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DECODING NABATAEAN BETYLS

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The Nabataeans used aniconic representations to portray their deities. These aniconic images are called betyls in modern research. Not before the last third of the 1st century B.C. the Nabataeans adopted anthropomorphic figures to refer to deities in the decoration of religious monuments but never gave up betyls. Unfortunately, there is the problem to find out who's who among the Nabataean betyls. Assuming that the betyls bear information the images need to be decoded. I would like to comment on three different approaches.

Nabataean betyls are small rectangular stelae with or without a trapezoidal small base, measuring from a few centimetres to about 1.20 m (Wenning 2001). Except for the group of eye betyls, they are plain slabs without any decoration. Eye betyls are characterized by square 'eyes' and a 'nose' and sometimes a diadem or a taenia at the upper end (Merklein and Wenning 1998; Wenning 2001: 83-84). 95% of the betyls are found in rock-cut votive niches. Votive niches with betyls are a peculiarity of Petra, Hegra/Meda'in Salih in Saudi Arabia and the spring sanctuary at Wadi Ramm. At Petra there are about a thousand rock-cut votive niches. At other Nabataean sites betyls are less frequent to non-existent. This phenomenon is not yet explicable, though regional features are typical in Nabataean culture.

THE EPIGRAPHICAL APPROACH

All previous research started with the quotation of the *Souda*, a lexicon from the Byzantine period, which describes the cultic image of the Nabataeans under the entry Θεός Ἄρης, a corruption of Δούς Ἄρης, Dousares, the Greek form of Dushara, the main Nabataean deity:

Theus-Ares: This is the god Ares in Petra in Arabia. The god Ares is worshipped among them, for they honour him especially. The image is a black stone, square, unshaped, four feet high, two wide. It is placed on a gold-plated base. (Healey 2001: 96).

Considering the identification of the *Souda* with Dousares/Dushara, Dushara the local deity of Petra, and his general importance scholars like to identify betyls in principle with Dushara. Probably the greater part of the betyls at Petra will represent him. Nevertheless, each particular case needs to be studied before a betyl can be identified with a particular deity. To restrict the betyls to Dushara would exclude all other deities of the Nabataeans. That is hardly acceptable. The few votive niches which have got an inscription as well contradict such a one-sided interpretation as a number of other deities are named. These niches and inscriptions are the main source for the identification of betyls. They have been often discussed but need to be listed here for illustration.

1-2) Two most important inscriptions are from the spring sanctuary at Wadi Ramm. Inscriptions no. 12 and no. 20 mention Al-'Uzza, just as Allat one of the two great goddesses of the Nabataeans. The votive niche of inscription no. 12 belongs to an eye betyl with star like 'eyes' (Savignac 1934: 586-87, figs. 9-10). Inscription no. 20 identifies the two betyls of the niche as 'Al-Uzza and the 'Lord of the House' (Savignac 1934: 587-88, fig. 11). Probably the

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‘Lord of the House’ refers to Dushara as the tutelary deity of the Nabataean dynasty (Healey 2001: 92; Wenning 2001: 87). The betyl on the right hand side is an eye betyl with square ‘eyes’ while the one on the left is a plain betyl. Referring to inscription no. 12 the eye betyl was also identified here with Al-‘Uzza. This interpretation became the basis in scholarly discussion to identify eye betyls in principle with Al-‘Uzza, although there are some arguments against this conclusion, which are given below.

3) An inscription from the stairs to Jebel el-Khubtha at Petra mentions Al-‘Uzza and the ‘Lord of the House’, unfortunately, this niche is empty (Dalman 1912: 46, fig. 42). There is another inscription at Hegra referring to the ‘Lord of the House’ but not accompanied by a niche (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 216-17 no. 58).

4) There is another almost identical eye betyl directly to the right of the eye betyl with the Al-‘Uzza inscription no. 12, which is identified as Al-Kutba by inscription no. 11 (Strugnell 1959: 29-31), although the framing is different. Al-Kutba is placed in an arched niche. It is debated, if Al-Kutba was a male or female deity (Healey 2001: 120-124). At least, the eye betyl is not restricted to Al-‘Uzza and not to female deities, if Al-Kutba is understood as a male deity of the Nabataeans in southern Jordan.

5) A votive inscription at the mouth of the Wadi es-Siyagh refers to Al-‘Uzza. A niche with a very small rectangular betyl is integrated into the inscription (Milik and Starcky 1975: 124, pl. 46,1-2). This evidence indicates that Al-‘Uzza can be pictured not only in the eye betyl but also in a plain narrow betyl.

6) Leaving Petra by the Wadi es-Siyagh in the west one passes a niche with an eye betyl and two inscriptions below (Wenning 2001: 83, fig. 3) which identify the betyl as ‘Atargatis, the one from Mangebita’, that is Hierapolis in northern Syria as Atargatis is a Syrian deity. Here, the eye betyl is chosen to portray a foreign deity.

7) Inscriptions no. 2 and no.16 at Wadi Ramm identify ‘Allat, the goddess, who is in Bosra’, respectively ‘the betyl of Allat, the goddess’. They are incised to the side of an unusual relief (Savignac 1934, 583-85, pl. 39; Wenning 2001: 81).

8) A large plain betyl next to a small one is identified by an inscription as ‘the betyl of Bosra’ at Qattar ed-Deir, a gorge on the way to the Deir plateau with a couple of votive niches (Wenning 2001: 81-82, fig. 2). It is debated if it portrays the personification of the city of Bosra in the Hauran, which would be unusual among Nabataean monuments, or ‘the one (deity) from Bosra’ and was then related either to ‘Allat or to Al-‘Uzza. Lately, a new reading was assumed (Hackl, Jenni, and Schneider 2003: 258-59), after which the votive refers to Dushara (A‘ra).

9) A betyl or an altar (‘mesgida’) at Hegra represents ‘A‘ara, who is in Bosra, the god of Rabb’el’ (CIS II 218; Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 417, pl. 41). A‘ara is known from other inscriptions as one of the epitheta of Dushara.

10) A votive niche at Hegra is framed by an aedicula with three betyls. The graffito below mentions ‘Dushara and *tbwš*’ (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 430; Inscr. no. 142). It is not yet clear who was venerated because of the reading.

11) An empty aedicula at Hegra was devoted to Shai el-Qaum (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 415, fig. 204; Inscr. no. 72), a male deity of the desert people.

12) The inscription of the well-known small stela from the Temple of the Winged Lions at Petra mentions ‘The goddess of Ḥayyan’ (Hammond 2003: 224, fig. 246). The type of the stela is unique among Nabataean betyls and belongs to the Arabian face stelae. Atargatis and Isis were assumed to be ‘the goddess of Ḥayyan’ but unless the deity of the Temple of the

Winged Lions can be identified there are no grounds for any identification.

There are a few triclina at Petra devoted to a particular deity as indicated by an inscription and a votive niche at the back wall, in which this deity was represented.

The Bab es-Siq sanctuary of 96/95 B.C. is devoted to 'Dushara, the god of Manbatu'. In the rear there are a carved aedicula in the centre and next to it an engraved rectangular betyl (Wenning 2003: 150-53, figs. 1a-c).

Among many graffiti a votive inscription to 'Dushara, the god of Madras' is written high on the wall of a triclinium at Al-Madras. Therefore, it is assumed that this triclinium was devoted to Dushara. In the rear there is a niche with a plain rectangular betyl, unfortunately much damaged (CIS II 443; Wenning 2003: 154-55, fig. 2).

A stibadium near the Wadi es-Siyyagh is devoted to (Al-)Kutba, but the votive niche at the back wall is empty with a groove in the bottom to put in a portable betyl (Dalman 1908: 243-44; Milik and Teixidor 1961: 22-24). Many of the niches at Petra have got such grooves for portable betyls.

The so-called chapel of Obodas at En-Nmeir shows a very high niche at the back wall, in which probably a statue was set up according to the inscription (CIS II 354; Wenning 1997: 183-90, figs. 1-4). Lately, the 'chapel' was cleared as a triclinium and fragments of a statue were excavated (Nehmé 2002). It is yet unknown if the statue fits with the niche and represents Obodas the God or was another votive statue in the triclinium.

Among the group of votive niches by the delegations from Adraa joining the Actia Dusaria during the provincial era the omphalos betyl rather represents a Hauranite/Syrian type of Dusares than a Nabataean one of Dushara. The Nabataean type, the plain betyl, is chosen in other niches of this ensemble (Dalman 1908: 146, fig. 69; Hackl, Jenni, and Schneider 2003: 225-35).

What can be learned from this epigraphic evidence is that betyls are connected with various deities. It seems that especially deities foreign to the place are given an inscription. Both the names of deities as well as the ancient terms for the betyls (Wenning 2001: 80-83) demonstrate that the betyls cannot be interpreted as pictures of donors and worshippers (see Dalman 1912: 53-55). The evidence is still too small to establish a particular type of betyl belonging to a particular deity. Rather, one has to assume that any type of betyl can represent any deity. Then it will be very difficult to decode the betyls.

THE TYPOLOGICAL APPROACH

The betyls are to be divided into three main types, the plain stela, the eye betyl, and the unique face stela (Wenning 2001: 85-87 with references to other typologies). The plain stelae can be subdivided into the rectangular slab, the rectangular slab with rounded top, the semicircular slab and the dome-shaped slab. Technically the betyls can be divided in those sculptured in the round (about 20 examples are known), those cut into the rock and raised in relief (plastic) or deepened as a recess (negative shape) and those carved into the rock-face like a graffito or a petroglyph. The 1:2 proportions of betyls could relate somehow to the cultic image as described in the Souda. At the same time, this seems to be the standardized dimension of a betyl in principle.

It was repeatedly assumed that the plain betyl with rounded top refers to a female deity. That assumption is based on stelae with rounded top from tombs in the Hauran which indeed belong to dead females, but there are a few such stelae of male dead too. It is debated if these

tomb stelae from the Hauran belong to a Nabataean population. What could be a custom for tomb stones is not necessarily applicable to votive stelae as demonstrates the evidence from Puteoli. There is a large votive monument with an inscription 'Dusari sacrum'. The monument carried seven betyls with rounded tops (Tran Tam Tinh 1972: 144, pl. 48). If these betyls refer all to Dushara or depict the seven planets, as it can be assumed, in any case there are male representations among them.

Lately, Uzi Avner has emphasized that the shapes are meaningful and allow a definition of the deity. It seems to be convincing that the shapes are not accidental but carefully chosen. Basing on many groups of 'standing stones' in the Negev and Sinai and considering the grouping of deities through the centuries in the art of the ancient Near East and the Graeco-Roman world in the East Avner established a typology, which he compared also in the interpretation of betyls of Petra too (Avner 1999-2000). Neither the sources and the evidence nor the state of research allow such an interpretation at the moment. Nevertheless, there could be more gained by this approach when the survey of compared monuments is done more critically and more thoroughly. Possibly other aniconic veneration in the East should be considered more intensive.

I am not going to discuss all of Avner's interpretations, instead I would like to demonstrate which of his interpretations could be helpful and where they seem to exaggerate. Avner explained a high betyl close to a smaller one indicating the more important deity. He assumed betyls even in height to be a pair of deities close in status and betyls uneven in height to be a pair of deities of unequal status. One would agree to this general differentiation, but his next statements are more speculative. He interpreted a narrow betyl with a shorter broad one as a pair consisting of a male and a female deity. He observed that the broader betyl is often placed to the left of the more important betyl. He compared this with the fact that female deities in figural representations are often placed to the left of male deities. Therefore, he expresses the narrow betyl indicating a male and the broad betyl indicating a female deity in general. Referring to a group of two narrow betyls he assumed that they were a pair of male deities, a group of broad betyls as a pair of female deities. The arrangement of a broad betyl to the right of a narrow one he explained as senior fertility goddess with a young god, and so on.

If one proofs these definitions just on the basis of the above mentioned betyls with inscriptions they do not confirm the interpretations. The betyls of Al-'Uzza and Al-Kutba at Wadi Ramm are of the same size and support the idea of deities of equal status, but the female deity is not to the left of the male deity. Concerning the betyl of Al-'Uzza and the 'Lord of the House' at Wadi Ramm, the broader eye betyl would represent the female deity and then is correctly in its position to the left of the male deity according to the classification of Avner. But there is a comparable group depicted in a large aedicula on a fallen rock in the Siq at Petra with the betyls in reversed position. The two versions of the group seem to contradict the statement of Avner. Furtheron, it cannot be ruled out that the eye betyl represents the 'Lord of the House', and that the eye betyls are broader just because of the design with 'eyes and nose'. It can be assumed that the niches at Wadi Ramm and Petra depict the same deities, but other identifications might be possible as well. Following Avner's classification the smaller plain betyl would be a less important deity, but one wonders if such a distinction is relevant to Al-'Uzza and the 'Lord of the House' and why Al-'Uzza should be superior to the 'Lord of the House'/Dushara at Petra. There is another problem with Avner's interpretation. Following his pattern, the group in the Siq would represent a senior fertility goddess with a young god. This is hardly acceptable.

Avner continued his classification in the same way with triads and quartets. Votive niches with four betyls are rare and those with six and ten betyls remain unique at Petra. Further, there are betyls one in front of the other, set into each other, and one on the top of each other. The latter are not explained by Avner's criteria. Avner is conscious of the problems. He tried to explain the differences between the standing stones and the betyls by the direction of writing. I am not convinced by this argument and rather prefer to see regional features in Nabataean art.

What can be learned from the typological approach is that the shapes and arrangements of the betyls offer some possibilities for an interpretation, but remain in most of the cases difficult to explain or simply are non decipherable. The approach is mainly helpful in the organization of the material. Therefore, another approach is needed.

THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

For a number of years I have been carrying out a survey of the Nabataean votive niches at Petra just to learn as much as possible about these monuments, unspectacular as they are. The corpus of niches is almost doubled by new discoveries, even only half of the area is surveyed. I estimate more than 1.000 votive niches at Petra. The approach is based on the function and the setting of each votive niche and betyl. This contributes first to the way the Nabataeans venerated their deities. Betyls and niches are part of offerings scenes. There are various installations connected with the votive niches to lay down offerings. Second, the approach points to the reason why there was a votive niche cut into the rock at this particular place. Third, one can learn about the general meaning of the betyls. This seems to be the main profit which can be gained from the survey, while it still remains very difficult to decode the venerated deities.

The context of the votive niches is to be described and to be analysed including its function in relationship to the setting. Niches in triclinia have been mentioned above. There are also betyls in tombs, but less frequently (Kühn 2005). Niches are found at sanctuaries and along the way to Petra, to sanctuaries, and to holy mountains. In the famous Siq at Petra about 80 niches are cut. In most sacred areas like Al-Madras and at the north-western slope of Jebel el-Khubtha niches occur as the dominant feature together with triclinia, while there are no tombs. Often votive niches are connected with spots where water poured out from the rock or where imposing winter rains rush dramatically through the gorges as they do in the 'Nischenklamm', Sidd al-Ma'ajin, where more than 100 votive niches are cut side by side in the rock face.

Considering the role of Petra, which has been called a 'hima' (Knauf), one has to assume that several deities have been venerated along the important ways and at the most venerated places (see the list of venerated deities at the spring sanctuary of Wadi Ramm). Although it can be assumed that some areas and holy mountains are devoted to a particular deity like Al-'Uzza at Jebel el-Khubtha, it cannot be excluded that other deities are venerated as well at these places. Therefore, it seems appropriate to look for complexes of niches which rather belong to a particular deity. Such 'closed' entities will be chosen to prove if in these places a particular type of betyl can be related to the deity venerated in this place. But even the deity of a particular place is known, it still remains difficult to decode the niches and betyls as can be demonstrated by an example.

Above I have mentioned the Bab es-Siq sanctuary with a triclinium devoted to Dushara, the 'god of Manbatu', with an incised aedicule and rectangular betyl at the rear. The rock in which the triclinium is cut carries 18 niches and a niche basin for water at its outer face

(Dalman 1908: 107 no. D. 15; Wenning 2004: fig. p. 44-45). It can be assumed that these niches are devoted to Dushara, the tutelary deity of the clan owning this place. Three niches are shaped as a rectangle, nine as an arched niche, six are cuttings ('Felsausschnitte') rather than niches. It was assumed that the arched niches could be the more important type. This is emphasized by the main niche in the row, D. 15c, and by the nearby niches D. 20, and the unpublished niche D. 13.4.

Only one niche shows a (very worn) plain betyl (niche D. 15i) and two of the niches show a betyl deepened as a recess (D. 15l and 15m) as far as the eroded character of the niches allow such a realization. It is debated if the recess itself is the betyl or if portable betyls are put into the recesses. Concerning the groove in the floor at the rear of niche D. 15m, a betyl was put into the recess. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that there was a portable betyl in niche D. 15l too, where the recess rested on the floor. Portable betyls seem to be characteristic for clan sanctuaries.

The type of the betyl in the two arched niches is not the same. While niche D. 15i shows a narrow rectangular betyl like the petroglyph in the triclinium, the niche D. 20, and niche ('Felsausschnitt') D15l, niche D. 15m shows a betyl with a rounded top. The arched niches D. 15i and D. 20 contain a rectangular betyl, connecting both features.

Neither the meaning of an arched niche nor a betyl with rounded top, which probably here is a particular aspect of Dushara, is yet decoded. The question to be put is not only who is who among the Nabataean betyls, but also which aspect of a deity is indicated. Of course, an answer cannot be based on a single evidence, therefore, more such evidence and more contexts are needed and will be gained by the on-going survey.

Unfortunately, the Nabataeans did not leave a literature. Therefore, the knowledge about Nabataean deities is limited and is based more upon the general character of Semitic deities and upon comparisons. There are a few literary sources, mostly by Greek and Roman authors. Combining this information with the epigraphical, the typological, and the functional approach it can be hoped for that in the end in a few cases I might be able to answer who is who among the Nabataean betyls. At the moment, it seems better to be cautious than to speculate.

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