

25 Petra

Pompey
Herod the Great

Names (also known as)

English: Petra
Arabic: البتراء, Al-Batrā';
Ancient Greek: Πέτρα, Petra
Nabataean: Reqem

Etymology

Petra (Gk) = rock, stone
Reqem (Heb) = having many colours

Location/Description

Petra is a city literally carved out of the mountains by the Nabataeans. It is located 240km south of the capital Amman and 120 km north of the Red Sea town of Aqapa. It is alongside the Kings Highway, which is the important inland North-South trade route. It is also near the East-West caravan routes that crossed the Arabian Peninsula from the ports of both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

This region was highly strategic, though relatively poor in terms of natural resources. Its importance came from its location along the caravan routes. The control of these caravan routes made the previously nomadic Nabataeans quite wealthy and powerful allowing larger, more permanent settlements to be built and a more complex government to be established.

Scriptural references

Old Testament

Num 31:8; Jos 13:21 – Rekem (reqem – inter.) a prince of the Midianites
Isaiah 34 – Bozrah
Jeremiah 49 – dwellers in the cleft of the rock
Ezek 35 – Mount Seir

New Testament

None

Famous characters

Ishmael
Reqem
Antigonus

Brief history

The Nabataeans were Ishmaelite Arabs. Josephus (and Jerome) thought them to be descended from Nebaioth because of the phonetic similarity. This is not correct.

They rose from humble nomadic origins in the deserts of northern Arabia during the Persian period (539-332 B.C.).

In 586 BC, when the Babylonians carried the Jews away captive, this provided an opportunity for the Edomites to move into the rich, abandoned lands of Judah. About this time, we begin to find records of Nabataeans living in Edomite territory. It is unclear if they emigrated there when the Edomites left or if they were present among them (like gypsies).

By the late fourth century BC, they had established themselves in the area around Petra (or Reqem, as it was known to them). They still maintained a nomadic lifestyle, moving seasonally across the desert with their tents and herds in search of water and fresh pasture. Around this time the Nabataeans became involved in the lucrative trade in South Arabian frankincense and myrrh.

At first, the Nabataeans were little more than middlemen in the trade, simply responsible for ferrying goods on camelback from Petra to the ports of Gaza and Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. But as their economic and political fortunes improved in the ensuing centuries, the Nabataeans gained political control over all of the lands bordering the Arabian frontier, a vast territory stretching from Damascus in the north to Hegra in the south.

As the Nabataeans grew in power and wealth, they attracted the attention of the northern power, the Seleucids. Against whom they were allied with the Judaeen Hasmoneans. King Antigonus attacked Petra in 312 BC. His army met with little resistance. The quantity of booty from the sack was so great that it slowed their return north. The Nabataeans were able to ambush and annihilate them in the desert.

The Nabataean empire grew quietly, expanding northward into Syria around 150 BC and by the first century BC, Petra had become a full-fledged capital city. Its rulers growing rich from an international spice trade that now extended from India to Rome.

With such wealth and position, the Nabataean kings had to present both themselves and their city as sophisticated equals in the international community. This meant adopting the culture, customs, dress and architecture of “western” Hellenistic civilization. Petra, much like Jerusalem under the Herods, was to be built as a Greco-Roman city ruled by western-looking kings.

In 65 BC, the Romans arrived in Damascus and ordered the Nabataeans to withdraw. Two years later, Pompey dispatched a force to cripple Petra.

The Nabataeans made a mistake by siding with the Parthians in their war with the Rome.

After the Parthians’ defeat, Petra had to pay tribute to Rome. When they fell behind in paying this tribute, they were invaded twice by the Roman vassal King Herod the Great. The second attack, in 31 BC, saw him take control of a large swath of Nabataean territory, including the lucrative northern trading routes into Syria.

King Aretas IV, who ruled from 9 BC to 40 AD, built a chain of settlements along the caravan routes to develop the prosperous incense trade. The Nabataeans were allied with the Romans in the Jewish uprising of AD 70.

The last Nabataean monarch, Rabbel II, struck a deal with the Romans to not attack during his lifetime. On his death in AD 106, the Romans claimed the Nabataean Kingdom and renamed it Arabia Petrea.

The city of Petra was redesigned according to traditional Roman architectural designs, and a period of relative prosperity ensued under the Pax Romana.

The Nabataeans profited for a while from their incorporation into the trade routes of the Roman Near East, and Petra may

have grown to house 20,000-30,000 people during its heyday.

The shift of trade routes to Palmyra in Syria and the expansion of seaborne trade around the Arabian Peninsula were fatal and sometime during the fourth century AD, after a devastating earthquake in 363 AD, the Nabataeans left their capital at Petra. The withdrawal was an unhurried and organised process, as very few silver coins or valuable possessions have been unearthed at Petra.

Sources:

<http://www.visitpetra.jo/Petra/TheNabataeans.aspx#all>

<http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/solving-the-enigma-of-petra-and-the-nabataeans/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabataeans>

http://scholarspace.jccc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=honors_journal

Religion

The religion of the Nabataeans appears to have become more ‘sophisticated’ over time.

Initially, they are thought to have represented their god/gods in the form of stelae – featureless, unadorned square blocks or stacks of blocks (like an obelisk) carved out or carved into the rock face.

Later, they appear to have adopted a more anthropomorphic pantheon:

Al Qaum - the warrior god who guards the caravans

Al Kutbay - the god of learning, commerce, writing, and divination

Al-Lat - the goddess of spring and fertility

Al-Uzza - the powerful

Manawat - the god of destiny or fate.

According to Herodotus, the Nabataeans had a Sun (Orotalt/Dionysius) and Moon (Alilat/Aphrodite) worship. These may be just be a Hellenised imposition of their deities.

(Compiler – John Tierney)

