CHAPTER FIVE

OTHER DEITIES WORSHIPPED BY THE NABATAEANS

Kūtbā and al-Kūtbā

The elaboration of the Nabataean evidence on the deity al-Kūtbā, whose gender has been disputed, we owe to J. Strugnell (1959; cf. Starcky 1966, cols 993-96). The name ʾlktbā had not before been clearly recognized until Strugnell made the comparison with the Liyanite divine names ḥnktyb and ḥnʾktb (JS II, 366-67: Lih no. 37:3; 402-03: no. 62:5, etc.; in 394-95: Lih no. 55: ʾʃld ḥktby) and was able to point to other occurrences (below). We follow his order of presentation, beginning with a corrected reading of text no. 17 from ḏʿAyn esh-Shallāleh (originally Savignac 1934, 574-75), inscribed below two betyls (Plate XV upper):

ʾlktbā dy bgp // ʾḥzā

Al-Kūtbā who is in Gaia // al-ʿUzzā

This deity would, therefore, have had a temple at Gaia/el-Ji just outside Petra, as well as being venerated at Iram.

The interpretation as “Al-Kūtbā who is (called) in Gaia al-ʿUzzā” (Colombo 1995) would settle the issue of the gender of the deity, but it is does not take account of the fact that there are two betyls (two deities) or the repeated use of the formula “DN who is in such and such a place” not followed by another divine name. Nor would it be easy to see why Gaia had been picked on, given the general popularity of al-ʿUzzā (Colombo 1995, 186).

While the first assumption with regard to the two betyls might be that one represented a male deity and the other a female (al-ʿUzzā), it is to be noted that the two betyls could both be female. Both have a form of decoration which is similar in every detail and Patrich (1990b, 187) states that the eye-idols specifically represent al-ʿUzzā. If this is true, the two betyls must represent al-ʾUzzā and another goddess of the al-ʾUzzā type. Al-Kūtbā would then have to be female. As we will argue below, it is best to interpret both ʾḥzā and ʾlktbā as female, but first we must examine the other evidence of al-Kūtbā.
The probable personal name *tymlktb* appears in JS I Nab 142 (corrected reading). We may immediately supplement this with the occurrence of the same name, *tym* *lkth*, several times at Petra, on a path from the Madras High Place (Milik and Starcky 1975, 116-19; note also Safaitic: Macdonald 1980, 188-89: no. 43). The name *bdplktb* appears in a Nabataean inscription from Taymā' (Beyer and Livingstone 1987, 292).

The same deity appears in the (first) inscription from Tell esh-Shuqāfīyyeh in Egypt dated to the middle of the first century B.C. Note that Strugnell restored the word *lht* at the end of line 2:

\[(dnh by)* d(y bnh PN)\]
\[(br ..)hw *lkdb* *lht*\]
\[(l) hyy mr'n sgg *plp*\]
\[(wh)yy npśh wdy yhwch šn(h)\]
\[(dk)yr qdmyh wib'wytw bšlm ...\]

This is the temple which PN son of PN built for al-Kutbā the goddess for the life of our lord SYW the afkal and the life of himself. And may his name be remembered before her and in WYW in peace ...

Strugnell’s assumption that the deity was female was supported by the form of *qdmyh* in line 5 (a view still adhered to, with justification, by Niehr 1998, 222). Starcky (1955, 155), in arguing for a masculine interpretation of the divine name, notes the existence of such feminine-looking masculine suffix forms in Nabataean (Cantineau 1930, I, 54-55), though they are exceptional and mostly very late in date, while arguments from other branches of Aramaic such as Christian Palestinian Aramaic (Zayadine 1990b, 44) and Syriac (Littmann and Meredith 1954, 229) are unconvincing, since the normal Nabataean for “before him” would certainly be *qdmwyh*. More fundamental to the issue of gender, however, is the universal assumption (post Strugnell) that the name is based on a feminine Arabic elative as in classical Arabic like the name al-ʿUzzā (الكبرى masc.: الاكبر feminine). As we have noted, in support of the femininity of al-Kutbā is the depiction of her as a starry-eyed eye-idol at ʿAyn esh-Shallāleh. This iconography is associated with al-ʿUzzā (and to a lesser extent Atargatis) (Patrich 1990a, 82-86).

There was in addition an altar dedicated *lkdb*, “to al-Kutbā”, and