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CEREMONIES AND RITUALS IN NABATAEANS SOCIETY (312 BC – 106 AD)

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ABSTRACT

Festivals were a significant part of life in ancient Nabataea (312 BC–106 AD) and were a central part of worshipping the gods. Some of the most important festivals of ancient Nabataea were held in honour of the main principle god Dushara. These festivals celebrated the powers of the gods and Nabataean kings and allowed the Nabataean citizens to show their respect. Hence, in this paper, we will try to determine what ceremonies were held in the ancient Nabataea, and the rituals associated with these festivals. Moreover, studies the social traditions and religious practises related to these events, the time of the ceremonies and banquets which be held near the tombs and temples. The article based on interdisciplinary historiographical and anthropological studies and Nabataean inscriptions, as well as the review of ancient historical and contemporary materials and written accounts, I finish my paper with the discussion of the application of my research findings.

Keywords: Nabataeans, Ceremonies, Festivals, Rituals, Religious Practises, Nabataeans gods

CERIMONIE E RITI NELLA SOCIETÀ DEI NABATEI (312 A.C. – 106 D.C.)

SINTESI

Le feste erano una parte molto importante della vita nell'antica Nabatene (312 a.C.–106 d.C.) e costituivano una parte centrale nell'adorazione degli dei. Tra le più importanti si tenevano in onore del dio principale Dushara. Queste feste celebravano il potere degli dei e dei re nabatei consentendo ai cittadini di portare loro rispetto. Nel saggio proveremo a determinare quali cerimonie si svolgevano nell'antica Nabatene e i rituali associati a queste feste, inoltre, prenderemo in esame le tradizioni sociali e le pratiche religiose relative a questi eventi, i tempi delle cerimonie e dei banchetti che si tennero vicino alle tombe e ai templi. Sulla base di studi interdisciplinari, sia storiografici che antropologici, come pure delle iscrizioni nabateani, prendendo anche in considerazione una vasta panoramica di materiali storici antichi e contemporanei e resoconti scritti, l'articolo infine propone una discussione intorno all'applicazione dei risultati della ricerca.

Parole chiave: Regno dei Nabatei, cerimonie, feste, rituali, pratiche religiose, divinità dei Nabatei

INTRODUCTION

Almost every society has ceremonies and festivals that have retained a ritualistic character over the centuries (Girard, 1977, 127). Merkel says that festivals represent a conduit for the ongoing processes of identity construction and articulation, as well as the expression of the relationship between people and place (Merkel, 2014, 33).

Due to limited sources, little is known about Nabataean ceremonies and festival practises. Also, the Nabataeans left no written sources that document their history. Nevertheless, there are different sources from which one can reconstruct aspects of their political, social, and cultural life. The primary sources are Greek and Roman accounts such as Diodorus of Sicily and Strabo, in addition to the scattered Nabataean inscriptions from Petra and different regions of the Nabataean kingdom (Janif, 2006, 341). While the activities we think of as “ritual” can be found in many periods and places, the formal study of ritual is a relatively recent and localized phenomenon (Bell, 1997, 1).¹ The Nabataeans had many rituals and ceremonies important for their beliefs, although these rituals are not necessarily a bastion of social conservatism, but through their liminal processes, they hold the generating source of culture and structure (Turner, 1988, 158). Hence, by definition ritual is associated with social transitions while ceremony is linked with social states (Turner, 1988, 158).

The festival and ceremony calendar² of the Nabataeans, like that of many people and civilizations in the Near East (Sachet, 2010, 249; Janif, 2006, 341) often revolved around birth, death, religious, weddings, circumcision, and gods. The daily worship in ancient Nabataea, took place inside the temples, and in celebrations, the statues of the deities were tended by priests to the temple (Villeneuve and al-Muheisen, 2003, 84), and they burned incense and carried fans. Ordinary people worshipped their gods at home.

By the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, in what was formerly the Nabataean kingdom, pagan public festivals were superseded by Christian ceremonies led by the bishop and ecclesiastical hierarchy (Bayliss, 1999, 66).

NABATAEAN FESTIVALS³

It is fundamental to ask what the Nabataeans say about themselves. Unfortunately, we have no contemporary Nabataean writer who offers such a perspective. In the absence of any Nabataean literary sources, we are compelled to turn to

1 For more information of the study of the ritual and the early theories related to the styles of interpretation of it at various times, see, Bell, 1997, 3–10; Alexander and Jacobs, 1998, 23–42.

2 For more information of Nabataean calendar see, Alzoubi, 2016, 301–309.

3 The term festival derives “from the Latin *festum*, which means public joy, merriment or abstinence from work in honor of the gods”. Thursby, 2009, 16. A Festival is an event, a social phenomenon held in a special day or period, celebrated by a community, whether sacred, public or private celebration. Steiner, 1955, 10. The word celebration is derived from the Latin *celeber* “numerous and much frequented” Thursby, 2009, 16.

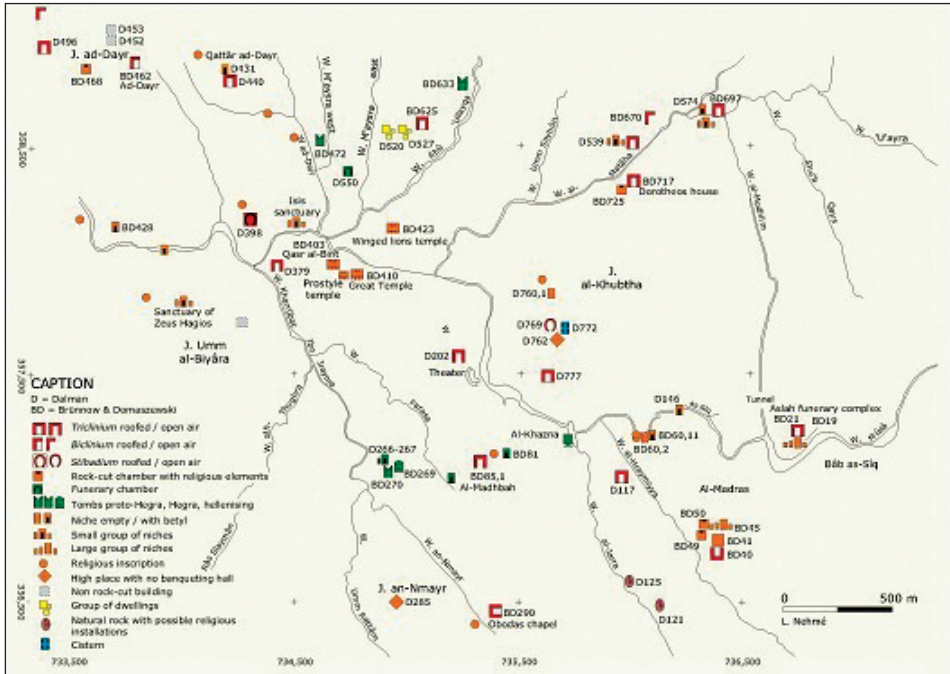


Fig. 1: The distribution of the main sanctuaries and banqueting halls in Petra (Nehmé, 2010, 19).

the inscriptions they left as well as foreign sources. The sources regarding the Nabataean festivals are relatively scarce and there is much that we do not know about the Nabataean culture. Literary and archaeological sources⁴ reveal different major types of Nabataean ceremonies every year. These can be classified as follows:

Early festivals

Around the fourth century BC, the Nabataeans were nomadic people. Diodorus of Sicily gives us a detailed description of their early lifestyle. He describes them as Arabs, some of whom raise camels, others sheep, and they pasture them in the desert (Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*.19.94.1-10; Negev, 1977, 574). They are exceptionally fond of freedom and use the desert as a fortress. They are difficult to overcome in war (Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*.19.94.1-10). This is the first mentioned to the Nabataeans as nomads and

4 All information from archaeological evidence sheds light on the daily life of the Nabataean.

depended in their livelihood on herding and commerce. The Greek Geographer Strabo described their capital Petra as a wealthy metropolis. He says that “their homes, through the use of stone, are costly; but, on account of peace, the cities are not walled. Most of the country is well supplied with fruits except the olive; they use sesame-oil instead. The sheep are white-fleeced and the oxen are large, but the country produces no horses. Camels afford the service they require instead of horses” (Strabo, Geography, 16.4.26).

The first indication to festivals among the Nabataean is based on the testimony of Hieronymus of Cardia⁵ preserved in Diodorus of Sicily, in his description of the military expeditions launched by Antigonus Monophthalmus (the one Eyed) against the Nabataean Arabs⁶ (Diodorus of Sicily, The Library of History.19.94.1-10). Diodorus says “It appears that such are the customs of the Arabs. But when the time draws near for the gathering at which those who dwell round about are accustomed to meet, some to sell goods and others to purchase things that are needful to them, they travel to this meeting, leaving on a certain rock their possessions and their old men, also their women and their children. This place is exceedingly strong but unwalled, and it is distant two days’ journey from the settled country” (Diodorus of Sicily, The Library of History.19.94.1-10). Unfortunately, Diodorus’ account did not give us any information about the location of this festival of the Nabataeans. As a matter of fact, no attention has been given to this question, however some scholars have argued that the Nabataean festival or gathering may have been carried out in Hūrāwa (Khirbet et-Tannur)⁷ (Peterson, 2006, 48). The presence of several altars, *triclinia*⁸, as well as sherds of Nabataean drinking vessels in the temple of Hūrāwa measuring (40 m x 48 m), supports the assumption that the place was important site of pilgrimage in the Nabataean period (Ball, 2000, 350; Peterson, 2006, 68).

Although Retsö says that site of gathering located in Avdat (Obodas) in the Negev, depending on the presence of the Nabataeans there already in the fourth century BC (Retsö, 2003, 226). J. Patrich suggests that the location of the assembly was not far from Petra the capital of the Nabataeans (Patrich, 2015, 479). Even though it cannot be proved, the candidacy of Khirbet et-Tannur or Avdat as the location mentioned by Hieronymus is quite strong. From the description provided by Diodorus it is clear that the early Nabataeans were tent-dwelling nomadic pastoralist, which makes it likely that the gathering took place not far from North Arabia the origin of the Nabataeans or somewhere in the area south of Petra close to Dumat al-Jundal (ancient Dūmah) or Taima.

5 The account of Hieronymus of Cardia preserved in Diodorus of Sicily remains the oldest detailed historical reference regarding Nabataean society and its customs.

6 For more on the routes undertaken by the two expeditions of Macedonian armies, see Patrich, 2015, 475–483.

7 Located 7 km south of Khirbet edh-Dharih in central Jordan, a Nabataean temple site located 300 m. above Wadi el-Hasa on the summit of Jebel Tannur. Peterson, 2006, 67.

8 The first known triclinia are dated by an inscription to the early 1st century BC while larger rooms were built from the early 1st century AD. Sachet, 2010, 259.

Diodorus also says that „after waiting for this season, Athenaeus set out for the rock with his army in light marching order. Covering the twenty-two hundred stades from the district of Idumaea in three days and the same number of nights, he escaped the attention of the Arabs and seized the rock at about midnight“ (Diodorus of Sicily, *The Library of History*.19.94.1-10). The ancient sources did not provide us with any clarifications of this season and banquets (Fig.1)⁹ which were held in Nabataea.

But, it is worth mentioning that, from the description in this passage of the Athenaeus expedition, and the mention that he waited for a season, that the Nabataeans had a calendar or organized their festivals at a particular time of the year. This brings us to ask: did the Nabataeans have a fixed time for celebrations, or for sacred time (Pilgrimage). However, neither of the Nabataean inscriptions nor sources provides us with information about regularly recurring festival (Healey, 2001, 160). Hammond mentions that “the celebration by the Nabataeans of festivals occasion, related to cyclic sacred seasons” (Hammond, 1973, 104). Also, the recurring mentions of the months of Nisan, Ab, and Tishri in the inscriptions, suggest these were times for special festivals and sacrifices (Hammond, 1973, 104).¹⁰

Strabo in the 1st century¹¹ AD is our primary literary source for our knowledge of the social and cultural environment of the Nabataeans during this period. He mentions that “The king is so democratic that, in addition to serving himself, he sometimes even serves the rest himself in his turn. He often renders an account of his kingship in the popular assembly, and sometimes his mode of life is examined. The king has as chief administrator one of his companions, who is called ‘brother’” (Strabo, *Geography*, 16.4.26.21). He, also reveals more aspects of social life in Nabataea, and he said: “It is exceedingly well governed. At any rate Athenodorus, a philosopher and companion of mine, who had been to the city of the Petraeans, used to describe their government with admiration. For he said that he found both many Romans and many other foreigners sojourning there, and that he saw that the foreigners often engaged in lawsuits, both with one another and with the natives, but that none of the natives prosecuted one another, and that they in every way kept peace with one another” (Strabo, *Geography*, 16.4.21).

Strabo reports that the Nabataeans prepare common meals together in groups of thirteen persons and that they have two girl-singers for each banquet. The king holds many drinking-bouts in magnificent style, but no one drinks more than eleven cupfuls, each time using a different golden cup (Strabo, *Geography*, 16.4.26). These are either royal banquets, which were perhaps held for diplomatic purposes (Sachet, 2010, 249), or they were dedicated to religious or funerary affairs (al-Salameen and

9 Banquets have been a widespread theme in Classical Antiquity, and in Nabataean inscription. The banquetting halls, 118 of which have been recorded. Nehmé, 2010, 20. On the Banquets in Antiquity, see Slater, 1991; Al-Theeb, 2014, 175.

10 For more on the Nabataean months, see Healey, 1993, 105; Healey, 2001, 160.

11 Strabo in his accounts about Nabataean based on accounts of his friend, the philosopher Athenodorus of Tarsus. MacDonald, 2013, 151.



Fig. 2: Nabataean inscription mentioned the word *mrzh* (Nehmé, 2012, 203).

Falahat, 2012, 48). It has been suggested that these may be secular celebrations (Healey, 2001, 167). However, if these banquets are religious, they could be linked with a festival organized in early January, as referred to in a text by Epiphanius, discussed below (Peterson, 2006, 50).

Archaeological excavations uncovered some banquet places and these were normally annexed to the temples elsewhere (Glueck, 1965, 190; Alzoubi, Masri and al Ajlouny, 2013, 155). The use of eleven cupfuls each time record by Strabo suggests that the customs of the Nabataeans considered any vessel as being unclean.¹² From the Nabataean inscriptions, we know that symposia¹³ were held in many different places in Petra. A short inscription in Beidha¹⁴ dated to the first half of the 1st century AD is related to a *symposium* (a *marzēah* in Nabataean).¹⁵ It reads as follows: “In

12 Negev mentions that the Nabataean used inferior quality of cupfuls and pottery vessels in daily use, this kind of vessels use at a single meal for once. Negev, 1971, 127.

13 A convivial party (as after a banquet in ancient Greece), with music and conversation.

14 Located about 5 km to the North of Petra, it was a significant agricultural spot within the outskirts of Petra during the Nabataean period. al-Salameen, 2004.

15 The word *mrzh* was a common term in the Levant; it is vocalized differently from place to place. The word also occurs in literary and epigraphic references spanning three thousand years and number of locations. McLaughlin, 2001, 1–3. It could refer to a feast, the association of participants, and possibly the meeting-place where the association gathered to feast. al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 46, and it is ritual and cultic meals in Semitic inscriptions. Sachet, 2010, 250. *mrzh* could be considered as a place dedicated to sitting in order to eat and drink. Nehmé, 2013, 114.

pious remembrance and peace to Ghanimu, the symposiarch and his son Wa'ilu" (Zayadine, 1976, 139). The inscription mentions Ghanimu, who is *rb mrzḥ*, i.e. "chief of the *marzeah*".

Another inscription near ed-Deir, which could be the sanctuary of the deified Nabataean king Obodas I¹⁶, mentions a symposium in honour of the latter led by a priest¹⁷ (Zayadine, 1976, 139–142; Nehmé, 2012, 182–183; Nehmé, 2013, 117, 124). The whole sanctuary found in the Nmayr area at Petra which dedicated to Obodas was abandoned in the early second century AD, after the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom¹⁸ (Nehmé, 2012, 190; Nehmé, 2013, 117). Dalman reports that the plateau in the region of ed-Deir would have been used as a stage for large public ceremonies¹⁹ (Dalman, 1908, 273; Nehmé, 2012, 191). In Avdat, in the Negev, a *marzeah* of Dushara²⁰, the god of Gaia²¹ is mentioned (Negev, 1963, 113–124).²² This inscription indicates the use of the *triclinia* of Petra as centres of religious symposia and is a good illustration of Strabo's account (Zayadine, 1976, 139). A Short Nabataean inscription also from Gaia (Wadi Musa) dated to the reign of the King Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE), refers also to the *rb mrzḥ* head of the symposium who/which is in Gaia (al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 43). This term and its rituals are associated with *triclinia* as we shall see (Healey, 2001, 167). It is worth mentioning that, the *marzeah* dedicated to the worship of any of the gods (Healey, 2001, 167), as it clear from the ed-Deir inscription which refers to "the *marzēah* of Obodas the god".

Unfortunately, these inscriptions do not inform us that these *symposia* were appointed on a yearly basis. There are no Nabataean sources, and the inscriptions give a few details on the participants to these banquets. We suggest however such categories, such as traders, soldiers, scribes, workmen and slaves (Healey, 2001, 166).

An interesting account is given by Cornelius Tacitus in 14 AD. He mentions that Aretas IV, the king of the Nabataeans, held a banquet in Rome at which golden crowns of great weight were presented as gifts. This banquet was organised when

16 For more information of burial place of a deified king named Obodas, see Retsö, 2003, 226.

17 The text of the inscription reads 'May 'Obaydu son of Waqihel and his companions, the *marzēah* of Obodas the god, be remembered'. al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 47. It seems that the whole of the ed-Deir complex was devoted to the cult of the king Oboda. Zayadine and Farajat, 1991, 284. For more information of Obodas the god and their inscriptions, see Nehmé, 2012, 184–188.

18 The sanctuary contains five banquet rooms, four of which are rupestres and one is masonry. In addition, a fragment of inscription incised on a marble plaque, uncovered during the excavations of the Chapel, contains the word *mrzḥ*. Nehmé, 2012, 203. (Fig. 2).

19 An inscription found by Brünnow in al-Madras at Petra contains the expression "in the presence of Dūšarā and Obodas". Nehmé, 2013, 124. This is very interesting to note the link between Nabataean kings and their deities.

20 Dushara was the main deity worshipped by the Nabataean and his consort al-'Uzza. Also, Dushara represent the local deity of southern Jordan and Sinai, sometimes called 'Lord of the House'. Healey, 1993, 36; Healey, 2001, 75; Alpass, 2013. The cult of Dushara remained after the annexation of Nabataean realm by Trajan in AD106. el-Khouri, 2002, 101–104. Retsö, 2003, 226.

21 Ancient name of Wadi Musa, a name which was derived from the spring of 'Ayn Musa. The word Gaia mentioned frequently in the Nabataean inscriptions. Healey 2001, 89–90. On the meaning of the word, see al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 41–42.

22 For more on the Avdat inscription, see Nehmé, 2012, 193.



Fig. 3: Limestone bust of a Muse (Melpomene) (photo by Prof. Zeyad al-Salameen, Jordan Archaeological Museum).

Tiberius replaced Caesar Augustus in Rome (Tacitus, 1906, II, 57; Lawlor, 1974, 112). It is understandable that Aretas would be found in Rome since Rome and Petra were at that time on good terms. Perhaps the banquet was given in honour of Tiberius himself.

Strabo also provides much information about the Nabataean festivals and the rituals which accompanied these ceremonies. He reports: “They worship the sun, building an altar on the top of the house, and pouring libations on it daily and burning frankincense” (Strabo, Geography, 16.4.26). This is an important passage referring to Nabataean religion.²³ It appears that the Nabataeans practised their religious rites inside their own homes. Sun-worship was widespread in the cults of Nabataea, and in the many cities in the Syria such as Palmyra in Syrian Desert, Heliopolis, the

²³ Some anthropologists believed that the religion “did not arise in the explanations of animism but in activities that cemented the bonds of community, and the religion rooted not only in speculative myths about the nature of things but also in rituals that essentially worshiped divine representations of the social order itself”. Bell, 1997, 4.

modern Baalbek, and Edessa in the north,²⁴ whose populations were mainly Arabic (Janif, 2006, 341). It seems that the supreme Nabataean deity Dushara had solar nature, and identified with sun god in the local religion (Healey, 2001, 104). Many scholars have found evidence of the importance of the Sun-cult among the Nabataeans and the Arabs (Healey, 2001, 104; Janif, 2006, 344).

Also, recent discoveries in the tombs under the Khazneh in Petra revealed large quantities of burnt incense as well as the remains of small altars. In addition, burnt animal bones, potsherds, fragments of iron and incense, were discovered outside the entrance to the tomb under the Khazneh (Wadeson, 2011, 9). These findings may reflect a variety of offerings to the dead, and the remains of funerary meals. Also, as well as offerings which could generally be classed as food, the Nabataeans gods received gifts of drink, especially wine or milk. This was usually poured out before the deity or on his alter (Parke, 1977, 33).

Glueck mentions that “on special holidays and particular festivals, such as marked, for instance, the spring and fall equinoxes, multitudes from all corners of the kingdom must have made pilgrimages to Jebel Tannur to ascend it and bring offerings to the gods ensconced in its temple. It stood in solitary splendour on top of its holy hill, ...” (Glueck, 1965, 78). Deities were portrayed in both aniconic and anthropomorphic configurations (Ward, 2016, 150).

Villeneuve and Muheisen (2003, 87–90) have suggested that priests lived at Khirbet edh-Dharh and performed special festivals at Khirbet et-Tannur²⁵ with cult objects brought from Khirbet edh-Dharh (Healey, 2001, 166). On some day in February, a special celebration was held on a day when “sunrise and sunset are on the line perpendicular to the axis of the temple, but we may guess that the orientation of the temple and of the whole sanctuary complex was guided mainly by the natural features of the ground at the spot” (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, 2003, 87). It seems that the gods of edh-Dharh were probably conceived as the masters of the solstices and those of et-Tannur as the masters of the equinoxes (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, 2003, 87; Janif, 2006, 348).

According to Villeneuve and Muheisen “... it is almost certain that the pilgrimages to et-Tannur were enacted in relation to sunrise (temple gates to the east) or sunset, and took place perhaps only at the equinoxes, with essential phases of the cult at sunrise, at midnight, or at sunset. This fact is hardly surprising, considering the abundance of astral symbols in the sculpture of et-Tannur. The edh-Dharh temple is oriented north, 13°38' east. This unusual orientation, of course, does not exclude a special celebration on some day in February, when sunrise and sunset are on the line perpendicular to the axis of the temple.” (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, 2003, 87).

24 Julian, in his *Hymn to Helios*, says that the Edessans had worshipped the sun “from time immemorial”. Julian the Apostate, 1913, 1–150.

25 The Khirbet edh-Dharh is larger than Khirbet et-Tannur, being the center of a very large Nabataean community. Glueck suggested that edh-Dharh and et-Tannur temples served local needs. The excavations in both temples reveal the presence of several structures belonging to earlier periods. Glueck, 1937–1939, 47.

Caner describes similarly festival a held by the Saracens²⁶ in Mount Sinai, during the fifth century AD. He says: “and on this mountain, on a part of the mountain, the Saracens have set up their own idol, made of marble white as snow... when the time of their festivals arrives with a new moon, before the moon has risen on the day of their feast, the marble begins to change colour; as soon as the moon appears, when they begin to worship, the marble turns black as pitch. When the time of the festivals is over, it returns to its original colour. We were totally amazed by this.”²⁷ (Caner, 2010, 259).

There is a *triclinium* in one of the rooms of the Qasr el-Bint temple at Petra, Khirbet et-Tannur, and Khirbet edh-Dharih.²⁸ The *triclinia* in both temples et-Tannur and edh-Dharih are along the courtyard of the main temple; and this suggests that they have a religious function (Healey, 2001, 167). Recent excavations at Dharih and et-Tannur have confirmed that the complexes could provide the infrastructure such as public baths for a large number of worshippers, especially, during the festival days (Al-Muheisen and Villeneuve, 2003, 91). The presence of the facilities in both temples, helped to accommodate the large public ceremonies. Glueck describes the Khirbet et-Tannur as follows: “There is a series of rooms on the north and south sides of the inner temple area and the outer court, where, in all probability, the temple functionaries lived and the pilgrims feasted and lodged...”²⁹

Al-Muheisen says that the temples were not the only places where such celebrations were held; they were also held in the theatre in Petra and Bosra (Glueck, 1970, 198). Excavations in the area of the Temenos Gate in Petra have revealed Hellenistic and Roman influences on the Nabataeans in drama and celebration. This is clear from the limestone bust of a Muse (Melpomene³⁰ the daughter of Zeus) holding a theater mask (McKenzie, 2003, 168) (Fig. 3). Masks are among the necessary tools of many primitive people, but we cannot answer with certainty the questions raised by their presence. What do they represent? What is their purpose? How did they originate? (Girard, 1977, 176). This means that dances were sometimes part of a religious ritual in Nabataea,³¹ accompanied supported by songs, as Epiphanius says in his account. The theatres were used after the end of the festivals to honour the victors and loyal citizens (Kammerer, 1929, 411). Some scholars say that the masked and costumed dances reenact sacred tales claimed to be part of the Nabataean’s history, and social status is directly linked to possession of such dances and the pedigree that they imply (Bell, 1997, 121). Girard offers additional clarification of this rite; he says that “The

26 For more on the meaning of the Saracens, see Parker, 1986.

27 For more details on the Saracens festivals calendar, see Carner, 2010, 250–255.

28 Both Temples appear to have been destroyed by the 363 earthquake and subsequently abandoned. Ward, 2016, 151. The distance between Dharih and Tannur is only a one- and- a- half hour walk (7 km). The distance between them and Petra (70 km) to the south in a straight line. Villeneuve and al-Muheisen, 2003, 84.

29 Her name was derived from the Greek verb *melpō* or *melpomai* meaning “to celebrate with dance and song.” Brockliss, 2017, 132–133.

30 Her name was derived from the Greek verb *melpō* or *melpomai* meaning “to celebrate with dance and song.”

31 Some scholars mention that both religious ritual and legal ceremony are genres of social action. Turner, 1988, 94.

introduction of masks at the supreme moment of the process can be taken as a direct allusion to the monstrous double, whose presence had already been suggested by the “metamorphoses” of the neophytes” (Girard, 1977, 299). Undoubtedly, therefore, masks serve a religious function.³²

These rituals have proven to be a particularly complicated phenomenon for scholars to probe—because of the variety of activities that one may consider ritual, the multiplicity of perspectives one may legitimately take in interpreting them (Bell, 1997, 1). Turner (1988, 178) says that these rituals were “transformative performance revealing major classification, categories, and contradictions of cultural processes”. In this respect the music and dance were an important part of Nabataean celebrations. They also accompanied the Nabataeans both at work and at war. The Nabataean craftsmen liked representing these gatherings in the Nabataean terracotta figurines. One of the most beautiful terracotta figurines represents three seated musicians,³³ one male sitting in the middle and by two female ones. The male plays the double flute, while the females play string instruments³⁴ (el-Khoury, 2002, 35; Alzoubi, al Masri, and al Ajlouny, 2013, 156). At banquets, the flute-players were usually women. The flutes were used widely in Nabataean music. Good evidence is provided by the painted figure playing a single flute in the Siq el-Barid *biclinium* north of Petra³⁵ (Glueck, 1965, 5–6; el-Khoury, 2002, 36; Twaissi, 2016, 105). Another terracotta found in Petra, portrays a covered male head with a double-pipe instrument, possibly depicting a clergyman (Braun, 2002, 140). This means that music was clearly of significant importance to them, and the music was part of their culture, as in other nearby civilizations such as Egypt and Greece. The Egyptians also used to consider music as a distinct part of their life. According to them, music was intimately linked to religion (Spencer, 2003, 116).³⁶ Bell says that religion was made up of a series of acts and observances; it did not exist for the sake of saving souls but for the preservation and welfare of society (Bell, 1997, 4). Hence, it seems that music was associated with most of the daily life aspects such as death, education and gods, as well as food preparation and drinking. It may be that music was a way to entertain before the food would arrive to the *triclinia*. It seems that the Nabataeans used many musical instruments such as drums and tambourines which accompanied military campaigns and religious rituals.

32 For a discussion of the use of the masks in the ritual ceremonies, see, Girard, 1977, 177.

33 The music is key part in the Nabataean festivals; it is mentioned in inscription “zmr̄t” (the singer). Al-Theeb, 2014, 147. In addition, the music represents an important feature in the Egypt festivals, and the women playing in the festivals called “singers”. Uphill, 1965, 377.

34 The main piece of cloth for the musicians was the girdle tied on the chest and the shoulder, as well as the adornments. Strabo describe the Nabataeans clothes, and says that “they go out without tunics, with girdles about their loins, and with slippers on their feet — even the kings, though in their case the colour is purple” (Strabo, Geography, 16.4.26).

35 Siq el-Barid is small gorge in the rock, situated about 3 km to the north of Petra, include cisterns and several triclinia.

36 The anthropologists stressed the importance of studying religion as a “total social phenomenon”, and it is linked to every aspect on society. For information on this link, see Bell, 1997, 26.

One of the most important religious festivals in Nabataea in the post-Nabataean period is the *Actia*³⁷ *Dushara* (*Dousaria*), which were organised on December 25th (the winter solstice). Feasts were celebrated in Tyre, Damascus, Daraa, and Petra in the Greek manner (Hammond, 1973, 104; Bowersock, 1983, 121, 212; Healey, 2001, 161), in honour of Dushara (Kammerer, 1929, 277, 327; Bowersock, 1983, 121; Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 203).

This celebration is best attested on the coinage (Kammerer, 1929, 403; Mac-Adam, 2002, 179). During the mid-third century, coins of Bosra are struck with the Latin legend, “*Actia Dusaria*”³⁸ (Kindler, 1983, 58–59; Graf, 2007, 184). Hammond mentions that this celebration at Petra and other Nabataean sites reflects the Hellenistic influence on the Nabataeans (Hammond, 1973, 104). The festival of *the Actia Dushara* is a series of games which commemorated Octavian’s victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, and Dushara the main Nabataean god (Healey, 2001, 99; Fiema, 2003, 46; Nehmé, 2012, 183), throughout the city quadrennially (every four years) from the reign of Emperor Philip „the Arab“ during the 3rd century AD (Healey, 2001, 99; Peterson, 2006, 48; Graf, 2007, 184; Taylor, 2002, 126, 220).

Healey reports that “It is possible that this festival instituted by king Aretas IV to please the Romans, or there may have been an earlier Dushara- A’ra festival which was reshaped in the third century” (Healey, 2001, 99). An inscription in the Siq of Petra, under the relief of a standing god, flanked by two opposed animals mentions an official in charge of these festivals. He is called a *panegyriarch*, “President of the festal gatherings” (Hammond, 1973, 104; Healey, 2001, 161), or “President of festivals” from Adraa (Der’a)³⁹ (Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 202). He arrived in Petra to participate in a religious festival (Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 202). The inscription of the *panegyriarch* Sabinus can be dated to the second half of the second century AD (Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 203). This festival is good evidence of the survival of the royal dynastic cult of Dushara after the annexation of Nabataea.

Petra is the dwelling place of the deity of the Nabataeans, the god Dushara, and it became an attractive place for burial and sacred spaces. When the Nabataeans who lived outside Petra visited the site during the festivals, they could honour their dead at the same time (Alpass, 2013, 63). Two Nabataean inscriptions point out to the Dushara-A’ra⁴⁰ festivals as being held in the month of Nisan (*nysn* in Nabataean)⁴¹ (Hammond, 1973, 104; Healey, 2001, 160). This month in Nabataean calendar refers to the „month of the sacrifice“⁴² (Langdon, 1933, 73). This indication could

37 *Actia*, was a festival of Apollo in Roman religious tradition.

38 A coin of Bostra minted under Decius (249–251 AD) bears on the obverse “*Actia Dusaria*”. Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 202.

39 The inscription: “Sabinus Ale(x)andros, *panegyriarchs* of Adraa, in piety dedicated”. Dalman, 1908, 145; Zayadine and Fiema, 1986, 202.

40 A’ra was the local god of the Bostra in Syria. On this god, see Bowersock, 1983, 73; Raymond, 2008, 31–32.

41 Ar’a is the local deity.

42 The word Nisan or Nisanu in the Babylonian means the first month in Accadian, also means sacrifice or to sacrifice. Langdon, 1933, 72.



Fig. 4: Nabataea Aretas IV, 9 BC-40 AD. Obv: Laureate head of Aretas IV, Reverse: two cornucopias with Palm branch, with inscription (Phasael), (<https://www.google.com/search?q=Phasael+son+of+Nabataea+Aretas+IV>).

refer to a common spring festival in Nabataea, or festal season from Ab to Tishri, i.e. from August, to November (Healey, 2001, 160). Epiphanius (315 – 403 AD) bishop of Salamis, in 4th century AD also point out to the pilgrimage season by the Arab tribes of Transjordan and southern Palestine in the month of Aggathalbaeith⁴³, to the major sanctuary (al baeith', تى بى لآ the House) somewhere in the territories of the ancient Nabataean kingdom (Epiphanius, Panarion, 51.24.4). It could be that the house in Petra itself, since Dushara the main god is often called *mr' byt'* „the lord of this house“ in Nabataean inscriptions (Belmonte and García, 2017, 137; Crone, 1987, 192). This also suggests that the building was *bayt allah*, the house of God (Crone, 1987, 192).

It is worth mentioning that the month of Aggathalbaeith in Epiphanius text equivalent in Arabic „تى بى لآ حج“ – perform pilgrimage or month „حج لآ وئ“ *Dua al-hajja* (Ali, 2006, 11, 348; Janif, 2006, 341). This month is one of the four „sacred months“ in the Islamic calendar⁴⁴ (Frankfurter, 1998, 275), during which the pilgrimage was performed. From our point of view, this is similar to the pre-Islamic *Hajj* to Mecca (قى تى لآ حج), the old house. According to Epiphanius, the time of the pilgrimage by the Arabs in the *Provincia Arabia* or in the *Palestine Tertia* was in October to November (Ali, 2006, 11, 348; Janif, 2006, 341). Ali pointed out that

43 The festival was on the 22nd day of Aggathalbaeith , corresponding to November 8th in the Julian calendar. Belmonte and García, 2017, 137.

44 The sacred months are: *Rajab*, *Dhul-Qa`dah*, *Dhul-Hijjah*, and *Muharram*, the latter three being the pilgrimage months before Islam. Aladieh, 1991, 147.

this month in Northern Arabia corresponds to the month „نيت حج وذ“ mentioned in the *msnd* in Yemen (Ali, 2006, 11, 348). This means that the pilgrimage was in the solstice season, in the winter.

The Christian historian Procopius (490–550 AD) refers to „two months to their god“, this period of the universal peace among the Arabs (Procopius, 1914, II, 16–18). It seems that *Dua al-hajja* was one of these months, and the other *Rajab* or *Dhul-Qa'dah* (Frankfurter, 1998, 275). These sacred months connected with (al baeth', تيبال, the House). During this time all the Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula should be respect and honour these months. Glueck, depending on the zodiac figure⁴⁵ from Khirbet et-Tannur, suggests two New Year festivals, one in the spring, and one in the autumn, celebrated by the Nabataeans⁴⁶ (Glueck, 1965, 413–414; Glueck, 1970, 231; Hammond, 1973, 104). These two festivals related to the times of sowing and harvest (Hammond, 1973, 104). The first one in the month Nisan (March–April) corresponds to the vernal equinox (al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009, 183; Stern, 2012, 253). The second in the autumn corresponds the autumnal equinox⁴⁷ (al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009, 183). Janif suggests that this „period of the year was sacred for the Nabataeans“⁴⁸ (Janif, 2006, 347). The use of this zodiac reflects the coexistence within the Nabataean kingdom of two calendars and of two New Year festivals (Janif, 2006, 347).

It can also be mentioned that the calendar system which Nabataeans used was lunar Babylonians calendar until the creation of the Roman *Provincia Arabia* in 106 AD (Janif, 2006, 346).

The celebration of Dushara by the Nabataeans was on the same date as the birth of Jesus, the twenty-fifth of December, which is also the birthday of the sun in the ancient cultures (el-Khoury, 2002, 104). By the fifth century, the calendar of festivals in most eastern cities was predominantly Christian, although the logistics, timing and meaning of many processions had been adopted from antique predecessors (Bayliss, 1999, 67).

For example, a fourth century Greek text of saint Epiphanius point out to pagan festival in Petra, and Elusa in the Negev every year on the night between the 5th and 6th January⁴⁹ „...When they have concluded their nightlong vigil torchbearers descend into an underground shrine after cockcrow and bring up a wooden image ... And they carry the image itself seven times round the innermost shrine with flutes, tambourines

45 Glueck dated the zodiac sculpture at et-Tannur to the first half of the second century AD. Glueck, 1965, 433. Another zodiacal pottery lamp recovered from the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra. Hammond, 2002, 165–168.

46 There was a natural New Year that began with spring, and a civil New Year that began with autumn. Glueck, 1970, 231. This Nabataean zodiacal panel is divided into clockwise and counter clockwise halves. Al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009, 183; Alzoubi, 2016, 306.

47 Summer solstice marks the end of the spring at the month of June and summer lasts from the summer solstice until the autumnal equinox at the month of September. Alpert, Osetinsky and Shafrir, 2004, 1014.

48 In Palmyra the feast of the New Year was celebrated in the first eleven days of Nisan the month which is included in the spring equinox. Al-Salameen and Falahat, 2009, 193.

49 For more on commentaries of this text, see Retsö, 2003, 603–604.



Fig. 5: Alabaster funerary stele showing the deceased engaged in a feast (top) and camel raiding (bottom) with Sabaic inscription, (<https://www.flickrriver.com/photos/ancientarabia/popular-interesting/>).

and hymns, hold a feast, and take it back down to its place underground... This also goes on in the city of Petra, in the idolatrous temple there. They praise the virgin with hymns in the Arab language and call her Chaamu – that is, Core, or virgin – in Arabic. And the child who is born of her they call Dusares, that is, “the Lord’s only-begotten”. And this also done that night in the city of Elusa, as it there in Petra and in Alexandria” (Epiphanius, Panarion, 51.22.11).

Epiphanius in this passage names Dushara as the chief deity of the Nabataeans. Also, he indicates that the festival of the Nabataeans occurred on the sixth of January, around the winter solstice (Healey, 2001, 161; Peterson, 2006, 53). This is the time of the annual festival.

This festival is held in Petra and Elusa the main cities of Nabataea in the post Nabataean period, as well as in Alexandria in Egypt, which had many cultural affinities with the Nabataean capital (Janif, 2006, 344). It consists of a night-long vigil, chanting, singing, and music (Peterson, 2006, 54). The account of saint Epiphanius gives us a systematic picture of the Nabataean religious celebration of the principle god Dushara, and indicated that Nabataeans were celebrating very great festival in the Petra and Elusa, at the beginning of the January.

There is evidence to suggest that traditional festivals in many places were maintained right through the fourth century, although apparently stripped of overtly pagan ritual (Bayliss, 1999, 69). Epiphanius’s description of the Nabataean celebration of Dushara might be associated with the first century AD feast where the celebrating group along with the king drank wine from gold cupfuls. Starcky says that the pagans themselves in Petra had admitted the idea of the virgin birth of a god (Starcky, 1966, 992). In the same period, *ca.* the end of the fourth century, the historian Jerome (347–420 AD) describes annual festival holding by the people at Khalasa (Elusa) in the Negev for the goddess Venus (Ward, 2008, 43)⁵⁰. Healey finally reports that Elusa is one of the places where the cult of the Dushara virgin mother was celebrated annually (Healey, 2001, 67). Unfortunately, we have no details on the preparation for the festivals in Nabataea.⁵¹ We think, however that when the preparation was completed, the festival could be proclaimed. The king of the Nabataean made offerings to gods assembled in the hall, in order to obtain life and continued rule. All the gods received huge quantities of offerings.

Undoubtedly, the Nabataean king left the festival hall after having celebrated the usual rites, with attending the queen and his ministers. It seems that the king himself had already left the hall before the god. But, it is not clear how the attendees dealt with their king. One of the days of the festivals the idols of the god were brought up from a chamber below the temple, and put on the platform of the latter, in order to circumambulation around. The excavations revealed two chambers under the temple of edh-Dharih, which were used for storing idols

50 For more on the account of Jerome, see Ward, 2008, 43–45.

51 For example, in Egypt the preparation for the festivals was for months before the proclamation of the festival. For more information on these preparations, see Uphill, 1965, 370–373.

(Alpass, 2013, 269). In Petra, none of the temples had underground chambers. We, therefore, cannot make generalizations on the Nabataean cult practises. The gods attending the festival would arrive from the many towns of Nabataea. It seems that some gods might be brought from Udruh to Petra in order to attend the festivals (Healey, 2001, 160).

In addition, during the period of festivals, Nabataean princes and foreign envoys would also seem to have been invited to be present, at least at the more public rites of the festival. Therefore, we find Athenodorus of Tarsus, the friend of Strabo describing some aspects of the Nabataean festivals. All these rites were accompanied by burnt incense in an incense burner in the front of the temples, to all the gods.

Birth Festivals

Nabataean families usually held birth feasts in celebrations of a newborn child. This can be seen by seen during the reign of King Aretas IV (9 BC – 40 AD), who struck large quantities of silver coins to commemorate the birth of his son, Phasael, in (5-4 BC)⁵² (Meshorer, 1975, 48, 97, 117). Phasael was Aretas's fourth-born⁵³ (Meshorer, 1975, 48). A Palm branch is represented on these coins, and this means that a festival was organised on this occasion (Fig. 4).⁵⁴ However, if the birth of Phasael was commemorated by coins bearing his name, why were his other brothers not given the same honour? Meshorer explains this by suggesting that the three sons of Aretas were born before his accession to the throne, whereas Phasael was the first son to be born after that event (Meshorer, 1975, 48). It is also possible that their names were not mentioned for economic or political reasons in the Nabataean kingdom when they were born. There are many obstacles to attempt to understand the nature of festivals which took place in Nabataea, especially to reconstruct any of the movements involved. It seems that, the Nabataean women played a vital role in the ritual ceremonies and religious activities in the temple (Alzoubi, Masri and al Ajlouny, 2013, 155). They also participated in the fertility ceremonies, offered sacrifices in the temple, and both men and women visited Nabataean temples (Glueck, 1965, 165, 190; Alzoubi, Masri and al Ajlouny, 2013, 155).

Circumcision Festivals

Circumcision is an ancient procedure, and a universal practise that is greatly influenced by cultural and religious traditions (Cox and Morris, 2012, 241). There is not a general consensus among anthropologists in regard to the origins of circumcision. Anthropological interest toward male circumcision is consistent with the fascinating fact that the practise of circumcision has been with humanity since the Bronze Age

52 Small bronze coins with the identical inscription were struck in that same year. Meshorer, 1975, 48.

53 The children of the king Aretas IV (Malichus, Obodas, Rabell, Phasael, and Sha'udat. Kammerer, 1929, 177; Meshorer, 1975, 48.

54 In the Nabataean culture the palm branch point to occasion, like a wedding or birth and joyful event.

(Vardanyan, 2006, 10).⁵⁵ Originally, the circumcision practised as a religious rite or a tribal custom. Herodotus reported the practise of circumcision among Egyptians and others (Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*. 2.36. 104). According to Flavius Josephus in the 1st century AD (Josephus, 1987, 1.12.2), the pre-Islamic Arabs practised circumcision “ناتخ” of both sexes. He reported that Arabs were circumcised after the thirteenth year. The ritual of circumcision was also adopted by the Persians and Jews (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 1.12.2).⁵⁶ As far as it is possible to tell, there is no explicit evidence to this ritual in the literatures of the Nabataeans people, also, the Nabataean inscriptions contains no explicit reference to circumcision, but the Syriac writer Bardaisan (154–222 AD) provides a rich reference to this ritual, he refers that „the Romans recently occupied Arabia (Nabataea), and suppressed all existing laws, including circumcision, that was being practised at the time“ (Baradaisan, 1965, 43).

The statement of the Syriac historian on this habit was very laconic. From this only reference, it may be concluded that circumcision was widely common and practised among the Nabataeans before the subject to the Romans. Every Nabataean father is obligated to circumcise his own sons, but there is no evidence about the age at which circumcision should be carried out knowing that both Greek and Roman laws prohibited circumcision (Vardanyan, 2006, 10).

Sozomen, a chronicler of Gaza in the 5th century AD refers to the Saracens in Arabia, and Sinai practised circumcision like the Jews (Sozomen, 1890, 309). It is worth mentioning that festivities associated with the circumcision ritual in Nabataean culture did not differ much more in their manifestations and practise from other Arab societies of the time. But, unfortunately, there is no refers to these manifestations. It is important to mention that circumcision festivals in ancient Nabataea were essential part of Nabataean religious life. Some theorize that the ritual may have evolved as a fertility rite (Vardanyan, 2006, 13). Male circumcision has always had a ceremonial and cultural significance and, thus, has been a religious rite within the tribal context (Cox and Morris, 2012, 243).⁵⁷ These rites involve the sacrifice of an animal in thanks to God (El-Sheemy and Ziada, 2012, 276). Female members sing songs, and at the end of the ceremony the guests are served with meals and sweets (El-Sheemy and Ziada, 2012, 276). In Nabataea, like the other Arab society, the occasion of circumcision itself had long been an occasion of feasting and rejoicing.

Here, it is useful to point out some of the roles played by priests and priestesses in the manifestations of the circumcision (Al-Fassi, 2012, 6), possibly the knowledge of different herbs making them expert healers. This means that the institution of the temple would be expected to be involved in arrangements of circumcision. The circumcision

55 Iconographic evidence puts circumcision much further back – well into the Paleolithic period, with many cave paintings and sculptures showing circumcised penises, By Egyptian times, around 5,000 years before present, circumcision was well documented, recorded in pictures and texts. Cox and Morris, 2012, 243. For more information on the theories ascribed to the origins of circumcision, see Vardanyan, 2006, 13–16.

56 For more on the circumcision in Judaism see Cohen, 2002, 395–415.

57 For more information on the ceremonial and cultural significance of the circumcision, see Cox and Morris, 2012, 246–248.



Fig. 6: Turkmaniyah Tomb, Wadi Turkmaniyah, Petra (Wadeson, 2011, 17).

is also the responsibility of the father. The procedure of the circumcision is sometimes semi-public, accompanied with music, special foods or great feasts, and much festivity (Hoyland, 1994, 113; Elliot, 1913, 75). From all regions of Arabia we have evidence, sometimes archaeological and sometimes literary, for communal meals (Fig. 5) (Hoyland, 1994, 134). Details of the religious ceremonies vary widely, but common factors in primitive cultures are the exclusion of women from the ceremony and postoperative seclusion of the circumcised youths (Cox and Morris, 2012, 243).

Wedding Festivals

It is worth mentioning that festivities associated with the weddings in Nabataea did not differ much more in their manifestations and practise from other Arab societies of the time. The classical sources and Nabataean epigraphic and numismatic contain no information about the weddings rituals. In the light of the shortage of source material, one must rely on the sources from the pre-Islamic times. The Nabataeans must have done the same. Almost all the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia were members of a tribe like Nabataeans people (Hoyland, 1994, 113). Most tribes would, however, at least have marked preferences. Some might favour cross-cousin marriages, and others felt



Fig. 7: Rock-cut triclinium form Petra -Wadi Farasa East (Wadeson, 2011, 15).

that marriage with outsiders produced hardier children and reduced the likelihood of family quarrels (Hoyland, 1994, 129). There is reference to the first-century marriage of the daughter of King Aretas IV (9 BC – 40 AD) to king Herod Antipas (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 116–119). It was a significant political marriage, unique in the social history of Nabataeans-Jews relations. This marriage between an Arab princess and a Jews king must have combined elements of both Arab and Jews weddings.

The Nabataeans coins and inscriptions indicted that Nabataeans kings were married from their sisters (Khairy, 1981, 22). From the reign of Nabataean king Obodas III (30 – 9 BC) onwards, the image of the woman begins to appear alongside her husband the king on coins (Meshorer, 1975, 17). Since the reign of King Aretas IV (9 BC – 40 AD) onwards, the Nabataean queens were given the title “sister of the king” (*ḥtmlk*) and named both on coins and in royal inscriptions (Bowersock, 1983, 63; el-Khoury and Johnson, 2005, 170). Murray says that “there is a certain amount of evidence to evidence that the Nabataeans, like their neighbours the Egyptians, practised brother-and- sister marriage, at least in the royal family. Whether this was also the case among the lesser folk is not known.” (Murray, 1939, 175). Although some of the Nabataean kings married with their sisters, there is no evidence – so far – of the existence of incest marriage among the commoners.

There is no doubt that the wedding was royally celebrated⁵⁸ and involved a nuptial banquet, which the Arab's always gave on such occasions and which they called the 'urs or 'urus (Shahid, 2009, 80), and dancing was a feature of the celebrations of the weddings. The sister of the bride was leading the group; she appears both as an instrumentalist and vocalist. The entertainment was thus provided not by a professional artist, a qayna, but by a family member, a sister singing at her sibling's wedding (Shahid, 2009, 80). Dance is a kind of entertainment that is documented in the painted figure in the Siq el-Barid (el-Khoury, 2002, 36; Twaissi, 2016, 105). Hence, some form of dance surely did exist in Nabataeans society, and must have included a wedding banquet as many occasions, such as funerals and births. Before the wedding was the engagement (*khutba*) banquet, when the hand of the maiden was asked for (Shahid, 2009, 251).⁵⁹ The sources refer to the *shiwā*, "broiled meat", mutton and beef that were served in these banquets (Shahid, 2009, 252). The food at such banquets must have included many other dishes as well, well known at Greek and Roman banquets. The archaeological evidence and animal remains indicated that sheep, goats and fish were exploited within Petra and its hinterland (MacDonald, 2013, 151). These animals were an important source of food for the Nabataeans.

In these joyous affairs like circumcision, all people came together to witness the rites of weddings and share in the repast, others were more sombre, such as funerary banquets (Hoyland, 1994, 134). But all such occasions of communal consumption served many functions beyond the immediate one of satiation. They often had social aims, for eating and drinking together promotes companionship, so confirming and reinforcing group identity and solidarity (Hoyland, 1994, 134). Hoyland mentions that "There could also be a political dimension, for it was by sponsoring public feasts that an aspiring leader became a man of influence and renown, his cavalier generosity to others creating obligations of reciprocity as well as earning him repute." (Hoyland, 1994, 135). Priests and priestesses have played different roles in weddings (Al-Fassi, 2012, 7). It is practically certain that it was a religious ceremony.

Wedding feasts might also be profane affairs, just plain revelry and camaraderie. Allusions to gatherings for the purpose of enjoying wine, women and song are common in the poems of the pastoralists of north Arabia. Purveyors of wine apparently travelled great distances to sell their product. Also in the category of profane feasts are the meals provided for the poor and needy, the stranger and wayfarer (Hoyland, 1994, 136). According to Sozomen, the odes of weddings and celebrating victories were still remembered and sung in the fifth and sixth centuries AD (Shahid, 2009, 79). But the verses sung were not formal; instead, they were light verses related to entertainment and the social life of the Arabian tribes (Shahid, 2009, 124).

58 Some scholars assert that "royal celebrations, such as coronations, birthdays, weddings and funerals, are not only concerned with the achievements or important days of individual members of the royal family but also ideological events as they support and advocate monarchism as a belief system", see Merkel, 2014, 6.

59 For a detailed account of the *khutba*, see Ali, 2006, IV, 644–50. The husband and his family prepared a banquet, to which they invited their friends and relatives. The type of banquet differed in accordance with the status of the groom and his family, see Masarweh, 2013, 849.

It seems that weddings have remained an important part of the Nabataeans lives till to the 106 AD, in which men and women attend the same gatherings. Strobel reports that weddings providing an opportunity for socializing, and offered a chance to display the wealth of the newlywed couple's families and that of their guests. The quality of clothing and the amount of gold jewellery worn by women at a wedding marked their wealth (Strobel, 1975, 39).

Festivals for the dead

While early theorists tended to see this genre of ritual as particularly “magical” due to what they deemed to be its manipulative intent, more recent scholarship has usefully focused on other dimensions, in particular, the ways in which these rituals actually affect people and the larger community (Bell, 1997, 120). It may be useful to report that in Nabataea, the dead had to be treated with respect and care, and dead kings enjoyed immortality all of them and a kind of apotheosis (Healey, 1993, 38). Archaeological works reveal interesting evidence concerning the Nabataean funeral practises and protection of the dead bodies (Alzoubi and Al Qudrah, 2015, 3). Banquets⁶⁰ were certainly organised to honour the deceased. Examples of this practise are attested in Petra and Hegra, the tombs of which aim at keeping the memory of the dead alive (Healey, 2001, 166–167). The banquet halls are mostly rock-cut rooms with arrangements generally well preserved⁶¹ (Sachet, 2010, 249). Annual ritual meals were held in specially crafted huge banquet halls next to the most important tombs, which were called *triclinia* (TARRIER, 1995, 165–182). These meetings might have been held in the rock-cut rooms and headed by the *rb mrzh'* „the chief of the *marzeah'*“ (Healey, 2001, 167; al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 47). This means that Nabataeans built *triclinia* for both funerary and religious festivals. Winnett and Reed mention that these dining halls were built to celebrate the feast of the dead (Winnett and Reed, 1970, 49). Langdon says that the Nabataeans in the middle of the month Tamuz (June–July) celebrated with the „month of seed corn“, in this month the bread made from corn breaking by the weeping women in honour of Ta'uz, they then ate soaked wheat, chick-peas, dates, and raisins, with wailing, this month was a month of lamentation in Nabataean calendar (Langdon, 1933, 120).

Glueck says that little is known about the sacred meals eaten in *triclinia* in Nabataean and related sanctuaries (Glueck, 1965, 165). Neither Nabataean inscriptions, nor classical sources contain any evidence for the existence of funerary meals in Nabataean religious practises (Negev, 1971, 127). These meals were an important part of the Nabataean religious practise (Negev, 1971, 127). Numerous *triclinia*, were discovered in and around Petra. Alzoubi and Al Qudrah report that Petra had over 3,000 tombs, close to 100 of those tombs had their own *tricliniums* (Alzoubi and Al Qudrah, 2015, 3). These *triclinia* were

60 The Nabataean had their own banqueting tradition, probably of nomadic origin, mixed with Hellenistic tradition. Sachet, 2010, 249.

61 Banquet halls found in Qaṭṭār ad-Dayr, al-Madras, al-Hraymiyyah, Wādī aṣ-Ṣiyyagh, Wādī ad-Dayr, Dayr Plateau, and Wādī al-Amṭī in the Bayḍā area. Nehmé, 2013, 115.

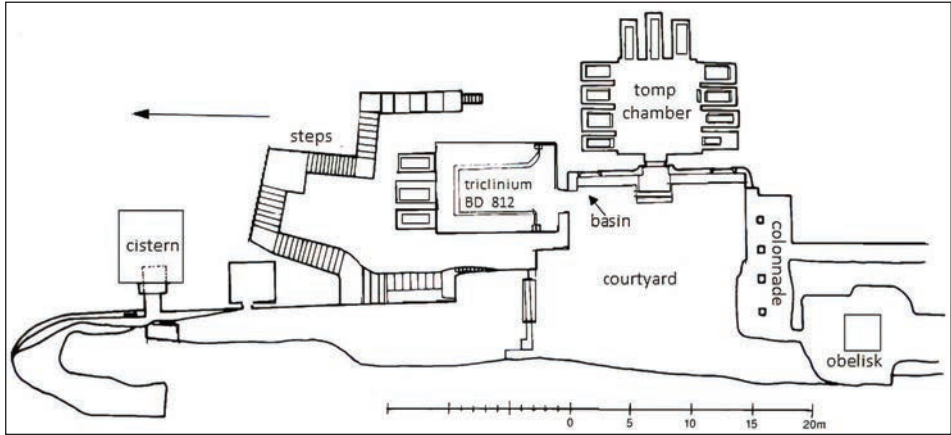


Fig. 8: Plan of the ‘Tomb of Unaihu showing components of the complex, el-Khubtha, Petra may have been used as areas for feasting (Wadeson, 2011, 16).

gathering places of the sacred symposia (Zayadine, 1985, 243). Some of these *triclinia* contained benches and were open to the sky. They perhaps functioned as a sort of summer dining arrangement (Wadeson, 2011, 9). Also, closer to the *triclinia* there are platforms which were used as dining areas (Wadeson, 2011, 9). The first large chamber of the Turkmaniya tomb (Fig. 6), immediately behind the facade, as the *krk*⁶² and there is a reference to the windows in the inscription (Milik, 1959, 558; Healey, 1993, 70). The courtyard and benches in front of the complexes may have been used for feasting, and this is the case of the platform in tomb of the Roman soldier in Wadi Farasa (Fig. 7) (Wadeson, 2011, 9). The dinners in honour of the dead were held in their own space, that is to say, in the necropolises (Sachet, 2010, 259). Sometimes, the banquet was even held in the presence of the dead, in the banquet rooms containing burials (Sachet, 2010, 259). It seems that, religious rituals were practised in the cemetery. Bell (1997, 1) mentions that ritual is a cultural and historical construction that has been heavily used to help differentiate various styles and degrees of religiosity, rationality, and cultural determinism. The excavations at the Nabataean necropolis of Mampsis (Kurnub) revealed several heaps of sherds contained bowls, drinking cups, and jugs⁶³ (Negev, 1971, 125). Negev says that the presence of these heaps of pottery vessels⁶⁴ in the vicinity of the tombs, are the remains of funerary meals at which the mourners partook (Negev, 1971, 125). It seems that, drinking wine was associated with the festivals in the *triclinia* (Healey, 2001, 167). The archaeological excavations revealed numbers of Nabataean rock-cut wine-presses in Beidha north of Petra (al-Salameen, 2004, 86). Also, wine

62 Healey suggests that the term (*krk*) mentioned in the Nabataean inscriptions at Hegra and Turkmaniya tomb at Petra refer to the place where ritual meals took place. Healey, 1993, 70.

63 The mourners were eaten at the cemetery.

64 For more on Pottery used in Nabataean rituals, see Negev, 1986, 88–93.



Fig. 9: The Madbah high-place (photo by the author).

vessels have been discovered in *tricliniua* both in Petra and Palmyra (Healey, 2001, 167), and as part of his duties the head of the *marzeah* provided good quality wine during the rituals (Hillers and Cussini, 1996, 318; Healey, 2001, 167). This tradition is also described by Strabo in Petra: “... the king holds many drinking – bouts in magnificent style” (Strabo, Geography, 16.4.26). Some scholar suggests that the mention of the month Nisan (Aries) in the Nabataean tomb inscriptions refers to some ceremonies in relation to the dead on that month, because it was the beginning of the year (Healey, 2001, 160).

Private Festivals

It should also be pointed out that many festivities were organised on various occasions in the Nabataean society. Some feasts were held on occasions such as the rebellion of (DMSY) Damasî against the last Nabataean king Rabbel II (70–106 AD) (Winnett, 1973, 54). This apparently happened during the eighteenth and the twenty-eighth regnal years of Rabbel II (88–99 AD). The Nabataean underwent a revolution in their way of life. This revolution was significant in that it called for special religious festivities, and it was probably on this occasion that king Rabbel was honoured by the title “who

brought life and deliverance to his people”⁶⁵ (Negev, 1986, 107). It seems that, a big temple at Petra such as the Qasr el-Bint was used by the Nabataean king and his princes during his festival ceremonies.

Private ceremonies with families and priests may have also taken place in aristocratic families at Petra (Sachet, 2010, 259). We have noted two *triclinia* connected with the ‘Uneishu tomb (Fig. 8) and the Roman soldier tomb at Petra (Healey, 2001, 166). There is, perhaps, a direct connection between the *triclinia* attached to the two tombs and the private ceremonies.

NABATAEANS SACRIFICES

In the anthropological studies, the sacrificial rite interpreted as a festive communion between humans and gods that has the effect of sacralizing the social unity and solidarity of the group (Bell, 1997, 4). Hence, ritual is the primary component of religion, and it fundamentally serves the basic social function of creating and maintaining community (Bell, 1997, 4). The sacrifices were the principal Nabataeans religious ritual.⁶⁶ They were often conducted at altars (el-Madhbah), high-places (Fig. 9),⁶⁷ and temples in order to gain the favour of the gods (Alpass, 2013, 47). Animals were sacrificed at religious festivals (Negev, 1977, 604). The spilling of blood on the face of a god during a ritual is believed to have had magic powers (Healey, 2001, 48).

Close to the altars, there is a basin with a drain which was used for sacrificial blood and libations (Healey, 2001, 48). In front of the altar is a courtyard with a raised platform used as place of preparation of offerings (Negev, 1977, 604; Healey, 2001, 48). Many banquet rooms at Petra equipped with niches were intended to receive statues of the god as an honoured guest, facing all other guests inside the room (Sachet, 2010, 260). Dushara was worshipped in Petra as the patron of the state, and of the royal family. He was wetted by his worshippers with the blood of the sacrificed animals (el-Khoury, 2002, 101). Also, sacred animals were offered to al-Uzza the consort of Dushara (el-Khoury, 2002, 100). Usually pig, cock and sheep or cattle were sacrificed.⁶⁸ Plants like pomegranates are also associated with the Nabataean goddesses (Accetola, 2012, 40).

Nabataean inscriptions suggest that the camel was a sacred animal, and dedicated to the god Dushara⁶⁹ (el-Khoury, 2002, 63). The large number of camel and horse figurines speaks for the importance of both animals in the Nabataean society and as animals

65 Fortunately, the Nabataean inscriptions at Oboda in the Negev indicate to the subjugation of Dmasi revolution. See Negev, 1986, 107.

66 The votive offerings were sacred to the gods, and necessary to protect against diseases, catastrophes, and wars, and to achieve the wishes of the gods. el-Khoury, 2002, 106.

67 High – places are common in Petra, Hauran, and the Oboda in the Negev. Alpass, 2013, 92–93. The Nabataean practised their worship at high places that were usually on top of mountains. These high places allow the practise of worship rituals on the mountain summit. There are numerous High – places in the hills and mountain of Petra. For more on these High – places and its orientation, see Stockton, 1971, 65–67; Alpass, 2013, 92–93; Ball, 2000, 350; Healey, 2001, 48.

68 The chief action in all Greek cult consisted in offerings sacrifice, and the most typical object was some animal, especially cattle, sheep or goats. For more on the offerings in Greek festivals, see Parke, 1977, 18.

69 For more on the camels in the Nabataea, see el-Khoury, 2002, 62–65.

worthy of being sacrificed to the gods (el-Khoury, 2002, 106). Glueck explains the representation of horses and camels on commemorative reliefs of the dead, by the idea that these animals might facilitate transporting the dead through the afterlife (Glueck, 1966, 242). Frankincense was a critical product which the Nabataeans used in their rituals, as Strabo has mentioned. It was a necessary product which Nabataean religion, as well as other ancient religions, could not do without (El-Nowieemy, 2012, 137), this is also true of incense.

It also reminds us that the celebrants in specific festivals are required to perform a number of actions that are normally forbidden: real or symbolic acts of sexual aggression, stealing, and the eating of proscribed foods (Girard, 1977, 299). Indeed, in many societies the ultimate act of initiation is the killing of an animal or a human being. But the Nabataean considered human sacrifice as immoral (Nöldeke, 1908, I, 665; Healey, 2001, 162).⁷⁰ A detailed account of that kind of sacrifice, performed about 410 AD, is given by bishop Nilus. He tells us that “the wild Saracens of Arabia Petraea had no image of a god, but only an altar crudely built of stones, on which they sacrificed, in great haste, a human being or a white camel to the morning-star (al-Uzza) before sunrise, obviously so that the star might be present during the whole ceremony. Thrice they marched round the sacred spot, sing in a hymn; then the chieftain, or an aged priest, struck the first blow at the victim, and drank some of the blood...” (Nöldeke, 1908, I, 665). One of the most peculiar features in this description is the drinking of the blood; in other cases, the Arabs, like the ancient Hebrews, allowed the blood of the victim to flow a way, giving back the element of life to the deity, or else they applied it directly to the idol (Nöldeke, 1908, I, 665).

It is worth mentioning that water played an essential role in the funerary rites and activities associated with the tomb. Many cisterns and reservoirs are found in tomb complexes (Wadeson, 2011, 8). The Turkmaniyah tomb inscription describes the tomb complex as consisting of tomb chambers, a *triclinium*, and cisterns (CIS II: 350; McKenzie, 1990, 113). The tomb of the Roman Soldier has a tomb chamber, and a *triclinium*. Besides, the area between the tomb and this *triclinium* forms a courtyard which shows evidence of having had a colonnade. There is a cistern above the *triclinium*⁷¹ (McKenzie, 1990, 113). It is interesting to note that the banquet room⁷² in the Turkmaniyah Tomb, is sacred and placed under the protection of the god Dushara, as the inscription itself says “this tomb and the large burial-chamber within it... and triclinium-garden, and the wells of water and the cisterns, and walls and all the rest of the property which is in this places are sacred and dedicated to Dushara, the god of our lord...” (Healey, 1993, 238).

This banquet room was dedicated to funerary ceremonies (Sachet, 2010, 251). Nabataean banquets were placed under the protection of a deity, mainly Dushara or

70 For a discussion of the human sacrifice in the ancient festivals, see Girard, 1977, 131–132.

71 The Obelisk Tomb has each of the features mentioned in the Turkmaniyah Tomb and the tomb of the Roman Soldier, see McKenzie, 1990, 113.

72 There are three types of funeral banquet rooms in Petra: single rooms, rooms with burials, and rooms with a niche. The banquet room of the Deir is the largest banquet room in Petra, c. 135 m2. Sachet, 2010, 251.

Obodas (Healey, 1993, 238; Sachet, 2010, 257). Dushara also had the opportunity to participate in the banquet, as his image was installed in a niche that had been planned for it inside the banquet hall⁷³ (Healey, 2001, 183; Sachet, 2010, 257). The size of the banquet room is the main indication of the type of ceremony held inside the complex (Sachet, 2010, 257). Most of the ceremonies and funerary rituals took place outside the burial chambers; the most important characteristic of these rituals and celebrations are gathering, libations, offerings and feasting (Sachet, 2010, 257).

CONCLUSION

This paper explained that through annual and religious festivals which the significance of festivals in terms of serving the social and cultural needs of the communities who organize them becomes apparent. As we have seen, temples were not necessarily open daily for private worship, such as in Khirbet edh-Dharih. Some, indeed, were only open once a year. The festivals of the Nabataeans, which we have surveyed exhibit an extraordinary variety of activity associated with a different religious cult. All festival days were really holy days dedicated to particular gods.

We are however able to mention that the Nabataean festivals and celebrations were held every year and at the same time, not only in the capital of the kingdom, at Petra but also in the other Nabataean cities, such as Oboda, Hegra, and Sinai (al-Salameen and Falahat, 2012, 49). It seems that, the Nabataeans have increased their link to their god Dushara, after the Roman annexation of their kingdom, believing that he would save them from Roman hegemony.

This tradition survived until the 4th century AD since, we hear in the account of Epiphanius that similar rituals were carried out in Petra and Elusa in the Negev on the same night (Wadeson, 2011, 10). This may suggest that festivals in Nabataea could be undertaken on a yearly basis. Moreover, the festivals have played a key role in Nabataeans society; the inscriptions also have provided clear evidence for the role of the women in these festivals, such as they did perform a ritual function at funerals, weddings and circumcisions celebrations.

Also, it seems that there is an urgent need for more archaeological excavations and surveys to reveal more aspects of social life in Nabataea taking into consideration that the celebrations of weddings and circumcision, as well as other celebrations did not differ much more in their manifestations and practised from the Arabs before Islam.

73 The walls in Petra and other Nabataean sites contain many niches. In each of these niches are one, two, or three betyls carved out of the living rock, one of these stones represent Dushara the main god of the Nabataean. The second and third stones would represent Manat and Allat. Winnett and Reed, 1970, 50.

SVEČANOSTI IN OBREDI V NABATEJSKI DRUŽBI (312 BC – 106 AD)

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POVZETEK

Najstarejšo omembo nabatejskih obredov najdemo v klasičnih grških virih med kampanjami Antigonosa leta 311 pr. n. št. Članek obravnava obrede in svečanosti nabatejske dobe v obdobju med 312 pr. n. št. – 106 n. št. ter osvetljuje zgodovino in tradicijo teh festivalov. Članek temelji na interdisciplinarnih zgodovinopisnih in antropoloških študijah ter nabatejskih napisih, pa tudi na pregledu starodavnih zgodovinskih in sodobnih gradiv ter pisnih poročil. Festivalski in obredni koledar Nabatejcev, tako kot pri mnogih ljudstvih in civilizacijah na Bližnjem vzhodu, se je pogosto vrtil okoli rojstva, smrti, verstev, porok, obrezovanja in bogov. Vsakodnevno bogoslužje v starodavni Nabateji je potekalo znotraj templjev, pri praznovanjih pa so duhovniki v templje nalagali kipe božanstev. Templji niso bili edini kraj, kjer so potekala takšna praznovanja. Potekala so tudi v gledališču v Petri in Bosri. Za vse obrede je bilo značilno, da so pred templji za vse bogove prižgali kadilo v kadilnem gorilniku.

Ključne besede: Nabatejci, svečanosti, festivali, obredi, religiozne prakse, nabatejski bogovi

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