As Jane Taylor suggests, the origins of the Nabateans "remain as hazy as a desert sandstorm" (2002: 14). The consensus among scholars is that they were Arabs whose earliest settlements were in southern Jordan and Palestine. There are a variety of theories, however, as to precisely where they were from before they arrived in Jordan and Palestine. Some scholars argue that they came from south-west of the Arabian peninsula, from modern-day Yemen – but the problem with this is that Nabatean language, script, and deities are not like those from south Arabia (Taylor 2002: 14; Graf 1992: 970).[1] Another theory is that they come from the East coast of Arabian peninsula, opposite Bahrain. Certainly they did seem to trade in this area, but whether they acutally originated from here is still a question. The more persuasive theory is that the Nabateans came from the north-west, today's Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia. Nabateans have several gods in common with ancient peoples from this region, and the root consonants of their tribal name (*nbtw*) is found in early Semitic languages from this area.

---

[1] The Nabateans used Aramaic for inscriptions since it had become the language of culture in the Semitic world, after cuneiform fell into disuse (Healey 2001: 26). The Aramaic (or, as Naveh calls it, "Imperial Arabic,") used by Nabateans in their inscriptions and legal documents (such as those found in a cave in Nahal Hever, near En Gedi) has some Arabic words and forms inserted, and over time, the Arabic insertions increased (Naveh 2003: 16).

The connection between the Greco-Roman Nabateans, whose name appears as *Nabatu* in their Aramaic inscriptions, with the earlier Ishmaelite tribe of the *Nebaioth* mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (in Gen. 25:13; 28:9; 36:7; Isaiah 60:7) has been rejected on linguistic grounds (Graf 1992: 970; Taylor 2002: 14).[2] Whatever their origin, by 312 BCE, the Nabateans "were centred at Petra, where they defended themselves successfully from an attack by Antigonous the One-Eyed, a veteran commander from Alexander the Great's eastern campaigns (Diodorus of Sicily 19.95)" (Graf 1992: 970).

Scholars of early Christianity know the Nabateans from their appearance in narratives found in the New Testament. Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, visited Emperor Tiberius in Rome and while there, became smitten with the Emporer's niece Herodias, who was married to Philip, his half-brother. Antipas divorced his wife, the Nabatean princess to whom he had long been married, and married Herodias. His actions enraged Aretas, the father of his Nabatean wife, and he incurred public wrath as well, because Jewish law forbade a man to marry his brother's wife while he was still alive (Taylor 2002: 70). Gospel accounts tell about John the Baptist's condemnation of this marriage, for which he was incarcerated. According to the Gospel account, Herodias encourages her daughter by her previous marriage to dance before Antipas and receive as a reward from the king the head of John the Baptist (Matt 14: 13-12 and parallels). The Nabateans are explicitly mentioned in the account of Paul's escape from

---

[2] The Greco- Roman Nabatean name lacks the *yod* found in "Nebaioth" of the Bible, and has an emphatic *tet* rather than a *taw*; this makes a relationship between the two peoples very unlikely (Graf 1992: 970).

Damascus, when the ethnarch of King Aretas IV guarded the city in order to catch Paul, but he was let down in a basket through a window and avoided capture (2 Cor. 11: 32-33).[3]

Generally there were close and amicable interactions between Nabatean kings and Jewish leaders, though at times tensions did arise (Kasher 1988). Conflicts with Alexander Jannaeus and struggles with members of the Herodian dynasty occurred, usually (primarily) due to Nabatean ambitions to expand their territory. But Jews lived quite peacefully, it appears, in the Nabatean city of Hegra. And, the Jewish woman Babatha's archive, stashed away in the caves above En Geddi during the Bar Kokchba revolt under Hadrian, reflects the fact that her Jewish family lived happily (except for those intra-family conflicts!) within Nabatean lands (Bowersock 1983: 76-78). Herod the Great's mother, Cypros, was of Nabatean descent. Indeed, in 65 BCE Petra served as a refuge for the boy Herod when his father, Antipater, sent his half-Nabataean children there for safety, "thus giving the young Herod and his future adversaries a first-hand view of each other" (Taylor 2002: 52). In many ways, the client-kingdom of Nabatea under Aretas IV (9 BCE – 40 CE) and that of Judea under Herod the Great underwent parallel developments (Graf 1992: 972). Both were significantly impacted by the Greco-Roman culture, as is reflected in each kingdoms' art and architecture.

The Nabatean's central source of income, as mentioned above, was through trade. This activity brought them remarkable wealth. By the late 4th century BCE, Nabateans were established traders of incense and spices from South Arabia and India, as well as balsam from the Jordan Valley near Jericho for medicinal use. Incense had many uses in the Roman world: for medicine, worship, and funerals (that needed frankincense), thus the price of incense tended to go up. For those involved in the incense trade, this meant a lot of money. The money was shared in a number of ways: the traders, of course, recieved part, as did those who took taxes as the caravaners travelled through their lands, and then finally the producers of the incense (Taylor 2002: 26; see Pliny, *Natural History* XII, 32, 63-65). Bitumen, extracted from the Dead Sea, was sold to Egyptians for their embalming, and for waterproofing boats and pottery (Taylor 2002: 37; Graf 1992: 970).[4]

---

[3] Paul's reference to an earlier stay in Arabia (Gal 1:17) is too vague to locate with certainty, although somewhere in the area of the Decapolis has been suggested by some scholars (Graf 1992: 972).

In the Hellenistic period, the Nabateans controlled the incense route from the northern Hejaz, through Edom and into the Judean Negev; they also had a stretch of Red Sea coast and some offshore islands (Taylor 2002: 38).[5] As Taylor notes, "The one thing in which the Nabateans had superior expertise over more sophisticated adversaries was their knowledge of the desert" (Taylor 2002: 17); they were, in particular, exceptionally skilled at water management. Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily, who wrote in late first century BCE, describes how the Nabateans used the desert as a "refuge" and "fortress" – they alone were able to cross it "since they … prepared subterranean reservoirs," filled them with rain water, and then "close[d] the openings, making them even with the rest of the ground, and they leave signs that are known to themselves but are unrecognizable by others" (XIX, 94. 6-8, trans. Oldfather 1961).

By the second century they had the monopoly of frankincense and myrrh from South Arabia, and established several settlements along the caravan routes between the Hijaz and Damascus, and between Petra and Gaza (Graf 1992: 970).[6] Nabatean camel caravans left the

---

[4] "'Not a few of them,' writes Diodorus/Hieronymus, 'are accustomed to bring down to the [Mediterranean] sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kinds of spices, which they procure from those who convey them from what is called Arabia Eudaemon' [today's Yemen]" (Diodorus XIX, 94.6-8: trans. Greer 1954).

[5] The second historical mention of Nabateans, which probably is first-hand, is in the papyrus archives of Zenon, the right-hand man of Apollonius, minister of finance for Ptolemy II Philadelphos (*Papiri greci e latini,* 406 in Graf 1992: 970; Taylor 2002: 38). According to this document, the Nabateans were in southern Syria (today's Hauran), in Auranitis and in the Northern Transjordan in the third century BCE.

[6] A prominent citizen called Moschion, son of Kydimos, of Priene, a city on the west coast of Asia Minor, mentions "Petra in Arabia" as one of the cities he visited in his diplomatic tour of the Mediterranean, along with the capital city of the Ptolemies, Alexandria. Dated to 129 BCE, this is "a clear sign that Nabataea was regarded as decidedly more than a minor provincial kingdom. The Nabateans were by now significant actors on the world stage" (Taylor 2002: 41).

Hejaz, and entered south of modern-day Jordan, and crossed long stretches of desert. Gaza was the main port for shipping material to Europe, and to get there they needed to cross the Negev. But in order to protect their cargo from first the Greeks, then the Judaeans and then the Romans, who wanted their cargo, the Nabateans chose the most challenging routes through the Negev, using wadis and hidden valleys to zigzag their way up steep cliffs, setting up forts at strategic spots, each with a cistern that would be guarded. They set up "caravanserais" in areas that had enough water to supply a large number of camels and riders; it was the final stretch that needed the most protection because it was open, so at Oboda the "largest military camp of all was established" (Taylor 2002: 26).

By the second century BCE, Nabateans occupied the coastal areas of the Red Sea. Diodorus describes how Nabateans attacked merchant ships of Ptolemaic Egypt, and that they were caught and punished for these acts of piracy (III, 42.4-5). They likely attacked in order to protect their trade interests, since Ptolemaic traders were sending Arabian material across the Red Sea directly into Egypt, sidestepping the overland Nabatean trade routes, and also avoiding paying taxes to the Nabateans (Taylor 2002: 38). Nabatean trading extended to the west coast of Italy, near Naples, and at other points along sea routes to Europe. Nabatean merchants set up "trading bases and temples" at Alexandria and Rhodes, and Puteoli on the west coast of Italy, near Naples (Taylor 2002: 70). "Within two or three centuries the Nabateans became the shrewdest of traders, ingenious hydraulic engineers and productive farmers, and acquired legendary wealth" (Taylor 2002: 17).

If we consider "nomadic life" to be on a continuum, with "nomadic" and "sedentary" at opposing ends, early Nabatean life (in the fourth century BCE) is best described as very close to the "nomadic" end of the pole. Diodorus, drawing on fourth-century BCE historian Hieronymus

---

of Cardia (one of Alexander the Great's officers) describes how the Nabateans "lead a life of brigandage," (II, 48.2: trans. Oldfather 1961) and that they "live in the open air, claiming as native land a wilderness that has neither rivers nor abundant springs from which it is possible for a hostile army to obtain water. It is their custom neither to plant grain, set out any fruit-bearing tree, use wine, nor construct any house; and if anyone is found acting contrary to this, death is his penalty", and that "[s]ome of them raise camels, others sheep, pasturing them in the desert" (XIX, 94.2-6: trans. Greer 1954). Nabatean life did not remain fully nomadic, however. As Healey points out, "these reports give a fairly consistent picture of the Nabateans, at least in their earlier history. Later they were undoubtedly much less nomadic, though there is the possibility, for example, that tents continued to be a popular type of housing even in the period when the Nabateans were building elaborate temples and tombs" (2001: 27).

3. Religious behaviour reflecting their mobile lifestyle

There are certain challenges to understanding Nabatean religion: there is, for example, no extant account of any aspect of Nabatean religion written by a Nabatean, including cultic behaviour, and there is no written account of Nabatean mythology (Healey 2001: 6). We have, furthermore, many questions and few solid answers about the nature and characteristics of the central deities worshipped by the Nabateans. On the other hand, there is plenty of archaeological evidence. There are thousands of Nabatean inscriptions (in Greek and Aramaic) and graffiti, and this material does provide some insight into Nabatean personal piety (Healey 2001: 8). In addition to this, there is a collection of Nabatean archaeological data, for example representations of deities, which are helpful for understanding Nabatean religion.[7] This material, however, is "fraught with interpretative difficulties" (Healey 2001: 21).

a) Betyls

The use of betyls, or standing stones, as representations of their deities, is characteristic of the Nabateans. The term "betyl" is used widely by scholars for a sacred stone or the stone slab that represents a deity. It derives from the Greek word baituvlia, which in turn is related to the Semitic "beth-el," which means "dwelling/house/temple of god/El" (Wenning 2001: 80). Nabateans used shaped slabs of stone, or stelae, often in rectangular shape, sometimes carved in relief, sometimes free-standing. Most of the gods represented at Petra are in the form of betyls carved into the sandstone cliffs (Patrich 1990: 59). This, says Taylor, reflects "a modest recognition of the impossibility of representing the unrepresentable" (2002: 122). Two terms are found for betyls in Nabatean inscriptions: *nsb* and *msb';* both terms, explains Wenning, are "related to the Semitic root *ysb* and describe an erected / standing stone / stela" and there is no indication in betyl types or shapes "any difference between the two terms" (Wenning 2001: 80).[8]

In the worship and representation of their gods, Nabateans observed what is called "aniconism," which means that "rather than using figural images as objects of worship, symbolic forms such as standing stones are taken as the representations of the deity" (Wenning 2001: 79). This is a practice they shared with many of their neighbours; in Genesis 28: 22, for example, Jewish patriarch Jacob is described as setting up a "stone, which … shall be God's house." Indeed, the Israelite prohibition of use of the graven image is well known. Taylor points out that the betyl “was for [Nabateans] the very abode of the god’s presence, and so an object of great sanctity” (Taylor 2002: 122). This “rectangular anonymity” for their deities was long followed by the Nabateans; their great god Dushara, their two chief goddesses Allat and al-‘Uzza, as well as several lesser gods, were represented as betyls.[9] The most common betyls are in the shape of a rectangle, usually with “a smooth surface; its width is half, or less than half, its height. Reliefs are cut either into the rock or into free-standing portable stones” with heights that range from 1.17 metres to 9 cm (Patrich 1990: 76).

---

[7] The amount of Nabatean archaeological material has increased considerably in recent years, particularly in Jordan, Syria, Israel and also Saudi Arabia (Healey 2001: 18). I participated last summer in a six-week excavation at Wadi ath-Thamad, Jordan, where work on Nabateans is ongoing under the leadership of Dr. Noor Mulder of the Netherlands, and the directorship of Dr. Michèle Daviau of Wilfrid Laurier University.

[8] Even though Nabatean inscriptions do not reflect usage of the term *beth-el*, it is standard scholarly practice to use the term betyl, so I shall do likewise.

It appears that some betyls were made to suit the Nabatean’s roving lifestyle: some of them were made small enough to carry from place to place in a pocket or purse: they ranged in height from 60cm to fewer than 10 cm (Patrich 1990: 83). Indeed, “grooves in the floor in many niches lead us to believe that portable betyls were used. We can assume that these betyls may have been kept in tents or houses as tutelary deities of the family and were put in the niches for special occasions. Some other, larger monuments have holes or slots in the top to insert betyls, including the cultic platform of the Qasr adh-Dharih … and three bases from Puteoli with a few betyls in situ” (Wenning 2001: 86). At the end of a pathway leading up to el-Hubtah at Petra, there is a niche with a double recess; the niche may have been designed to contain two “portable” betyls (Patrich 1990: 54). “At Petra, a chair with a back is carved in a niche on the upper terrace of the house of Dorotheos. The chair is empty, but it probably once held a portable idol” (Patrich 1990: 91-2). Portable stelae have been found in the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra, a structure completed in c. 27/28 CE (Patrich 1990: 97). In the Negev desert, U. Avner discovered many Nabatean encampments, at each of which “he found between one to thirty standing stones" (Patrich 1990: 40). Avner also found "standing stones at the side of the road, unconnected to a specific site," which, Avner intriguingly suggests, "appear to be connected with a road cult and may have been used for prayer by people traveling with caravans" (in Patrich 1990: 66).

---

[9] Several ancient authors dates between the second and fourth centuries CE state that the Arabs worshipped a god represented by a stone slab. Maximus Tyrius, for example, wrote: “The Arabs worship I know not whom, but their image I have seen – it was a square stone” (*Philosophumena,* II, 8, ed. H. Hobein, Leipzig, 1910, p. 25, l. 19f); Clement of Alexandria, in *Protrepticus,* 4.46.2,(ed. O. Stählin, *GCS* 12. Leipzig, 1905, p. 35, 11.14-15), states: “Thus, in ancient times, the Skythians worshipped the dagger, the Arabs the stone, and the Persians the river …”

Some of the rectangular stele, or betyls, bear schematic representations of eyes and a nose. These have been found at Petra, 'Ain-Shellaleh, and Mada'in Saleh (Patrich 1990: 82). So far, 27 eye betyls are known (Wenning 2001: 83). At Petra, portable betyls of this type have also been discovered (Patrich 1990: 83). At the path up to Jabal al-Khubtha at Petra, there is a niche and an accompanying votive inscription: "These are the betyls of Al-'Uzza and of the Lord of the House, wade by Wahballahi, the caravan-leader, son of Zaidan" (Dalman 1912: 96-98, 171 no.85 in Wenning 2001: 80). Dalman describes the niche as empty (1912: 46 no. 760, fig. 42), and Wenning suggests that, despite the fact that grooves in the floor of the nich are not found, it nonetheless may have been filled with a portable betyl (2001: 81).

b) The use of stone in betyls and *nepheshes*

Stone is a substance that is solid, stable, and permanent – unlike the lifestyle of the nomad. One could argue, in fact, that the characteristics of stone represent the exact opposite of the transient life of a people continually on the move. As Eliade has said, "Above all, stone *is*" (1970: 216). Eliade points out that rock shows the human "something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity: an absolute mode of being" – and that the nature of stones made them useful symbols of that "something beyond" sought in his devotion (1970: 216). In the "grandeur, …hardness, … shape and … colour," of stone or rock, suggests Eliade, humans were "faced with a reality and a force that belong to some world other than the profane" (1970: 216). Perhaps for the nomadic Nabateans, it was the motionlessness of stones, and their permanent, stable qualities, that particularly appealed to them. The permanence of stone was so different from their mundane lives out on the fields, riding camels and herding flocks of sheep, constantly chasing the fertile fields on which their animals would graze; perhaps in its stillness, a stone was the perfect symbol of "otherness" of their deities for the Nabatean. This argument cannot, I admit, be pushed too far: there are, after all, sedentary populations that use[d] stone to represent their deities. Perhaps, though, this use of stone among sedentary communities is a remnant of an earlier nomadic, wandering lifestyle.

Interestingly, Nabateans also used stones to memorialize the dead. The "*nephesh,"* is "shaped like an obeliskoid pilaster or a pointed cone, often with a blossom/pinecone or a stylized crown at the top" (Wenning 2001: 87). They are usually placed on a base on which the name of the dead person is inscribed. The term "*nephesh"* is a Semitic word meaning "life" or "person" and it is found in certain Nabatean inscriptions (Wenning 2001: 87). The Nabatean *nepheshes* are "in bas-relief, roughly carved or engraved into rock faces," and are found both inside and outside tombs – though some are found quite apart from tombs (Wenning 2001: 87). Patrich warns that "we … must make a distinction between a rock-cut relief intended as an idol and one intended as a memorial marker for the dead, a *nefesh.* The *nefesh* might be found inside the burial chamber itself or, alternatively, unconnected with a tomb; at Petra, the *nefesh* resembles a pointed or concave cone, ending in a sort of spout or blossom – a shape totally different from that of the stelae idols. The difference is further attested to by the identifying inscriptions that occasionally accompany them" (1990: 70 see illustration 40 on p. 122).[10] *Nepheshes* have been discovered along the pathway of the Siq, the gorge through which the main road entering the city of Petra passes, along its prominent rock walls. Wenning, citing Dalmon, describes three

---

[10] The neighbours of the Nabateans, the Judeans, also used an "architectonic shape or a column topped by an object resembling a pine cone" as the *nefesh* as well (Patrich 1990: 122-23).

nepheshes carved into the wall of a quarry that “probably commemorate masons who suffered fatal accidents” while doing their job (Dalmon 1908: 245 nos. 401b, c, e).

Finally, figurines in the shape of camels, horses, and riders on horseback have been found at many Nabatean sites. The horses are shown wearing an elaborate harness and saddle; the camels are depicted with harness, saddle, saddle bag, water gourd, shield, and sword (Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2003: 39). While some scholars interpret the statues to be representing deities, Patrich reasonably suggests that “they may simply be ordinary horsemen and cameleers, or heroic, but not divine, nomadic figures” (1990: 113, esp. footnote 160). These figurines may have served as votive offerings to Nabatean deities (as suggested by the inscription, discussed earlier, from Puteoli), asking for protection during their travels. Whether or not they are meant to represent heroic camaleers or deities, these figurines (particularly those figurines of horseback riders), reflect the itinerant lifestyle of the Nabateans.

c) The mobile lifestyle reflected in Nabatean architecture, art, and symbols

Nabatean travel through trade introduced Nabatean temples to areas outside of Nabatean territory. For example, there is a temple of Dushara at Daphne in Epypt; we know this from an inscription dated to 34 BCE from Shuqafiyyeh (see Fiema and Jones 1990). No doubt such a temple was established by Nabatean merchants, who, in their travels, desired a place to worship and so erected this temple. There were, as mentioned earlier, also temples established in Puteoli, Italy, by traders. An inscription at Puteoli records the restoration of “the former sanctuaries .. made in the 8th year [51 BCE] of Malichus, king of the Nabataeans.” The renovated temple was dedicated “for the life of Aretas, king of the Nabateans, and of Huldu his wife, queen of the Nabateans, and of their children, in the month Ab [August], the 14th [AD 5] of his reign” (Taylor 2002: 70). Another inscription at Puteoli, apparently set up by two Nabatean merchants, was established to commemorate an answered prayer. Their offerings, which likely were votive figurines made of clay or precious metal, were presented in gratitude to their god: "These are two camels offered by Zaidu, son of Taimu, and Adelze, son of Haniu, to the god Dushara who heard us. In the 20th year of the reign of Aretas, king of the Nabateans, who loves his people" (Taylor 2002: 70).[11] Travelling Nabateans did not forget who they were; they wished to worship their deities in a familiar setting, and so took it upon themselves to establish sacred places outside of Nabatean territory.

We also find non-Nabatean deities *within* Nabatean land. There is evidence, for example, of an Isis cult "having existed among the Nabateans in general and at Petra specifically. The Khazneh, or treasury, (see Ill. 36 on p. 116 Patrich), for example, includes attributes from the Isis iconograpy…" (Patrich 1990: 105). I am not suggesting that Nabatean contact with non-Nabatean styles and deities could come to pass only because of Nabatean travel: certainly, in many ways, Greco-Roman culture came to *them*.[12] Isis may have been introduced to Petra by foreigners, perhaps Egyptians, who visited Petra – but it is also possible that Nabatean traders encountered and became devotees of the Isis cult on their travels, and then introduced the cult to the Nabatean milieu when they came back home. Perhaps both of these scenarios were in play.

In the Lower Temenos (the sacred lower terrace) of the Petra Great Temple, which is the largest free-standing structure in central Petra, there are some remarkable capitals. These are in the Ionic tradition, but instead of the usual curved volutes there are Asian (or Indian) elephant heads![13] These are "[s]culpted from limestone and covered with a light plaster film, their wrinkled skins, their provocative eyes, their small well-defined veined ears, their tusk openings (no tusks have been recovered), and their curving trunks are remarkable in that each elephant face has a character, a personality of its own" (Joukowsky 2002: 245). The date of these carvings is usually set in the first century BCE or the early first century CE (Joukowsky 2002: 245). These are Indian, or Asian, elephants, (this species is smaller on average than the African elephant, has smaller ears, and a convex, as opposed to concave, back [Scullard 1974: 23-24]). Nabateans may not have needed to travel to India to encounter elephants (elephants were used by Julius Caesar against the Pompeians in 46 BCE, and by Pompey in state ceremonies until 81 CE, so were found in the Hellenistic Roman world), but, since Nabateans did engage in the trading of Indian spices, perhaps this was a conscious expression of an Indian symbol with which they had direct experience.

---

[11] Rosenthal-Heginbottom notes that camel figurines, perhaps like those offered by the traveling merchants in Puteoli, are among the repertoire of mold-made figurines found in Nabatean sites in the Negev (2003: 38).

[12] For example, one Greek inscription in the Siq is difficult to read with certainty, but it seems to contain a reference to a priest of Isis (Patrich 1990: 105).

[13] Joukowsky points out that there are approximately 156 elephant-headed capitals adorning the Lower Temenos; of these, five have been restored and "429 elephant fragments remain to be united with other elements" (2002: 246).

It may also be their mobile lifestyle that, at least in part, brought Nabateans into contact with new, figurative, ways of depicting their deities, and in some cases Nabateans adapted these styles to create their own individual expression. As Taylor rightly says of the Nabateans: "Their rare gift was to learn from the skills of others, and to transform disparate ideas into something uniquely their own" (2002: 17). In Wadi Farasa in Petra, one can find an abstract rectangular *betyl* (40cm x 20cm), cut in bas relief into the rock, of Dushara, and above it is a human head inside a circular medallion (30cm wide and 37.5cm high). It is difficult to know with certainty who this represents because of erosion of facial features and body contours: most probably it is the Greek god Dionysus, with whom Dushara was frequently identified (Taylor 2002: 123).[14]

---

[14] "It is reasonable to assume that Dushara was originally worshipped in betylic form, but the fact that he was represented also figuratively is suggested by the marble hand from the *adyton* of the Qasr el-Bint temple at Petra, assuming that this was dedicated to Dushara as high god (Zeus Hypsistos). There are also possible terracotta figurines of Dushara" (Healey 2001: 97). Also, Dushara came to be identified ("mostly later" says Healey 2001: 97) with the god of Bosra, the god of Adraa, and "under Greek and Roman influence in certain areas, with Dionysus and Zeus" (Healey 2001: 97). There is a bilingual inscription (Greek and Nabatean) from Miletus that states that a dediction to "Zeus Dusares Soter" (Healey 2001: 101).

This combination of the non-figurative style and the anthropomorphic style probably reflects the artist's intention "to specify, by means of figurative iconography, the identity of the deity represented below it as a simple stele" (Patrich 1990: 107). Like the medallion and block relief, in the "Eagle Gully" (Wadi Dfeleh) at Petra, there is an eagle above the more traditional stele (Patrich 1990: 108). Patrich suggests that in these works of art, "we are witness to the artisan's dilemma: he was caught between two worlds, between two polar iconographic conceptions of how to represent the deity: the figurative conception prevalent in the cultural centers of the period and the traditional betylic conception" (Patrich 1990: 109). The artist decided to compromise and combine the two styles, a judicious move "that introduced the new without abandoning the old" (Patrich 1990: 109).[15]

According to Taylor, such a combination "indicates that abstract representations of Nabatean deities existed side by side with anthropomorphic images of the assimilated gods; the one was not superseded by the other" (Taylor 2002:123). Indeed, states Patrich, "we can hardly speak in terms of a linear development over time from rude betylic representation to anthropomorphism" (Patrich 1990: 106). Taylor argues that it is only after Rome incorporated Nabataea into its empire "do we find anthropomorphic images of Nabataean gods. Until then, the closest the Nabataeans came to representing their gods in their own image was to adorn a small handful of their rectangular *betyls* with schematized facial features": which essentially was a straight line for a nose, squares or ovals or the shape of a four-pointed star for eyes, and sometimes, an oval mouth (2002: 122).[16]

---

[15] This relief is often dated to the reign of Aretas IV (9 BCE – 40 CE) when Greco-Roman influence at Petra was strongest.

[16] "A quite extraordinary stele for the Nabatean region was discovered in the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra …It is a flat, rectangular slab, its two oval eyes are carved in outline and are topped by thick, curved eyebrows, suspended from them a long nose points toward thick lips that are, in turn, split by a deeply incised horizontal line…"(Patrich 1990: 84-5).

In 106 CE, upon the death of the last king of the Nabateans, Rabel II, Nabatean independence ended for the kingdom was incorporated into the Roman Empire as *Provincia Arabia* (Patrich 1990: 70). Many cities in the area began to mint coins, and the "usual practice was to show the head of the reigning emperor on the obverse of the coin and that of a city god or some other religious symbol on the reverse" (Patrich 1990: 70). While most of the gods are depicted anthropomorphically, "[t]he coins of Adraa, Bostra, Charachmoba, and Medaba (all four of which had been within the boundaries of the original Nabatean kingdom) show an anthropomorphic scheme for the city gods but a stele for the ancient Nabatean god Dusares" (Patrich 1990: 70). The intriguing reality that the older Nabatean nonfigurative tradition had not been phased out completely is reflected in these coins; the one from the city of Bostra at the time of Caracalla, in 209/210 CE, displays three betyls of Dusares:

> Three stelae stand on a raised platform that is reached from a staircase. A number of flattened objects rest on top of the central stele; the number is not constant on the coins, and instances of one, three, four or seven such objects are known. There is only one such object on top of the lateral stelae. All three stelae are elongated and slightely rounded at the top. The inscription … "Dusares the god" explains the meaning of the representation of the coin… it is possible to distinguish two human figures standing on the platform, on either side of the stela. They are presumably engaged in some sort of ritual activity, possibly the blood libation mentioned in the Suidas *Lexicon* or some other ritual connected with the Dusares cult… [this coin and others like it] are proof of the continuing undiminished validity of the ancient nonfigurative tradition (Patrich 1990: 73-4).[17]

As they encountered first the Seleucid and Ptolemaic worlds, and then later the Roman world, their religious expression underwent certain changes: "new features are assimilated and integrated, some traditional features are set aside or go out of fashion" (Healey 2001: 15).[18] Yet, as noted, the Nabatean tradition of depicting their deities in non-figurative form continued even during periods when Roman influence on art and architecture was strong (e.g., during the reign of Obodas III (30-9 BCE) and Aretas IV (9/8 BCE – 40 CE), and after they had lost their political independence in 106 CE.

---

[17] The *Souda*, a Byzantine lexicon written in the tenth century but containing earlier material, provides a detailed description of the highest god of the Nabateans in Petra: "[It] is a black stone, square and unshaped, four feet high and two feet wide. It is set on a base covered with wrought gold. They offer sacrifices to it and pour over it the blood of the victims, that being their form of libation. The whole building abounds in gold and there are dedications in abundance" (Taylor 2002: 124).

The explanation for why Nabateans continued to assert their ancient, non-figurative tradition might be found in Fred Donner's argument that nomadic groups "tend to be socially and culturally isolated" despite their mobile lifestyles (1989: 78). Donner points out that nomads are exposed to new ideas and customs during the months when they are in close contact with settled communities or even living among them, "but unlike their sedentary neighbors, nomads also spend part of the year – maybe the greater part of it, in some cases – in search of pasture, in a setting that for those months not only isolates them from almost all contact with outsiders but also places them in the sole companionship of others like themselves, in small groups among whom long familiarity and the exigencies of life reinforce their time-honored values and customary ways of doing things" (1989: 79). Donner suggests that the implications of this is that nomads are "culturally conservative, that is, slow to change their ways" (1989: 79). Perhaps when certain Nabateans left sedentary communities, where they were temporarily dwelling, to travel together along the trade route, or to live in tents together as they searched for fertile pastures off of which to graze their flocks, this was a time during which their ancient tribal tradition of worship using non-figurative forms, such as betyls, was reinforced and reaffirmed.

---

[18] "It appears … that during the first century BCE and the first century CE … Nabatean religion was still at a stage in which a fixed ritualistic frameworkhad not yet crystallized. In this period the Nabateans already built monumental temples within sacred precincts, around which a national rather than a tribal religious establishment must have grown. These settings, in which the worship of the deity required the mediation of a priest, was more appropriate to settled than to nomadic tribes. Such a development would not have affected the personal-folk cult of worshipping rock-cut reliefs in open air shrines or portable stelae in private homes" (Patrich 1990: 103-4).

They would, then, return to the sedentary community with a renewed commitment to traditional customs.

d) "Dushares" etymology

The central, most important Nabatean deity is Dushara, and this was recognized among ancient writers. Untangling the meaning and origins of this name, however, is rather complicated. In fact, this "name" is not really a name, but an epithet or descriptive title that associates the god with a particular geographical location (Healey 2001: 23, 86). It is, according to Healey, "a widely held view… that Dushara's name is to be explained on the basis of a putative Arabic word, meaning "the one of (i.e. 'Lord of') the Shara(t) mountain range" (2001: 87). This mountain range is "well documented in the Arab geographers as the name of a region of southern Jordan corresponding more or less to ancient Edom … this region had, according to some sources, its capital at Udhruh east of Petra" (Healey 2001: 87). If this interpretation is correct, then perhaps this is one of the areas in which that the nomadic Nabateans wandered with their flocks.

Healey offers an additional interpretation, however: he suggests that "Shara" can mean "road, tract of land, mountain," and can also mean "colocynth, spreading plant." He tentatively suggests that this reflects an identity of Dushara as a vegetation god: "Final certainty cannot be reached on this, but I am inclined to suspect a meaning along the lines of 'He of the vegetation'" (Healey 2001: 88). Since one of their primary concerns was finding fertile fields on which to graze their flocks of sheep, this connection between Dushara and vegetation is not surprising. Healey laments that one of the big issues in Nabatean religion "is the identification of the nature and characteristics of Dushara, the main god. When the Nabateans worshipped Dushara, were they worshipping a god of the vegetation, of the sun, of the storm, of the nomadic life or what?" (Healey 2001: 93). Unfortunately, there is no certain answer to this question.

e) Nabatean Burials

Strabo makes an intriguing statement about the Nabateans' concern (or, rather, lack thereof) for their dead in his *Geography* 16, 4.26: "They have the same regard for the dead as for dung, as Heracleitus says: 'Dead bodies more fit to be cast out than dung'; and therefore they bury even their kings beside dung-heaps" (trans. Jones 1949). What could Strabo have meant? This statement, which comes from the first-century CE observations of the traveler and philosopher Athenodorus, has given rise to much scholarly commentary regarding Nabatean mortuary rituals. Most scholars understand Strabo's description to be a reference to exposure of the dead prior to secondary burial, where the disarticulated remains were gathered and then buried (Wright 1969 in Healey 2001: 28).[19] Indeed, secondary burial was practiced so frequently in the Neolithic and Hellenistic Near East that few scholars question its use among Nabateans (Perry 2002: 265).

It is not so much the monumental rock-cut tombs that have provided insight into Nabatean funerary customs, but the recent excavations of two less ornate Nabatean tombs on the North Ridge of Petra that give "considerable data on Nabatean mortuary customs and the ancient inhabitants of their capital" (Perry 2002: 265). These burials reveal the manners in which Nabateans dealt with their dead: burial in large tombs with elaborately-carved facades, burial in shaft tombs that were shared with several bodies, and single burials in cist tombs or coffins (Perry 2002: 266). Fortunately, the two Nabatean shaft-tombs uncovered in the1998 excavation season contained a surprising amount of information.

---

[19] Clermont-Ganneau (1895) suggested that confusion arose because the Greek word for "dung," `kopriva`, sounds like the Nabatean word for "tomb" (*kapra)* (in Healey 2001: 28).

The first tomb was a simple shaft tomb located underneath the north side of the Ridge Church. It contained "four parallel *loculi* cut into the floor of a chamber measuring 3.5 meters east to west by 2.5 meters north to south" (Perry 2002: 267). Because of repeated human and natural disturbances, the human skeletal remains were discoverd scattered in pieces about the soil layers in the chamber area. This tomb held the remains of at least four people: an adult male, a woman, a six to twelve month-old child, and a three to four-year-old infant. A substantial amount of pottery was found, both painted and unpainted, dating to the first half of the first century CE (Perry 2002: 267). These ceramics included items "likely used in funerary feasts honoring its occupants, such as storage jars … strap handled pitchers and dipper juglets" and many cooking pots (Perry 2002: 267).

The second, considerably larger tomb, is located south of the southern wall of the Ridge Church. It is a square chamber measuring "five and a half meters east to west by five meters north to south," with a doorway in the middle of the northern wall leading to a smaller square room "measuring 2.25 meters north to south by 2.60 meters east to west" (Perry 2002: 267). At least thirty-six individuals were buried in this tomb during the second half of the first century CE. Excavators were pleasantly surprised to find *in-situ* burials at Petra (most of the other tombs had been disturbed by robbers), but what in particular intrigued them was the fact that "many of these individuals had been buried at the same time" (Perry 2002: 268). For example, the earliest skeletal remains belonged to an 18 to 20-year-old female, and "[s]hortly after that interment, four more individuals were placed within the tomb at the same time: a 20 to 24-year-old female with a six-month-old infant placed by her side in a wooden coffin, and a 45 to 49-year-old of unknown sex holding a newborn baby" (Perry 2002: 268). After a short period, three more individuals were buried at the same time within the tomb.[20] Interestingly, Perry states that "[b]io-anthropological data revealed nothing that could explain what simultaneously killed these individuals" (2002: 268). The evidence for the practice of multiple concurrent burials "suggest that a fatal event, such as a disease epidemic or other citywide occurrence, may have resulted in a large number if deaths in a short time period during the first century CE" (Perry 2002: 269).

The excavation of the North Ridge tombs has "allowed for a better picture of first century CE Nabatean mortuary practices in the urban center of Petra" (Perry 2002: 268). Nabatean burials outside of Petra likewise have reflected diversity among Nabatean funerary rites and interment techniques.[21] What is known is that, while Nabateans did practice secondary burials, communal tombs and primary cist graves were the most commonly used funerary type, and that, "[f]requently, after decomposition of the corpse, the body would be moved aside to make room for the next interment, suggesting that the decay of soft tissue marked complete the transformation of the deceased's social persona from the world of the living to the dead" (Perry 2002: 27). In addition to this, funerary feasts appear to have been held frequently by Nabatean mourners.

4. Scythians

That there was much diversity in the way nomads buried their dead is evidenced when one compares the Nabatean rituals with those of the Scythians. Scholars generally agree that the Scythians were people of Indo-European (possibly Iranian stock), who were known for their skills as warriors on horseback (West 2002: 440; Artamonov 1969: 11).[22] They lived along the steppes of the northern Black Sea area, or northern Pontic steppes, from the seventh to the third century BCE (Raevskii 1986: 145). The borders of classical Scythia correspond more or less to those of present-day central and southern Ukraine (Rolle 1989: 11).[23]

---

[20] The additional twenty-eight skeletons were found scattered due to disturbances from robbers and natural phenomena; twenty-two of these were adults and six were children (aged from newborn to eleven years old) (Perry 2002: 268).

[21] Excavations of the Mampis cemetery have, for example, "uncovered examples of direct inhumation, burial within cedar coffins and secondary burial… most burials contained only a few artifacts such as personal jewlery and, in cone case, an alabaster jug (Perry 2002: 269). Burials at Khirbet edh-Dharih and Khirbet Qazone, two other Nabatean cemeteries located in southern Jordan, reveal different practices. For example, at Khirbet Qazone twenty-two first-century CE graves were uncovered, each containing one person, sometimes wrapped in leather shrouds or textiles (Perry 2002: 269).

The Scythians did not have a written language, so information about them is derived from archaeological data, and Greek and Roman authors. Herodotus (Book IV) is the central literary source for the Scythians. He says that he travelled to their land in the middle of the fifth century BCE, in particular because he desired to see where the failed Persian campaign against the Scythians took place in 513/12 BCE. It is not entirely certain, however, whether or not Herodotus visited the northern coast of the Black Sea; travel to the North Pontic coast was not easy – if Herodotus went anywhere in the region, he probably visited the city called Olbia (West 2002: 443). There were a number of Greek settlements established from the sixth century BCE along the narrow northern coastal strip of the Black Sea, apparently this wave of colonization began from Miletus in Asia Minor (Rolle 1989: 11). Olbia was one of these new foundations; it was located on the estuary of two large rivers, the Hypanis (present-day Bug) and the Borysthenes (Dnieper). At any rate, what Herodotus says about the Scythians "should be treated as a synthesis of information derived from various sources" probably including merchants and slaves who had travelled through Scythia (West 2002: 444).[24]

---

[22] "[I]t looks as if the name *Scythes* was extended from one dominant group of Iranian stock to encompass a large number of culturally similar tribes, some of whom may have been Finno-Ugrian or Proto-Baltic" (West 2002: 440).

[23] "Ordinary Greek (and later Latin) usage could designate as Scythian any northern barbarian from the general area of the Eurasian steppe, the virually treeless corridor of drought-resistant perennial grassland extending from the Danube to Manchuria. Herodotus seeks greater precision, … his Scythians…belong to the North Pontic steppe" (West 2002: 439).

[24] Ovid provides another eywitness account; in 9 CE he was exiled by Augustus to Tomis (modern Constanta in Rumania) on the western border of Scythia, in a town comprised of "barbarized" Greeks, Scythians, and Getae (Rolle 1989: 14). Orator Dion Chrysostomos from Prusa in Bithynia in north-west Asia Minor travelled to Olbia; his impressions of the city, which, by the time he visited it in the summer of 95 CE was very much in decline, are reflected in his *Borysthenitica* (Rolle 1989: 14).

Herodotus describes the Scythians as formidable foes in the battlefield, "[f]or when men have no stablished cities or fortresses, but all are house-bearers and mounted archers, living not by tilling the soil but by cattle-rearing and carrying their dwellings on waggons, how should these not be invincible and unapproachable?" (IV, 46: trans. Godley 1971). The Scythians travelled in the warmer season from one pasture to another by caravan; these caravans or wagons likely were driven by oxen rather than horses.[25] Clay models of the Scythian wagons, which probably were used as toys, have been found in burials (Rolle 1989: 114). While the Scythians may not have been the first to domesticate the horse, they probably were among the first; in China, India, and possibly also in Egypt, horses had been used in the second millennium as beasts of burden for transporting carts or, in battle, pulling light chariots. The Scythians attained great success in military campaigns primarily because of the advantages their mounted soldiers had over enemies on foot; "[i]n consequence [after] the Scythian penetration into Asia … the technique of riding was suddenly mastered throughout the entire Middle East" (Rice 1957: 70; Artamonov 1969: 10). The horse was a crucial part of Scythian culture; indeed, as we shall see, the horse had a significant role in Scythian burial practices.

Herodotus, in Book IV, 71, provides a vivid description of the Scythian burial rituals for a king. First the body was embalmed: the corpse was cut open and the internal organs removed. The body cavity was filled with aromatic spices and then sewn up, and then was covered with wax. There were, says Herodotus, 40 days between death and burial for kings; during this time the body was transported by ceremonial waggon to the different areas of his territory and various feasts were held in his honour.[26] Then the body was buried. The grave, usually an underground chamber-catacomb, was uniform in the way it was constructed and in the objects gathered to accompany the king. Servants ("one of the king's concubines, his cup-bearer, his cook, his groom, his squire, and his messenger" [IV, 71: trans. Godley 1971]), as well as horses, were killed (strangled) to accompany the king in his death. Over the grave "a great barrow of earth" (IV, 71: trans. Godley 1971) was built. As for the other, non-royal Scythians, Herodotus writes that "when they die, [they] are laid in waggons and carried about among their friends by their nearest of kin, each receives them and entertains the retinue hospitably, setting before the dead man about as much of the fare as he serves to the rest" (Book IV, 71 trans. Godley 1971).

---

[25] Rolle explains that horses' windpipes can be blocked by the throat straps of the brow and neck yoke (1989: 115).

[26] Interestingly, traditional folk belief of eastern Europe holds that the soul hovers near the body for 40 days until it leaves for the land of the dead (Rolle 1989: 27).

Archaeology has largely substantiated Herodotus' description of the Scythians' unusual burial rites. A multitude of burial mounds, called *kurgany* in eastern Europe and *mogily* in the Ukraine, attest to the presence of the Scythians (Rolle 1989: 19). The kurgans of the Scythians stand out by their height and structure. They tend to be very tall (some are as high as a three-story building!) and their bases can reach a diameter of over 100 m. (Rolle 1989: 19). Scythian kurgans tend to be arranged in groups, usually with the largest mound surrounded by smaller ones; "in certain areas they are so concentrated that we may speak of a 'grave landscape' – as far as the eye can see: hundreds, sometimes thousands of mounds…"(Rolle 1989: 19-20).[27]

The construction of the mounds "was an organized communal activity" that would have required a considerable labour force (Rolle 1989: 32). This gives "an indication of the firm administration which underlay the apparent freedom of the steppe peoples" (West 2002: 452). The burial mounds attracted the attention of grave robbers through the centuries; in fact, some of the robbers' skeletons have been found in the graves – apparently they were crushed or suffocated by falling earth from above them. "In one case [the grave robbers] even remainted upright, picks and spades in their hands; the remnants of a purse containing small coins of the period of Mithradates VI Eupator (107-63 BC) at their feet make an approximate dating possible" (Rolle 1989: 21).

---

[27] Archaeological excavations of the kurgans began in the eighteenth century, with the goal of acquiring the precious objects; few records were kept. Fortunately Peter the Great, and other Russian tsars, took an interest in the Scythian objects, so that rather than being destroyed many artefacts are on display in the Hermitage (Rolle 1989: 20).

The basic design of a catacomb burial was rather complicated: "[it] consists of a descent, usually leading steeply down from the original surface, with a corridor or short passage below opening into a cave-like burial chamber" (Rolle 1989: 21). The descending shafts are tunnel-like, and can descend to between 10 to 15 metres deep, and can reach up to 30 metres long, sometimes with sections that branch off. The chambers are hollowed-out, rounded areas, with side-chambers and additional compartments created in the walls. A substantial quantity of soil had to be dug out and transported, sometimes as much as 400 cubic m for the tomb of a prince, who would need a lot of room for all of the items he would need for the next life (Rolle 1989: 22). Generally, steps led down the descent so that the body as well as all of the necessary "equipment for the next world" could be transported down to the chamber (Rolle 1989: 21-22).

Archaeology has shown that, in the royal tombs in the northwest Caucasus and on the Pontic steppes, women, servants, grooms and horses were frequently interred with the main burial. The tombs were lavishly furnished with the king's possessions in order to create a comfortable "dwelling for the dead;" items include colourful wall-hangings and carpets, cushions and pillows, beds, clothing, jewelry, drinking vessels, even cooking pots, and weapons (often of fine workmanship in gold) (Rolle 1989: 27; Farkas and Piotrovsky 1975: 8).[28] Men were not the only ones buried with bow, quiver, and arrows, spears, and sword – "the presence of weapons (along with spindles, mirrors, and jewellery) in an increasing number of women's graves in the Scythian region … has revealed what led to the location of the mythical Amazons in this area" (West 2002: 453-54).[29] The Certomlyk kurgan, the most significant tomb of Scythian times, was found mostly undisturbed by archaeologist Zabelin in the middle of the nineteenth century; it could be that the death of a grave robber, whose body was found in one of the burial chambers, was enough to deter others tempted by the hidden treasure (Rolle 1989: 21). It is from undisturbed graves in which Scythian rulers were buried that the evidence of Scythian material culture is primarily derived.

---

[28] Many of the Scythian items (e.g., tools, weapons and jewelry) are decorated ornately with animal forms; the significance of certain animals, such as the stag, which are depicted repeatedly, is a subject of debate among scholars, though surely some were favoured because of their mobility (Charrière 1971: 134 ff.)

Once the body and other objects were buried, the descent path or shaft was filled in with soil, and "the chamber itself where the body lay remained open, and when the burial rites were over it was merely blocked with the dismantled parts of the funeral car on which the dead body and its equipment had been transported. Above the shaft, which was filled in with earth or large rocks, the burial mound was gradually raised" (Rolle 1989: 22). All of this meant that once a catacomb grave was filled in, it would take a tremendous amount of time and effort to open it up again. If an additional corpse was to be buried in a tomb that had been filled in, "they dug a second shaft and tunnelled through from the bottom until – with luck – they came to the original burial chamber. Here, without disturbing the first burial, they laid the body of the person who had died later" (Rolle 1989: 22).[30]

The Ordzonikidze kurgan, excavated by B. N. Mozolevski in 1971, contained five burials: 1) a young woman with lots of equippment; 2) an infant of approximately two years with its own "burial gifts"; 3) a young man's skeleton at the heads of the first two, who was "probably meant to be their 'weapon-bearer' or 'protector' in the next world since he was the only one equipped with bow and arrow. He had been killed during the funeral ceremonies [presumably] by having his skull crushed;" (Rolle 1989: 24) 4) a young, probably female person "assumed by the excavators to have been a 'nurse' or 'kitchen maid' since she lies immediately outside the entrance to the kitchen niche containing food offerings and cooking utensils" (Rolle 1989: 27); 5) the "waggon-driver", is not visible here but is "in the foreground" (Rolle 1989: 27).

---

[29] As West notes, "[t]hese 'Amazon' graves raise interesting questions, but we should emphasize the practical value of such skills in defence of animals and family, particularly valuable when the men of a group were absent, raiding or rounding up beasts; better to arm women than slaves" (2002: 453-54).

[30] Some of these secondary burial approaches looked so similar to those tunnelled by the grave-robbers, "their significance was for a long time lost on archaeologists. This was compounded in some mounds where apart from the central graves there are also side graves, adding to the confusion. It is only in recent years that excavations making use of soil samples and detailed analysis of traces of ancient workings have been able to establish the facts more precisely" (Rolle 1989: 22).

Archaeologists have learned the following about the accompanying victims: their skulls were crushed, they were killed by blows to the temple (this contrasts with Herodotus' description of strangling) and in two cases, the hands were submerged in the earth. Perhaps to be chosen to travel with an old warrior into the next world was considered an honour, and maybe victims of their own volition offered to accompany the dead person – perhaps with the aid of some type of anaesthetic (Rolle 1989: 29). Many waggons were found in Scythian tombs. Rolle suggests that these waggons were "no doubt for the purpose of transporting the dead into the next world. So far those found have almost always been dismantled, which was probably because of ideas of the dead reawakening and fears of consequent disaster" (1989: 114). While he may be correct (and it is very difficult to interpret the meaning of these items)[31] the fact that the waggon was such an important part of the nomadic lifestyle of the Scythian, it is not surprising that it was included in the graves. Indeed, the mobility of the Scythians is very much reflected in their funerary customs. "Travel" does not end upon death: if Herodotus is correct, the corpse of the kings and laity alike are transported around "visiting" friends before burial. In the graves themselves, with the inclusion of horses and waggons, the mobile lifestyle is again reflected, and honoured.

Interestingly, the Scythians, like the Nabateans, employed stone stelae in their funerary rituals by placing rough-hewn stone human statues on top of the burial mounds. Rolle notes that

---

[31] West prudently warns that "[a]rchaeology has spectacularly supplemented Herodotus' account," but, "we must resist the temptation to dovetail the results of excavations with Herodotus' text. Every year it becomes evident that the picture was far more complex and varied than it previously appeared" (2002: 451).

"[a]lthough we know of numerous such stone stelae, only one of them has actually been found upright and still intact on a Scythian kurgan. Most of them had fallen down and lay beside the base of the mound…" (1989: 36). This custom "was widespread among the peoples of Eurasia," beginning in the Neolithic age, through into the late Middle Ages (Rolle 1989: 36). The best known are the stone figurines of the Polovci, a nomadic people who inhabited the north Pontic steppe from the eleventh to the thirteenth century CE. Rice explains that local inhabitants called these stone figures, which often depicted the men as well as the women with large breasts and bellies, *kamenniya babi* or "stone dames" (1957: 68). The Scythian *kamenniya babi,* on the other hand, are "exclusively male" and are "usually warriors" (Rolle 1989: 36). Rice states that "[e]arly travellers associated the statues with the people buried in the barrows beneath them, and some scholars are on the whole now inclined to concur with this view" (Rice 1957: 68). This Scythian ritual is reminiscent of the Nabatean use of stone *nefeshes* to honour the dead, discussed earlier.

Herodotus (Book IV, 72) describes a bizzare ritual that took place one year after burial: "[t]aking the trustiest of the rest of the king's servants… they strangle fifty of these squires and fifty of their best horses and empty and cleanse the bellies of all, fill them with chaff, and sew them up again." They would stabilize sets of wheels and then drive stakes lengthwise through the dead bodies of the horses, and then place bits and bridles on the horses, stretching the reins forward and attaching them to the ground. Then the Scythians would take "each one of the fifty stangled young men and mount him on the horse" by driving stakes downward through the body, so that these stakes would meet up with those driven through the horses. "So having set horsemen of this fashion round about the tomb they ride away" (IV, 72: trans. Godley 1971).

Archaeologists have discovered "[n]o trace of this last grim ritual," or, at least, no trace that has survived. Rice points out that "it is hardly likely to have [survived], since the bones of the dead would quickly have been picked bare by the carrion birds and the skeletons would have fallen to dust long before our day" (1957: 90). She suggest that "Herodotus has been proved substantially correct in so much else that there seems little reason to doubt his accuracy here. But if such large-scale sacrifices were indeed made, they can surely have occurred only at the death of a king of outstanding importance" (Rice 1957: 90). This ritual of erecting mounted horsemen to encircle the grave mound again strongly reflects the phenomenon of travel in the lives of the Scythians.

5. Summary: Religion on the Move

The Nabatean lifestyle, especially after the fourth century BCE, fell somewhere in between the opposing poles of "nomadic" and "sedentary." Nabateans had close interactions with, and sometimes lived in, sedentary communities and cities (such as at Hegra, or Petra). Many of them periodically left these dwellings to travel: sometimes because of their involvement with (indeed, their dominance of) the lucrative trade routes of the Arabian peninsula, or because they had to lead their flocks of grazing animals to new pastures. As they travelled, Nabateans encountered new religious customs and traditions. This led to an exchange of traditions and styles that left an imprint on the lands into which the Nabateans travelled, and likewise impacted Nabatean architecture, art, and symbols. Nabateans made an impact on the religious spheres of non-Nabatean territory by establishing temples (for example in Puteoli, Italy) where they (and perhaps interested locals?) could worship their gods. Nabateans also incorporated non-Nabatean styles and symbols into their religious expression (for example, anthropomorphic depictions of deities, or the statues of elephants into decorations of a temple). Yet, as we saw, the "old" or "traditional" styles (non-figurative depictions of deities in the form of betyls) were not supplanted by the new; at times, by combining the contrasting symbols (non-figurative with anthropomorphic), Nabatean artisans created images uniquely their own (for example, the medallion and block relief at Petra).

In their religious behaviours and customs, the Nabatean itinerant lifestyle is reflected. I argued that their use of stones to represent their gods (the "other" in the form of betyls) and their dead (in the form of *nepheshes)*, might be related to the fact that the characteristics of stone (permanence, stability) contrasted with the characteristics of Nabatean life (mobility, insecurity) best captured the sense of "otherness" of their gods and their deceased. Clay figurines of horses (some with riders) and camels, as well as the possible etymology of Dushares, the Nabatean supreme deity, can likewise be seen to reflect the phenomenon of travel.

As for nomadic funerary rites, diversity is the theme. Archaeological evidence reveals that Nabateans engaged in numerous burial practices (e.g., secondary burials, communal tombs). Scythians, a nomadic people brought into the discussion on mortuary rites for comparison purposes, followed intricate (and at times bizarre) burial traditions (embalming the body, and transporting it around for visits among friends and family for 40 days, then burying the body, along with servants and horses, in elaborately-prepared underground tombs). The strongest similarity between the Nabatean burial practices and those of the Scythians was the use of stone objects to commemorate the dead (the Scythians' are anthropomorphic, though, and the Nabateans' are nonfigurative). Certainly the phenomenon of travel is reflected in several of elements pertaining to the Scythian burial rituals (the inclusion of waggons and horses in the tombs, the erection (if Herodotus is correct) of a "honour guard" consisting of corpses mounted on dead horses placed around the burial mound).

Bibliography

Artamonov, M. I.
1969 *Treasures from Scythian Tombs: in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.* London: Thames and Hudson.
Bowersock, G. W.
1983 *Roman Arabia. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.*
Charrière, Georges.
1971 *L'Art Barbare Scythe.* Paris: Èditions Cercle D'Art.
Donner, Fred M.
1989 "The Role of Nomads in the Near East in Late Antiquity (400-800 C.E.)." In F. M. Clover and R. S. Humphreys, eds.: *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 73-85.
Eliade, Mircea.
1970 *Patterns in Comparative Religion. Cleveland, Ohio: The World Publishing Company.*
Farkas, Ann and Boris Piotrovsky.
1975 *From the Lands of the Scythians: Ancient Treasures from the Museums of the U.S.S.R. 3000 BC – 100 BC.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Graf, David F.
1992 "Nabateans." In David N. Freedman, ed.: *Anchor Bible Dictionary.* Vol. 4. New York: Doubleday, pp. 970-973.
1997 *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: from the Nabateans to the Saracens.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
Healey, John F.
2001 *The Religion of the Nabateans: A Conspectus. Leiden: Brill.*
Kasher, Aryeh.
1988 *Jews, Idumaeans, and Ancient Arabs: relations of the Jews in Eretz-Israel with the nations of the frontiers and the desert druing the Hellenistic and Roman era (332 BCE – 70 CE).* Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
Joukowsky, Martha Sharp.
2002 "The Petra Great Temple: A Nabatean Architectural Miracle." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65/4: 235-248.
Naveh, Joseph.
2003. "Language, Writing and Inscriptions." In *The Nabateans in the Negev.* Haifa: Reuben and Edith Hecht Museum, University of Haifa, pp. 15-19. [in Hebrew]
Patrich, Joseph.
2002 *The Formation of Nabatean Art: Prohibition of a Graven Image Among the Nabateans. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press.*
Perry, Megan A.
2003 "Life and Death in Nabatea: The North Ridge Tombs and Nabatean Burial Practices." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 65/4: 265-270.
Raevskii, D.S.
1986 "Scythian Religion." In M. Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion,* vol. 13, pp. 145-149. New York: Macmillan.

Rice, Tamara Talbot.
1957 *The Scythians.* London: Thames and Hudson.
Rolle, Renate.
1989 *The World of the Scythians. Berkeley: University of California Press.*
Rosenthal-Heginbottom, Renate.
1990 "Artists and Artisans: Reflections on Nabatean Minor Art – Clay, Metal, and Stone." In *The Nabateans in the Negev.* Haifa: Reuben and Edith Hecht Museum, University of Haifa, pp. 33-44. [in Hebrew]
Scullard, H. H.
1974 *The Elephant in the Greek and Roman World.* London: Thames and Hudson.
Taylor, Jane.
2002 *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabateans.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Wenning, Robert.
2001 "The Betyls of Petra." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 324: 79-95.
West, Stephanie.
2002 "Scythians." In Egbert J. Bakker, Irene J.F. De Jong, and Hans Van Wees, eds.: *Brill's Companion to Herodotus.* Leiden: Brill, pp. 437-456.