CHAPTER TWO

FOR THE LIFE OF . . . KINGS

THE NABATAEAN PERCEPTION AND EMPLOYMENT OF THE FORMULA

Preliminary remarks

The rise and fall of the Nabataean Empire is one of the most intriguing topics in ancient Near Eastern history today. Throughout the present century, excavations at sites designated as 'Nabataean' have yielded a large mass of data which, in turn, has resulted in an overwhelming corpus of publications. However, much about the history and culture of the Nabataeans still remains obscure. The epigraphical record, for instance, amounts to nearly 4000 inscriptions, but the majority of them are short graffiti-texts of one or more names together with a genealogy comprising one or, at most, two generations and accompanied by a benediction. This limited information does not substantially contribute to our knowledge and conception of Nabataean achievements.

In an attempt to solve the many problems posed and in order to overcome as much as possible the lacunae in our information, commentators have frequently taken recourse to classical authors such as Diodorus Siculus (first century BC), Strabo (c.64 BC–c.25 AD), Josephus Flavius (c.37–c.100 AD) and the Biblical books of Maccabees. However, the usage of these sources for reconstructing Nabataean history and culture poses its own problems.1 Excepting the books of Maccabees, the authors, as they themselves indicate, only provide second-hand information on the Nabataeans. Moreover, it is questionable to what extent Diodorus' and Strabo's accounts are representative of Nabataean society as a whole.2 Obviously, Josephus as well as the

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1 Cf. Appendix A for a discussion on Diodorus Siculus and Strabo.
2 A particular example might be Strabo's account of the expedition of Aelius Gallus, which must have taken place in about 25 BC on the initiative of Augustus himself. It turned out to be a total fiasco for the Romans. According to Strabo, Syllaios, the Nabataean Administrator, was to blame since he seized every opportunity to sabotage the Romans. The negative picture of Syllaios may well have influenced Strabo's account of the Nabataean...
books of Maccabees write on them only if it is relevant to the history of Israel. As a result, the picture that can be drawn of Nabataean history and culture is far from complete, whereas many proposed traits are open to serious discussion.\textsuperscript{3}

The consensus is that as a corporate body the Nabataeans make their first substantial contribution to history in about 312 BC. As related by Diodorus, they succeed in resisting an expedition equipped by Antigonus Monophthalmos (382–301 BC), the ruler of Asia Minor and Syria, which being part of his strategy against Ptolemy (367–283 BC), the ruler of Egypt, was bound to subdue them. Together with Seleucus I Nicator (356–281 BC), each of these former generals of Alexander the Great (356–323 BC), had been allotted a part of the Eastern territory of the immense Empire after Alexander’s death. They engaged in constant warfare with each other until the battle of Ipsus (301 BC) brought a provisional settlement of their conflicts. It may be inferred from Diodorus that at this point in history the Nabataeans dwelt in the region south of the Dead Sea, i.e. the area that prior to them was inhabited by the Edomites (Diodorus XIX, 94). Soon this was to become the heartland of the Nabataean Empire, harbouring one of its capital centers: Petra.

In the course of time the Nabataeans managed to monopolize the trade of aromatics, myrrh and frankincense, grown in the southern parts of the Arabian peninsula, as well as that of spices and other commodities imported from the Far East that came by ship and were discharged at Gerrha on the Persian Gulf. Like the products from the south of the peninsula, they were transported by camel through the Arabian desert to emporia such as Hegra. Thence, they found their way to the consumers around the Mediterranean. This transit-trade proved itself to be an abundant source of income providing an ever increasing wealth for the Nabataeans. Undoubtedly, it considerably contributed to their rise as a political entity during the second and first centuries BC. In describing the events of these times Josephus, both in his \textit{Antiquitates Judaeorum} as well as in his \textit{De bello Judaica}, frequently alludes to the ‘king of the Nabataeans’. Occasionally,