NABATAEAN ROYAL PROPAGANDA: 
A RESPONSE TO HEROD AND AUGUSTUS?*

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Abstract

Major developments and building activities took place within the Nabataean kingdom, mainly in the city of Petra during the reign of Herod and the period that immediately followed. Some of these elements, such as the layout of funerary complexes, details of interior decoration and specific elements of luxury architecture, find close parallels within Herodian buildings. The question, therefore, is, whether these similarities are related to aspects of pure fashion or whether there is a kind of rivalry between the Nabataeans and Herod. When analysing these elements, it becomes evident that some interpretations of what can be considered Nabataean royal propaganda do depend on the exact status of the Nabataean kingdom in relation to Rome, i.e. the question whether at that time it was a client state or not.

Several relief blocks with figural decoration suggest that events related to Octavian’s victory at Actium and the conquest of Egypt in 31/30 BC were prominently illustrated in the city centre of Petra. Although we do not know the exact function of the buildings to which they were attached, it becomes evident that the Nabataeans did use a purely Hellenistic-Roman iconography by that time, implying, of course, strong figural elements, and, therefore, different from contemporary Herodian architectural decoration. Despite such differences, the layout of luxurious buildings, such as theatres, temples and representative pool- and garden-complexes from Petra do show straight parallels with respective Herodian constructions. Following this argumentation, we can even propose to identify a royal residence on top of Umm al-Biyara as being a kind of Nabataean answer to Herodian hilltop palaces like Masada or Machaerus (Machairous).

Despite evident parallels, details related to construction techniques and in general terms the attitude of the Nabataeans towards Rome and the wider Mediterranean indicate that the status of the Nabataean kingdom cannot be considered exactly the same as in the case of Herod’s Judaea. While workshops responsible for the interior decoration of building complexes seemingly worked within Herodian palaces as well as in Petra, the Nabataeans did not employ Italian workshops and building materials as did Herod and other client kings. Also, there are no indications of official honours bestowed upon Roman emperors by the Nabataeans prior to the annexation of the kingdom in AD 106.

We therefore witness the interesting situation of a culture slightly behind the line of direct influence and control from the great Mediterranean powers, trying to juggle with propagandistic elements in order to preserve their independence.

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The period during which Herod the Great reigned over Judaea as well as the years immediately afterwards correspond to major developments and building activities within the Nabataean kingdom, not exclusively but perhaps predominantly in the city of Petra, the capital of the Nabataean kingdom.1 During the reigns of Obodas III (30–9 BC) and Aretas IV (9 BC–AD 40), the city of Petra saw an important monumentalisation, both in terms of private and public buildings. Whilst some of these buildings as well as their decoration (stucco, painting, sculpture) probably depended on more general developments and influences of styles from the major Hellenistic and Roman centres, other elements seem to be connected to a kind of rivalry between the Nabataean realm and Herod. The present contribution considers some of these elements, without claiming to be a complete study of the phenomenon. At the same time, the extent to which these elements reflect influences by or reactions to events related to Roman and more specifically Augustan policy are examined.

Within the framework of the above issues, the best opportunity seems to be offered by the remains of a weapon frieze, discovered in the city centre of Petra in the 1960s.2 Several blocks depicting panoply as well as three blocks belonging to a figural scene (Fig. 1) surely come from the same monument.3 Since they were found as fill in a tower-like structure southwest of the entrance to the temenos of Petra’s main temple, the Qasr el-Bint (for location see no. 1 in Fig. 12), we can assume that they once adorned a public building in the city centre. Further precision as regards the exact location and function of that presumed building is not possible for the time being.4 However, the blocks themselves indicate a further element: the three fragments with figural decoration, representing more precisely a Nereid riding a triton and accompanied by a small Eros, form an angle, maybe even the

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1 For a general overview, see Schmid 2001a.
2 For an account of the discovery and a first publication, see Wright 1967–68, 20–29.
4 A fragment of a block showing a small frieze (about 10.5 cm in height) with Nereids riding on sea monsters, but without weapons, was reported as being found in the area of the baths: Bachmann, Watzinger and Wiegand 1921, 45, 47–48 and Fig. 39; such more peaceful variants of marine thiasoi could belong to the decoration of the baths (ibid. 47–48), as well as to the frieze illustrated here as Fig. 3.