CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND: NABATAEAN HISTORY AND TRADE

Nabataean History

We cannot trace the earliest history of the Nabataeans as a whole or establish how the élite which ruled the state gained its control. No doubt this was effected through a combination of conquest and alliance (Knauf 1986). We can, for the present purpose, outline the facts which are established by clear literary and epigraphic evidence. There are several modern surveys of Nabataean history (Starcky 1966, cols. 900-24; Hammond 1973, 9-39; Negev 1977a; Bowersock 1983, 12-89; Millar 1993, 400-08; Wenning 1993a) and we limit ourselves here to a very brief account. More detailed references to secondary literature will be found in Healey 1993 (13-31).

The Nabataeans are called in Nabataean inscriptions nbẖw/nabaṭu and their origin is unknown (see recently Retsö 1999). Their earliest settlements were in southern Jordan and Palestine, though they may ultimately have come from the East, possibly from the marginal areas to the north of modern Saudi Arabia (see discussion of Graf 1990). An argument can also be made for the view that they are simply a later transformation of the earlier people of southern Jordan, the Edomites (Bartlett 1979; 1990). They are probably not to be associated with the Nebayot/na-ba-a-a-ti/nbyt of biblical/Mesopotamian/Taymanite sources (Abu Taleb 1984). Both the Nabataean inscriptions and later Greek sources associate them with another tribe, the šlmw/šalamu (Hegra inscriptions H 1:4; 8:9; 19:3; Stephanus of Byzantium, Ethnika, 550:12-13).

Greek writers, including Josephus, frequently call them Arabs, but there are considerable difficulties in the way this term is used in sources of the Roman period for the Middle East. In some contexts it has a very wide significance, referring to peoples in the fringe areas of the Fertile Crescent from Nabataea to Hatra. In others the term is very specific, referring to particular regions within established states: thus the kings of Edessa administered the desert region to their southeast with the help of a “governor of ‘Arab”. None of the ancient sources use the term Arab in the later significance it came to have in
the Islamic period (see Drijvers and Healey 1999, 105-06; Dijkstra 1990).

There is also clear evidence (especially in the south of the Nabataean realm) of “Arabic” influence in the Aramaic used by the Nabataeans in their inscriptions (Cantineau 1930-32, II 177-80; 1934-35; O’Connor 1986; Healey 1995a) and an Arabian element in their tradition of personal names (Negev 1991a, passim, but see also Macdonald 1999; 2000, 47: personal names with clear “Arabic” elements are mostly concentrated in Sinai). As we will see later, the Arabian side of Nabataean religion is also clear. It is therefore arguable that they were of Arabian origin and had settled at some uncertain date to form a state (Healey 1989a, but note Millar 1993, 400 n.1). They used Aramaic for inscriptions because it had become, after the decline of cuneiform, the traditional language of culture in the Semitic world. A semi-nomadic social background is reflected in the Greek sources, which say that the Nabataeans did not build houses originally or drink wine and that they reared sheep and camels.

The most informative of the Greek writers concerned with the early Nabataean period is Diodorus Siculus (c. 80-20 B.C.) whose main source of information was the historian Hieronymus of Cardia who was, it appears, present in the Greek entourage during the events of 312 B.C. which first brought the Greeks into close contact with the Nabataeans (XIX, 100.1). There are various statements by Diodorus which reflect the lifestyle of the Nabataeans:

They lead a life of brigandage, and overrunning a large part of the neighbouring territory they pillage it, being difficult to overcome in war. For in the waterless region, as it is called, they have dug wells at convenient intervals....and so they retreat in a body into this region out of danger (II, 48.1-2: trans. Oldfather 1935).

There is also in the land of the Nabataeans a rock [πέτρα], which is exceedingly strong since it has but one approach, and using this ascent they mount it a few at a time and thus store their possessions in safety. And a large lake [the Dead Sea] is also there which produces asphalt in abundance, and from it they derive not a little revenue (II, 48.6).

They live in the open air, claiming as native land a wilderness that has neither rivers nor abundant springs from which it is possible for a hostile army to obtain water. It is their custom neither to plant grain, set out any fruit-bearing tree, use wine, nor construct any house; and if anyone is found acting contrary to this, death is his penalty. They follow this custom because they believe that those who possess these things are, in order to retain the use of them, easily compelled by the