

# **LAW AND RELIGION BETWEEN PETRA AND EDESSA**

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Studies in Aramaic Epigraphy on the  
Roman Frontier

John Healey

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Studies in Aramaic Epigraphy  
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## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

*The articles in this volume, as in all others in the Variorum Collected Studies Series, have not been given a new, continuous pagination. In order to avoid confusion, and to facilitate their use where these same studies have been referred to elsewhere, the original pagination has been maintained wherever possible. Where papers have been reset, the original pagination has been indicated in square brackets within the text.*

*Each article has been given a Roman number in order of appearance, as listed in the Contents. This number is repeated on each page and is quoted in the index entries.*

*Asterisks in the margins are to alert the reader to additional information supplied at the end of the volume in the Addenda and Corrigenda.*

## INTRODUCTION

The publications included in this volume and most of my other publications over twenty years are focused on the epigraphy and languages of the Middle East in what I believe is a crucial period lasting roughly from 300 BCE to 300 CE. The word ‘crucial’ here is meant in its most literal sense, since, as I see it, the period represents a cross-over or crossroad, a juncture at which in a certain sense the ‘Ancient Near East’ was coming to an end and, after this transitional period, the Greek-Christian and Arabic-Muslim worlds came to dominance.

This transitional period, 300 BCE to 300 CE, clearly shows its debt to the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Syria and South Arabia, while responding to the impact of the Greek and Roman interventions in the Middle East, which brought much that was new, for example in philosophy, in law and (most visibly) in architecture. During this period these various elements were under constant change, with locally negotiated accommodations between the old and the new. In religion, the old deities and their myths survived, but often in Greco-Roman garb and in Hellenistic-style temples.

Places like Petra, Palmyra, Hatra and Edessa can all be viewed within the framework of this period of transition. They took much from ancient Mesopotamia, Syria and Arabia, but also participated in the creation of the new worlds of Christianity and then Islam. Aniconic religious traditions in the Petra of Dushara; the imperial self-assertion of Zenobia in the Palmyra of Bēl and Nabu; the Hatra of the sun-god Shamash; Edessa, converted from the worship of Bēl and Nabu, and acclaimed as the first Christian kingdom with an apostolic foundation. All looked back to the ancient era, while pointing the way to what was to come.

By an historical accident, one of the most astonishing of such historical quirks, the language we know as Aramaic was shared by all these cities and many others in the so-called Fertile Crescent. Although Aramaic can be seen as yet another legacy of the ancient world, originating at an early date in Upper Mesopotamia, it is a surprising legacy, since the Aramaeans themselves never achieved the kind of political significance enjoyed by the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Despite this, the Aramaic language was employed and spread by these great powers as a convenient *lingua franca*. The reasons for its convenience are clear: in large swathes of the western parts of the empires, Aramaic was the common language of local inhabitants. It had been in use in

Upper Mesopotamia since at least the 10th century BCE (and probably since much earlier) and it had adopted a simple writing-system, the linear alphabet, which was widely used in the West for other languages, such as Hebrew and Phoenician. We can see the expansion of Aramaic in its use by the Assyrians when attacking Judah *c.* 700 BCE (2 Kings 18: 26ff.) and in the Jewish colony of Elephantine communicating in it with the Achaemenid authorities *c.* 410 BCE, but there seems also to have been a genuine, ‘on-the-ground’ expansion of Aramaic, e.g. in the Jordan valley, arising solely from linguistic factors. Certainly we know that it ended up in common use throughout Mesopotamia (where Aramaization has been well documented) and Greater Syria, and it ultimately displaced western languages like Hebrew (so that most Palestinian Jews in Jesus’ time spoke Aramaic). At the outer fringe of this expansion we have the Nabataeans, whose élite may have spoken some form of Arabic, though they maintained the exclusive use of Aramaic in inscriptions and legal documents.

It is in this context that Aramaic epigraphy comes to be the medium through which we have our most direct knowledge of the Fertile Crescent in the period 300 BCE to 300 CE. The inscriptions and documents (and, in the case of Syriac, the literary texts) which provide this knowledge are the primary source-material on which the studies in this book are based. For less direct evidence we turn to Greek literary sources such as Josephus’ *Antiquities* and Strabo’s *Geography* and, later, the church historians like Eusebius.

Because of the dominance of Aramaic in this area at this time, I have coined the phrase ‘Aramaic Crescent’ for use in this context instead of ‘Fertile Crescent’, and I think this way of conceptualizing the situation as a linguistic territory rather than an agricultural zone has importance for the understanding of interregional contacts in the period in question.

Arabia, apart from the South Arabian kingdoms, is little known and understood during the periods of Assyrian and Babylonian imperial rule, despite the fact that there was some contact and that long-distance trade between Arabia and the Levant is well documented from early in the 1st millennium BCE. We are better informed in the Persian period, especially with regard to the important centre of Taymā in north-west Arabia, but the period of *close* contact between the two worlds of Arabia and the Mediterranean, and indeed also the period of the emergence of the ‘Arabs’ as they come to be more clearly identified, is again precisely the period 300 BCE to 300 CE. In this period the first written Arabic appears (in the inscriptions) and by the end of the period, in the early fourth century (328 CE), the tomb inscription of Imru’lqais from Namāra in Syria proclaims him ‘king of all the Arabs’.

The cultural interchange between Arabia and the Mediterranean both in this period and, of course, in the later Islamic period, was in many ways mediated

by the speakers of Aramaic. When the Arabian ancestors of the Nabataean kings settled in Petra they adopted Aramaic as their official language and wrote legal documents using the already well-established Aramaic legal formulary. Palmyra, a traditionally Aramaic-speaking region incorporated into the Roman Province of Syria, had a substantial Arabic-speaking population and Arabian gods appear in its pantheon. In Hatra inscriptions refer explicitly to the Arab part of the population who appear to have attached themselves secondarily to the Aramaean (or Irano-Aramaean) statelet. Indeed, it is broadly true to say that all the contact in the pre-Islamic period between the world of Arabia and the Mediterranean world of the Greek-speaking Romans was mediated by the Aramaean or Aramaic Crescent. Nor did this mediating role cease with the rise of Islam: Syriac-speaking Christian and Harranian scholars and scientists continued to play an important role in the development of Islamic civilization.

The chronology of transition and the geography of interaction referred to above provide the framework for the papers collected in this volume. The specific themes which have been prominent in my work are linguistic, religious and legal.

The linguistic aspect underlies everything and it is really the marginality of the study of Aramaic inscriptions in academia which had led to the neglect of these epigraphic resources. Obviously, writers on Roman history in the Near East rarely have direct access to the material, but it is also beyond the reach of most Hebraists, New Testament scholars and church historians. The material is not straightforward and the relation between the different Aramaic dialects involved and their inner varieties and registers form a substantial barrier to easy access.

Religion has long been prominent in the surviving epigraphy since the 19th century and it has naturally attracted attention both in Biblical/Jewish/Early Christian contexts and in relation to the classical world. The legal traditions, by contrast, have come to be known much more recently through the publication of extensive documentary materials, in Jewish Aramaic, Nabataean and Syriac, mostly within the last two decades. This legal material needs much more work and the papers included here only scratch its surface.

The papers are organized into three categories:

1. Petra and Nabataean Aramaic
2. Edessa and Early Syriac
3. Aramaic and Society in the Roman Near East.

This arrangement corresponds, it is hoped, to the likely readers' particular interests, since even within the field of Aramaic studies there is so much

specialization that those interested in Nabataean Studies (1) are rarely familiar with Syriac Studies (2), the study of which is closely associated with the Middle Eastern churches. The final category (3) gathers items which have a broader significance.

The Addenda and Corrigenda incorporate references to works which appeared after the original publication of the paper in question, but they also refer to book-length publications in which I have explored the above themes at greater length and commented on many specific inscriptions:

*The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 1)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993

*The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene (Handbuch der Orientalistik I/42)* (written jointly with H.J.W. Drijvers). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999

*The Religion of the Nabataeans: a Conspectus (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 136)*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001

*Aramaic Inscriptions and Documents of the Roman Period (Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions IV)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

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# ABBREVIATIONS

## Abbreviations and main *sigla*

<i>ADAJ</i>	<i>Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan</i>
<i>AHw</i>	<i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> (W. von Soden, Wiesbaden 1965-81)
<i>AIEO</i>	<i>Annales de l'Institut d'Études Orientales</i>
<i>AION</i>	<i>Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli</i>
<i>ALASP</i>	Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästina
<i>AO</i>	<i>Aula Orientalis</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BAR</i>	British Archaeological Reports
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>BWL</i>	<i>Babylonian Wisdom Literature</i> (W.G. Lambert, Oxford 1960)
<i>CAD</i>	<i>Chicago Assyrian Dictionary</i> (A.L. Oppenheim <i>et al.</i> , Chicago 1956-)
<i>CIS</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum</i>
<i>CRAIBL</i>	<i>Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres</i>
<i>CSCO</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>DBS</i>	<i>Dictionnaire de la Bible. Supplément</i>
<i>DDD</i>	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> (K. van der Toorn <i>et al.</i> , Leiden 1995 [2nd ed. 1999])
<i>DJD</i>	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
<i>EI</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel and Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> (2nd ed.)
<i>GLECS</i>	<i>Groupe Linguistique d'Études Chamito-Sémitiques</i>
<i>H</i>	Numbered inscriptions in J.F. Healey, <i>The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih</i> (Oxford 1993)
<i>HdO</i>	<i>Handbuch der Orientalistik</i>

<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
IGN	Numbered tombs in the Madā'in Šālih survey by the Institut Géographique National, Paris
<i>IOS</i>	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
<i>JA</i>	<i>Journal Asiatique</i>
<i>JANES</i>	<i>Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society</i> (Columbia University)
<i>JEOL</i>	<i>Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap</i> <i>Ex Oriente Lux</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JS	Numbered inscriptions in A. Jaussen, and R. Savignac, <i>Mission archéologique en Arabie I and II</i> (Paris 1909, 1914)
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
JSSSup	Journal of Semitic Studies Supplements
KTU	Numbered texts in M. Dietrich <i>et al.</i> , <i>The Cuneiform</i> <i>Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, ras Ibn Hani and Other</i> <i>Places</i> (KTU: second and enlarged edition) (Münster 1995)
<i>MUSJ</i>	<i>Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph</i>
OBO	Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
<i>OLZ</i>	<i>Orientalistische Literaturzeitung</i>
<i>Or</i>	<i>Orientalia</i>
PAT	Numbered inscriptions in D. Hillers and E. Cussini, <i>Palmyrene Aramaic Texts</i> (Baltimore 1996)
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>QDAP</i>	<i>Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique</i>
<i>R. Ét. Islamiques</i>	<i>Revue des études islamiques</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumrân</i>

SBLWAWs	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World Series
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici</i>
<i>TIMS</i>	<i>The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih</i> (J.F. Healey, Oxford 1993)
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
<i>WdM</i>	<i>Wörterbuch der Mythologie I. Götter und Mythen im vorderen Orient</i> (H.W. Haussig [ed.], Stuttgart 1965)
<i>ZA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

## **Nabataean Inscriptions: Language and Script**

The aim in this short paper is to survey the question of the language or languages used by the Nabataeans and the Nabataean script in its various forms. It is not possible here to enter into detail in relation to either topic. Instead I try to give a summary of the facts and the consensus of scholarly opinion, but I will also explore some newly emerging aspects of these topics and also comment on the content of the Nabataean inscriptions, speculating a little on what might be found in the future.

### **Preliminary**

Before launching myself into this ambitious plan, I have to draw attention to some difficulties which constantly arise in the study of Nabataean inscriptions, important factors which must always be kept in mind if we are to avoid making nonsense of the evidence.

Firstly, the Nabataean Kingdom had geographical limits at any particular time and disappeared in 105/6 C.E. when it was incorporated into the Roman Province of Arabia. Many of the inscriptions in what we call for convenience and by scholarly convention the “Nabataean” script were produced outside these geographical and chronological limits. Some are post-Nabataean, even if they are from Petra; others are contemporary with the Nabataean kingdom but were manufactured outside its geographical boundaries.

Secondly, in order to avoid clumsy expressions, scholars have to use a certain amount of shorthand in referring to the languages of the area. So when we write here of the “Nabataean” language, it should be understood that we are referring to the local Nabataean dialect of Aramaic. When we speak of Arabic, even more care is needed. We know Classical Arabic properly only from the seventh century C.E. onwards, i.e. the early Islamic period. Some form of “pre-Arabic” was, however, in use among some peoples even in the first centuries of the Common Era. It is important not to confuse this with the Arabic we know from much later and, when we refer by a kind of shorthand to “Arabic” influence, to keep in mind the fact that, as far as we can tell, Classical Arabic as such did not exist in the period of the Nabataean Kingdom.

By keeping these points in mind we may avoid distorting the evidence.

## The Nabataean Language

The Nabataean inscriptions were first fully deciphered by Eduard Beer in 1840 on the basis of copies of texts from Sinai (Beer 1840). From a very early stage of their study it became clear that the language involved was a form of Aramaic. It is not Hebrew (which some eccentric Victorian fundamentalists would have liked: in one group of “Nabataean” inscriptions Forster could hear the “voice of Israel from the rocks of Sinai” [Forster 1851; see discussion in Healey 1994, 84–91]), nor is it Arabic (which some Arab linguistic nationalists would like). Aramaic is *related to* Hebrew and Arabic, but it has linguistic features which set it completely apart from these sister languages. Most obvious linguistically is the lack of any prefixed definite article (“the”). Aramaic had long been widely used in the Middle East, becoming an important diplomatic and commercial *lingua franca* under the Achaemenid Persian empire (Beyer 1986, 14–19). It functioned a bit like Latin in medieval Europe.

Although the Nabataean inscriptions are written in a form of Aramaic, from an early stage of their study note was made in some inscriptions of the presence of Arabic-type vocabulary and grammatical intrusions. There are pieces of un-Aramaic vocabulary like *walad*, “child, children”, *nasīb*, “kinsman”, and the verb *laʿana*, “to curse”. Nöldeke and other nineteenth century philologists were alert to these intrusions (Nöldeke 1885; O’Connor 1986; Healey 1995). It came to be widely accepted that these intrusions arose because the Nabataeans must have spoken Arabic in everyday speech, but when they wrote their inscriptions they used the already established *lingua franca*, Aramaic.

There are other linguistic arguments which could be used to bolster this view that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic on an everyday basis, but used Aramaic for public purposes, such as the fact that the actual Aramaic of the inscriptions is rather archaic and old-fashioned by comparison with the contemporary dialects of Aramaic which are used in inscriptions from Palmyra, for example: the Aramaic of Nabataea might have preserved its archaic features through being basically a non-spoken language (Beyer 1986, 26–27; Healey 1993, 59–63). There

\* are also non-linguistic arguments in favour of this idea that the Nabataeans spoke some form of Arabic, including the widely held view that the Nabataeans were in fact a bedouin Arab tribe who had settled in southern Jordan to form a state. Caution is needed here, however, since non-linguistic arguments of this kind do not prove much about linguistic matters. But at least it could be argued that the hypothesis that the Nabataeans spoke some early form of Arabic fits with the idea that the Nabataeans were Arabs.

However, apart from the quite separate argument over whether the Nabataeans *regarded* themselves as Arabs (and what the term “Arab” meant in the first century C.E.: see Healey 1989; 2001b), recent discussions of linguistic questions

\* have now at least raised some questions about the view that they spoke Arabic while writing in Aramaic.

Most importantly, the supposed Arabic influences in the Nabataean inscriptions of the first century C.E. are mostly limited geographically to the southern

area of Nabataea, especially around Ḥegra/Madāʿin Ṣālih in Saudi Arabia (O'Connor 1986, 220 and generally). We should not, however, be too dogmatic here: there is *some* evidence of Arabic influence further north towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. (e.g. in the Nabataean papyri of Naḥal Ḥever [see Greenfield 1992]), and it is possible that the impression of stronger Arabic influence in the south is a function of the fact that the southern inscriptions, especially those from Ḥegra/Madāʿin Ṣālih, are of greater length.

We do, however, have to keep chronology as well as geography in mind. Some of the other evidence of Arabic influence is in inscriptions from Sinai dated after the end of the Nabataean Kingdom: again not all inscriptions in Nabataean script have anything to do with the Nabataeans of Petra and they cannot be regarded as indicative evidence for the linguistic and ethnic situation of first century C.E. Petra (Healey 2001b and 2002). Second and third century C.E. \* inscriptions from Sinai tell us about Sinai at that period, not about Petra 150 years earlier.

The idea that it was *necessary* for speakers of an early form of Arabic to resort to Aramaic for public inscriptions also needs to be questioned, since contemporary peoples of a supposedly similar background to that of the Nabataeans, like the Lihyanites in north-west Arabia (centred on Dedan/al-ʿUlā), spoke and wrote their own North Arabian dialect, using the South Arabian script. And that such a possibility would have been available to the Nabataeans further north is evident from the fact that the authors of the Safaitic inscriptions of eastern \* Jordan and southern Syria, some of them people attached to the Nabataean state (as we know from their basileophoric personal names incorporating the names of Nabataean kings), also wrote in a North Arabian language using a form of the South Arabian script. Given these facts it is not easy to explain why *other* Nabataeans, those in Petra and the other main cultural centres, used Aramaic.

It may also be noted that certainly in the post-Nabataean period, and probably also in the Nabataean period, completely informal inscriptions, graffiti, are written in Aramaic: i.e. Aramaic is used in circumstances which do not demand the formality of adopting an official tongue rather than the vernacular. Why did the Nabataeans write these graffiti in Aramaic if some form of Arabic was their daily language? (Here, however, we have come full circle logically – the Arabic intrusions into the graffiti of Sinai may be taken to point to the idea that the writers were normally speakers of Arabic.)

Taking all of the above into account – both the consensus view that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic and the reservations I have noted – we may have to adopt a more nuanced view of the linguistic situation of the inhabitants of Nabataea. The Nabataean élite, the royal family and its closest associates, may well have been of north Arabian stock. The kings' devotion to Arabian religious practices and deities and their personal names suggest this (Healey 2001a). The main god of the Nabataeans is Dushara and his name is of a distinctively Arabic type, with the prefix *dhū*-. There were probably also other sections of the Nabataean population who could be called "Arabian" from a linguistic and cultural point of view. The Safaitic subjects of the Nabataean kings are the most

visible (because of their use of a distinctive script to write in an Arabic-related language). But this does not mean that *all* the population of Nabataea were Arabic-speakers. Rather, Nabataean hegemony covered many areas where Aramaic was dominant, as is best known from nearby Judaea, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Persian-period Wādī al-Dāliyyah documents, texts from Idumaea, etc. (Beyer 1986, 16; Lemaire 2001, 7–8). In the more remote areas of Nabataean influence extending into southern Syria, the Aramaic tradition is even stronger and there is no trace of Arabic linguistic influence in the Aramaic used there until much later. So we are left with the possibility that many but by no means all of the population of Nabataea spoke a language akin to Arabic: possibly the élite, probably some of the population of the southern provinces of Nabataea, and certainly those writers of Safaitic inscriptions who owed their allegiance to the Nabataean state. Others probably spoke Aramaic, the Nabataean kingdom being multilingual and “multi-scriptal”.

The best explanation of the choice of the Aramaic language and script for official purposes, both formal public inscriptions and legal documents, remains the supposition that the newly established state, even if its leaders spoke some sort of Arabic, wanted to assert its status by adopting an established prestige language, Aramaic, along with the other trappings of statehood.

Before moving on, it may be worth reflecting very briefly on the role of Greek and the significance of bilingual inscriptions. While Greek inscriptions and bilinguals are common in the Ḥawrān area, in fact Greek was not in wide use in Nabataea until after 105/6 C.E. Of the documents of the Babatha archive none of the Greek texts predate 105/6 (Lewis 1989, 29). We may contrast the case of Palmyra, which was under heavier Roman influence. There are, however, some Greek-Nabataean bilinguals of the period of the Nabataean kingdom. Those which occur outside Nabataea, within the Roman world, are easily explicable in terms of the locations in which they were set up: thus the Nabataean bilinguals from Delos and Miletus dated 9 B.C.E. (Roussel and Launey 1937, ID 2315; Rehm and Kawerau 1914, no. 165) and one from Cos dated 9 C.E. (Levi della Vida 1938). More interesting in terms of the implications for Nabataean society is the Bāb es-Sīq triclinium inscription from the reign of Malichus II (40–70 C.E.) (Healey 1993, 243–44; Sartre 1993, 89–91: no. 54), the only Greek text from the area securely dated before 105/6 C.E. In this inscription, a man with a purely Nabataean name (ʿAbdmanku) is the son of a father with an apparently Greek name, *Achaios*. There are some peculiarities in the formulae used in this inscription by comparison with other tomb texts and one might suspect that this is a special case of a Petran particularly proud of his Hellenism! The peculiarities of the inscription were debated by Milik, who concluded that ʿAbdmanku was a foreigner (Milik 1976), a view opposed by Sartre (1993: 89–91).

### The Nabataean Script

In turning to the Nabataean script, I begin with another reminder that many of the inscriptions called Nabataean in the scholarly tradition have nothing immediately

to do with the Nabataeans of the Nabataean kingdom: many come from peripheral areas and post-date the kingdom. The Nabataean script is a characteristic artefact of the Nabataean kingdom and had its origin and main centre there, but it is not exclusive to it. To use the Latin analogy again, not every individual or state using the Latin script can be labelled Roman or uses Latin or even inhabits territory formerly held by the Romans.

We also need to be wary of other weaknesses in the scholarly tradition in this regard. There has been a general lack of care in distinguishing different script-forms and texts are sometimes included in collections of “Nabataean” inscriptions which are quite distinctive and could arguably be better included in a different category. This applies to some of the inscriptions from southern Syria (see Starcky 1966, cols 930–31; see also on the inscriptions from Si<sup>c</sup>, Healey 2001a, 66) and to some of the later inscriptions from Sinai. Even some of the inscriptions from what is arguably the Nabataean heartland, such as those from Khirbat al-Tannūr (Starcky 1966, col. 930; Healey 2001a, 60), are arguably different in script from the standard Nabataean style. A new typology and classification is needed. \*

We do, however, have a substantial number of dated or datable inscriptions on stone which were definitely made by Nabataeans of the Nabataean Kingdom, using a standard type of script which we can legitimately call “Nabataean”. This script is one of the several local variants of the Achaemenid Persian Aramaic script: the local variants emerged when local post-Achaemenid rulers and élites were writing Aramaic inscriptions for local consumption, i.e. not as part of the world-wide administration of the Persian Empire. Aramaic’s role as a *lingua franca* was disappearing. There is a Latin analogy again, in that local versions of the Latin script developed as states formed in Europe after the demise of the Roman Empire.

This classical Nabataean script in the time of the Nabataean Kingdom appears to have been used in at least two forms, a monumental form and a cursive form. The monumental script is used on stone for the writing of public inscriptions, whether religious or funerary, and is typically represented by the tomb inscriptions of Madāʾin Šālīḥ (Healey 1993). The cursive script was used in legal, diplomatic and commercial documents for writing on papyrus or parchment (see the Nabataean texts in the Babatha archive, now available in Yadin et al. 2002). In fact this division into two styles may be over-simple, since there are some written materials which are hard to classify, such as graffiti, which, as in virtually all script traditions, tend to be written in a hybrid of formal and informal styles (see Healey 1990–91). Typically the graffito-writer tries to make his inscription look more formal than his ordinary handwriting. There is also some variation in the papyrus documents: some appear to be rather formal, in a style you might use for a legal document, while others are more casual. There are also texts written on plaster which are a little different again (see Savignac and Horsfield 1935, 265–70 and plate x). \*

Worthy of note here is the fact that the more formal inscriptions and documents clearly aspire to a certain calligraphic elegance: i.e. there is an element of



display. The inscription on the Turkmaniyyeh tomb at Petra and the tomb of Kamkam at Madā'in Šālīḥ are notable examples (*CIS* II, no. 350; Healey 1993, \* 238–42, and no. H16). In the case of tomb inscriptions there is clear evidence that the legal details inscribed on a tomb-facade were also lodged in papyrus form in a \* local registry (Healey 1993, no. H36:9). We can guess, though the evidence is indirect, that the stone mason might have been an expert in lettering, but not a literate and legally trained scribe. He might well have copied his text from a manuscript original. This may explain the occasional intrusion of unexpected cursive letter-forms, and it certainly makes sense of the several cases where the stone mason runs out of space and has to squash up the lines or run over onto the tomb-façade (e.g. Healey 1993, no. H9, H16).

The continued use of the script in the post-Nabataean period is important in the search for the origins of the Arabic script known to us from the early Islamic period. This is not the place to discuss this later history in detail (see Gruendler \* 1993). Suffice it to report that there is a consensus view, despite a dissident minority, that the cursive Nabataean script lies at the origin of the later cursive Arabic script known to us from about 640 C.E. Essentially the evidence consists of a number of distinctive Arabic letter-forms which cannot be easily explained in any other way than by assuming a link with Nabataean. Our assumption is that the cursive form of the Nabataean script continued in use in the post-Nabataean period in commercial and perhaps legal contexts. There is very limited evidence in the period between 105/6 C.E. and the seventh century (though see Healey 1990–91), but this cursive script then re-emerged in the early Islamic period as \* the script adopted for most practical purposes for the writing of Arabic.

I would just draw attention to three things. Firstly, one of the earliest texts in something approaching Classical Arabic, the Namārah inscription dated \* 328 C.E., is written in the Nabataean script (recent detailed discussion in Robin *et al.* 1997). Secondly, there are several types of early Arabic script, including the beautiful Kufic script, and not all of them may have been direct descendants from the Nabataean. Other influences may have been at work. And thirdly, it is to be noted that some of the features of the Arabic scripts might be accounted for as being derived from or inspired by the Syriac script (which originated in northern Syria). The incoming Muslim Arabs will certainly have seen and been impressed by fine Syriac calligraphic manuscripts in cities like \* Damascus (Healey 2000).

### The Content of the Inscriptions

The inscriptions and documents for the most part fall into the following categories:

- (a) religious, mostly minor inscriptions, usually referring to dedications of statues and altars, identifying places, *loci*, for particular cults, occasionally referring to religious laws and regulations (e.g. the inscriptions at °Ayn al-Šallālah and the inscription from the Temple of the Winged Lions: see Healey 2001a, 56–59, 162–63, with further references);

- (b) tomb-inscriptions, mostly of a legal character, referring to ownership, authorization for burials, fines on rule-breakers (most of these from Madā'in Šālīḥ: Healey 1993); \*
- (c) informal inscriptions, often of a commemorative character and difficult to date. A common formula for these is "Remembered be so-and-so for good before the god so-and-so" (Healey 1996); \*
- (d) legal and administrative texts and letters on papyrus and leather (Yadin et al. 2002; Starcky 1954).

The inscriptions are very numerous, numbering several thousands if we include all the Sinai texts (Stone 1992–94) and even those from the period of the Nabataean Kingdom probably number more than a thousand. But what do they tell us? Unfortunately the answer is "disappointingly little" except in one or two areas of life! They *do* tell us

- (a) quite a lot about the most immediate and concrete aspects of religion (like names of gods, religious practices), but nothing at all about mythology or higher-level aspects of religion. There is enough, just about, to enable us to reconstruct some general ideas about Nabataean religion (Healey 2001a);
- (b) quite a lot about social structures, though these are often difficult to interpret: so, for example, we have information on inheritance matters, administration, some aspects of the legal tradition and the status of women (al-Fassi 2000);
- (c) quite a lot about the Nabataean tradition of personal names (but again the evidence is hard to interpret) (Negev 1991; Macdonald 1999).

We learn virtually nothing about the trade on which the Nabataeans built their power!

### What of the Future?

More inscriptions are always appearing, but they are rarely significant enough to change our perceptions. Most important, especially for linguistic, script and legal studies is the full publication of the Nabataean papyri from the Naḥal Ḥever texts, the so-called Babatha Archive. These were published in a preliminary way on microfiches as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Tov 1993) and recently in definitive form (Yadin et al. 2002).

What might the archaeologists find in the future? My own wish-list is a little optimistic:

- (a) the Nabataean myth of creation – surely there was one;
- (b) a Nabataean national epic – again there must have been some sort of story accounting for the establishment of the Nabataean state and where its rulers came from;
- (c) examples of Nabataean court poetry.

All the analogies with what we know of pre-Islamic Arabia suggest that these probably existed, at least in oral form. Whether they were written down we do not know, though it seems likely. Such prizes can appear unexpectedly, as we know from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Petra Greek papyri, and such discoveries would put us in a much better position to understand the Nabataeans. \*

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## II

### Were the Nabataeans Arabs?

Although the received wisdom is that the ancient people called the Nabataeans were in fact Arabs, it has been suggested to me more than once, especially during visits to the Syriac-speaking areas of Syria and Iraq, that they were not Arabs but Aramaeans, like the majority of the inhabitants of the cities of Palmyra and Edessa. The modern descendants of the ancient Aramaeans are rightly proud of their heritage, as are the people of Arab stock. The question of the race of the Nabataeans must, however, be addressed in a purely scientific way. Just as pan-Arabism is to be avoided, so it is also unsatisfactory to allow a pan-Aramaeanism to lay claim to all the ancient peoples of the region! Since the issue of the ethnic character of the Nabataeans has not, at least in recent years, been systematically discussed, I propose to re-examine the question in this paper.

#### *1. Preliminaries.*

a) As a matter of general truth it must first be stated that the establishing of the racial origins and affiliations of an ancient people is always and inevitably very difficult. The only really significant evidence is the evidence of what the particular ancient people said about themselves and what other peoples said about them. Customs of a people, including in this category religious beliefs, if they are very distinctive and different from those of the general environment, may give an important clue, as would also a scientific study of the physical characteristics of the particular people. In general, language, like religion, is not a decisive criterion, since there are numerous examples of the people of one racial group adopting the language or religion of another race. Slightly more telling are personal names, since even when a population abandons its traditional language, it normally retains its own distinctive types of personal names.

Let me illustrate this from a modern example totally unrelated to the Middle East. My own family is entirely of Irish origin and I am a Roman Catholic. The majority of Roman Catholics in England are of Irish origin, so that my religion is a clue to my racial background. But it is not an unambiguous clue: there are non-Irish Roman Catholic families, as well as converts. My family name is a distinctively Irish one, from a particular region of Ireland. My son's first name is Kevin: this is a purely Irish name, the name of a sixth/seventh century saint. However, Kevin also happens to be the first name of a famous English footballer and it has become quite common even among people with no connection with Ireland. There are certain physical racial characteristics of the Irish (quite apart from the racist caricaturing of the Irish as stupid and short-tempered). For example, a high proportion of people of Irish descent have red or ginger hair and very fair skin and there are certain

inherited diseases which are more common in the Irish/Celtic populations. With regard to language, however, almost all of the Irish use the English language most of the time. For generations the Irish language has been declining and now few Irish people can speak it fluently. Indeed, English has become so much a national language in Ireland that that country is famous for having produced some of the greatest writers in English in this century.

If we apply this model to an ancient population we will see that there are some difficulties in the way of firm conclusions. Physical characteristics of an ancient people cannot normally be studied scientifically, certainly not in the case of the Nabataeans and ancient Arabs, though it may be noted that there is some work being done on physical characteristics of human remains from Palmyrene tombs <sup>1</sup>. Language is not a sure guide. Names and religion (and other aspects of culture) are better clues and are more easily definable.

b) Before proceeding we have to attempt to define some of the ethnic terms involved in the discussion. What do we mean by the term Nabataeans?

The Nabataeans became an identifiable group settled in southern Jordan from the fourth century B.C.<sup>2</sup>. They called themselves Nabatu (*nbtw*) <sup>3</sup> and outsiders sometimes call them (in Greek) *Nabataioi*. Another tribal name. Shalamu (*šlmw*), is sometimes associated with the term *nbtw* <sup>4</sup>. The great cultural centre of these people was the city of Petra (native name Raqmu), though they spread also to the north into modern Syria, west into modern Israel and south into modern Saudi Arabia. Eventually they founded a kingdom which flourished in the first century A.D. until it was annexed by the Romans in 106 A.D. During this time the Nabataeans produced fine architecture, tombs of a distinctive type <sup>5</sup>, their own administrative system combining tribal and Roman features and many inscriptions in a distinctive Nabataean script, but linguistically quite close to the ancient Aramaic of the Persian or Achaemenid period <sup>6</sup>.

c) What do we mean by the term Aramaeans?

The Aramaeans are well known as a new population group which emerged \* in northern Syria after the fall of the Hittite empire in c.1200 B.C. <sup>7</sup>. These people came to rule the old Hittite-dominated kingdoms of the region. They

1. See *Lettre d'information archéologique orientale* 8 (1986) 53.

2. On the Nabataeans in general see J. Starcky, "Pétra et la Nabatène", in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément* 7 (1966) cols. 886-1017. On the Nabataeans in Arabia see J.F. Healey, *Atlat*, forthcoming.

3. For *nbtw* see the title *mlk nbtw* J. Cantineau, *Le nabatéen* II, 1932, 119.

4. For *nbtw* with *šlmw* see A. Jaussen and R. Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie* I, 1909, Nabataean texts 1, 8, 19, and Cantineau, *op.cit.*, 151.

5. See Jaussen and Savignac, *op.cit.*, 307-404; A.Negev. "The Nabataean Necropolis at Egra", *Révue Biblique* 83 (1976) 203-236.

6. See K. Beyer, *The Aramaic Language. Its Distribution and Subdivisions*, 1986, 26-27. The standard grammar of Nabataean Aramaic is still J. Cantineau, *Le nabatéen* I, II, 1930-1932.

7. On the earlier history of the Aramaeans and their culture see A. Dupont-Sommer, *Les araméens*, 1949; A. Malamat, "The Arameans", in *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (ed. D.J. Wiseman), 1973, 134-155.

took firm root very quickly and they were not totally obliterated even by the westward advance of the Assyrian Empire. Indeed, the Aramaeans had a genius for making themselves and their language useful to the Assyrians, who ended up using it as their diplomatic and commercial language, as a *lingua franca* in which Aramaean scribes were the experts. The later Persians did the same thing.

Aramaean art and religion is much harder to pin down, but there are sufficient distinctive features to enable us to produce an outline <sup>8</sup>. Aramaean religion remains fairly obscure, but there was clearly a great devotion to Baal Shamin and Hadad <sup>9</sup>. Many Aramaean personal names are known and certain features of the names can be identified <sup>10</sup>.

After the break-up of the empire of Alexander the Great the Aramaic still in use throughout the Middle East went into a decline. Each city developed its own form of the Aramaic script and since the area was no longer unified, dialectal variation began to emerge.

\* d) What do we mean by the term Arabs?

The term Arab is hard to define in the context of the pre-Islamic period <sup>11</sup>. It seems to have been used by the Assyrians, Babylonians and biblical authors as a catchall term to refer to the nomadic peoples who were active on the fringes of the desert from the ninth century B.C. onwards <sup>12</sup>. New populations were entering into the settled areas of the Fertile Crescent, taking up residence in trading centres. Their presence is clear at places like Palmyra in the first centuries of the Christian era: distinctively Arab deities and personal names are found. Pre-Islamic Arab religion is attested to in a number of sources <sup>13</sup>, including the Qur'an itself, and, for example, ibn al-Kalbi's *Book of Idols* <sup>14</sup>. Allah, Hubal, Allat, al-'Uzza and other deities were prominent in northern Arabia.

Arab personal names are, of course, well known from the later period, though also from the pre-Islamic era.

The main difficulty of definition with regard to the Arabs is that our information tends to be about individual tribes and it is not easy to speak meaningfully of the Arabs as a clearly distinct entity in the pre-Islamic period. It may be noted that Syriac writers called all Arabs Tayyites, though obviously

8. On Aramaean art and architecture see H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, 1970 (4th ed.), 279-310; E. Akurgal, M. Hirmer, *Die Kunst der Hethiter*, 1961, 100-104.

9. On religion see Dupont-Sommer, *op.cit.* 106ff.; Malamat, *op.cit.*, 148f.

10. Note E. Lipiński, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics* I, 1975, especially 58-76 (though the scope of this is very limited).

11. The difficulties of definition are referred to by A.K. Irvine, "The Arabs and Ethiopians" in *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (ed. D.J. Wiseman), 1973, 289-311.

12. Irvine, *op.cit.*, 290. On the Arabs in Assyrian, Babylonian and biblical sources see I. Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs. Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent. 9th-5th Centuries B.C.*, 1982.

13. See G. Ryckmans, *Les religions arabes préislamiques*, 1951 (2nd ed.), especially 7-24; M. Höfner in H. Gese, M. Höfner, K. Rudolph, *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer*, 1970, 368-387.

14. English translation: *The Book of Idols*, trans. N.A. Faris, 1952.



this was really the name of only one group. However, the general features of the different Arab groups are fairly clear and consistent, so that we are justified in speaking of north Arabian tribes with a common basic culture and a common linguistic tradition, making them quite distinct from the peoples of south Arabia on the one hand and the western Semitic peoples on the other (Aramaeans, Hebrews, etc.). The lack of political coherence of the Arabs prior to Islam does not alter the fact that the Arabs or northern Arabians did actually form a distinguishable entity.

## 2. *The evidence.*

These preliminaries clear the ground for our investigation.

The first part of my argument can be conveniently summarised by the use of a map (see figure). The shaded areas show very approximately the regions where Aramaic was used during the time when it flourished from c.900 B.C. to the Arab conquest and where the Aramaeans are known with fair certainty to have been settled in this period: the evidence is provided by external references to the Aramaeans and distinctive Aramaean names and religion. It will be seen that there is a discrepancy between the two features. In large areas where Aramaic was used it is clear that the native populations were not Aramaean. The Persians and Parthians are the clearest example and Indian rulers also used Aramaic. The Jews used Aramaic as they gradually abandoned the use of Hebrew. In fact Aramaic held the position of a *lingua franca*: like English in the modern world it was quite independent of race.

On the map I have left a question mark in the Nabataean area: were the Nabataeans Aramaean or were they yet another non-Aramaean group merely using the Aramaic language? If the latter, to which group did they really belong? The evidence falls under five headings:

a) What do the Nabataeans say of themselves and what do others say of them?

Their own account is not conclusive; they call themselves members of the Nabatu and Shalamu tribes. In Assyrian and Babylonian sources there are references to Arabs in the Nabataean area <sup>15</sup>, but that is not conclusive. Ancient Greek sources, however, frequently describe the Nabataeans as Arabs <sup>16</sup>.

b) Nabataean religion has some unexpected characteristics showing links with the pre-Islamic religions of Arabia <sup>17</sup>. For example, the god Hubal, \* worshipped by the Nabataeans, is mentioned in ibn al-Kalbi as a Meccan

15. See Irvine, *op.cit.*, 289ff. We may note in passing the debate on whether the Nabataeans/*nbtw* are to be identified with the biblical Nebayot, the Assyrian *na-ba-a-ti* and *nbyt* in inscriptional material from Taymā'. In the view of most scholars the identification is to be rejected: see most recently M. Abu Taleb, *Dirasat* (University of Jordan) 11 (1984) 3-11; E.A. Knauf, *Ismael. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, 1985, 92-93.

16. On this see especially J. Cantineau, "Nabatéen et Arabe", *Annales de l'institut d'études orientales* 1 (1934-1935) 79-81.

17. See J. Starcky, *op.cit.*, cols. 985-1016.



deity; Allat too was worshipped, while the main Nabataean god is Dushara, “the lord of Shara”. There is no trace, on the other hand, of the traditional

\* Aramaean gods like Hadad and Baal Shamin.

c) With regard to other aspects of society it may be noted that the Nabataeans, according to Greek sources (for example Diodorus Siculus), were of nomadic/tribal background. They were shepherds and lived happily in the desert. The Nabataean inscriptions reveal aspects of family and legal institutions suggesting a traditional tribal structure. The Aramaeans themselves had been nomadic originally but they were settled in great urban centres like Damascus at an early stage. By the time the Nabataeans settled in southern Jordan, the Aramaeans had long been city-dwellers and farmers.

\* d) The Nabataean personal names, when analysed, are mostly of an Arab type<sup>18</sup>, though there are a small proportion which are Greek and Aramaean. The most distinctive type of name with final *-w(-u or -o)* is somewhat enigmatic. This is neither an Arab nor an Aramaean feature.

e) The Aramaic used by the Nabataeans is not far removed from Imperial Aramaic, but it is influenced by a non-Aramaic north Arabic dialect akin to classical Arabic. This is especially clear in the intrusion of vocabulary which seems to be of Arabic origin and is not normal from an Aramaic point of view<sup>19</sup>.

From all these considerations it looks likely that the Nabataeans were not Aramaeans and the evidence suggests that they might in fact have been Arabs of one sort or another.

### 3. *Historical context.*

Is it historically plausible that the Nabataeans were Arabs? How could we account for this fact historically?

There is abundant evidence of the Arabs in the Nabataean area from the eighth/seventh centuries B.C. onwards<sup>20</sup>. The Arab presence in the region is clear from cuneiform inscriptions, from the Bible, from Greek sources and from other evidence. There were, however, other people in the area too, including the biblical Edomites. The fact that the Arabs did not appear for the first time with Islam is clear from many inscriptions. Some of these pre-

\* Islamic Arabs used languages like Thamudic, Lihyanite and Safaitic, but others used Aramaic, as is shown by such texts as the Aramaic inscription of the Tell el-Muskhuta bowl of c. 400 B.C., found in lower Egypt, which bears

18. See J. Cantineau, *op.cit.* 84-91; *Le nabatéen* II, 1932, 164-171.

19. See J. Cantineau, “Nabatéen et Arabe” (note 16); J.F. Healey, “Some Aspects of Nabataean Aramaic”, paper delivered at the 32nd International Congress for Asian and North African Studies, Hamburg, 1986 (publication planned); M. O’Connor, “The Arabic Loanwords in Nabataean Aramaic”, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 45 (1986) 213-229 (cautious in the interpretation of loans).

20. See Irvine, *op.cit.*, 289ff.; I. Eph’al, *op.cit.*, 81ff.