Cult-niches and Images of Gods

Cult-niches and steles are a common feature of Nabataean sites (Starcky 1966, cols. 1008-10; Patrich 1990a, 50-113). They are very numerous at Petra and in the Jabal Ithlib area of Hegra. Many niches contain plain stone pillars or betyls carved out of the rock and often probably representing Dushara, sometimes with one, two or even three additional pillars representing the deities associated with him. It is clear from the inscription accompanying two betyllic figures of this kind at Ramm that al-\(^{c}\)Uzzā and al-Kutbā are being represented in that case (Patrich 1990a, 101-02, fig. 7; Plate XV upper). While it is reasonable to assume that each betyl represents a different deity, some coin depictions of three steles are accompanied by the name of Dushara only. Thus identifying the gods represented is often very difficult: Krone (1992, 139) thinks the three pillars in some niches could represent Allāt, Manāt and al-\(^{c}\)Uzzā and the two in other niches Allāt and Dushara or Allāt and al-\(^{c}\)Uzzā, while Niehr (1998, 221) regards the larger betyl of pairs as Allāt and the smaller as Dushara. In accordance with our suggested identification of Allāt and al-\(^{c}\)Uzzā as a single deity, we are not inclined to accept that both were depicted side by side. The essential concept of the niche is, however, clear: it is a miniature temple or adyton of a temple (Zayadine 1989, 113).

The use of the betyl, usually without any facial markings, is typical of the Nabataeans. It reflects a reluctance, shared, notably with the Jews and the later Muslim Arabs, to make images of a god in human form (see Patrich 1990a, passim, and for comparisons with Judaism and Islam 185-91). The god himself, being spiritual, could not be portrayed. There is even some slight evidence of Nabataean iconoclasm (Patrich 1990a, 153-7). Different types of betyl may be distinguished: those carved in relief and those which are free-standing and could be carried around in processions (Niehr 1998, 226-27). A surviving relief may depict an idol being transported (Dalman 1908, 109-10; see...
Wenning forthcoming). The base or throne (mwtb) on which the stele sat was worshipped as a distinct object of veneration (Patrich 1990a, 58-9, 91-2).

A standard concession to depicting the gods in human form is found in the particular type of betyl known as an “eye-idol”. This has schematic squares to indicate eyes and, more rarely, a vertical line to indicate the nose. The eyes are sometimes stellar in character and association with inscriptions suggests that the goddesses Atargatis and al-Uzza, especially the latter, were depicted specifically in this way (Patrich 1990a, 82-86). This, it may be recalled, is one of the reasons to support the thesis that al-Kutbā is female — the deity is depicted with star-like eyes in the double betyl at ʿAyn esh-Shallāleh. However, a possible Dushara betyl with eyes is to be published by K. Schmitt-Korte (Merklein and Wenning 1998b, 84). A detailed typology of steles or betyls is drawn up by Patrich (1990a, 75-91; Merklein and Wenning 1998).

There are pre-Nabataean examples of this type of betyl from Taymā (al-Theeb 1993, 276-79; Beyer and Livingstone 1987, 294; Anonymous 1975, plate 67) and it is evident that the Nabataean favouring of betyls is connected with the north Arabian roots of some aspects of Nabataean culture (Hübner and Weber 1997, 116). The Arabic term for these steles is nuṣub or nṣb (plural anṣāb), which are, of course, connected etymologically with the Hebrew massēbah. In Nabataean nsgb, nṣb, and mṣb are all attested. The first is found in an inscription from el-Khubthah beside a niche: ʿllh nṣyby ṭmişwrm bḥt, “these are the betyls of al-Uzza and the Lord of the Temple” (RES § 1088). The second appears in an inscription beside a niche at ʿAyn esh-Shallāleh: nṣbt ṭlt ṭlḥt, “betyl of the goddess Allāt” (Milik 1958, 247). mṣb is found in an inscription from Ḥatār ed-Deir at Petra, where the reference is to the betyl of the deified city of Bosra or its Tyche (Milik 1958, 246-49: no. 7). The basic meaning of these words appears to be “erected stone monument” and they most often refer to steles or betyls representing deities. Unfortunately none of the Nabataean inscriptions relate the term specifically to any of the known temples, so we cannot be sure whether one of these words was used for the main object of worship in a temple.

Where statues existed, the term slm would have been used (see Arabic šanam). Thus it is used of the statue of the divine ʿObodat in CIS II, 354, and the feminine form, slmt, is used of the Tyche of St in the bilingual mentioning her (RES § 1092). Nabataean thus seems to have