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The Sacred Space in Ancient Arab Religions

It is common knowledge among students of ancient Semitic religions, at least since Julius Wellhausen and his famous book, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (1897), that pagan cults of the Arabian peninsula were often provided with large precincts, called *ḥīma* or *ḥaram* and regarded as the sacred land on which cultivation of soil, hunting game, cutting trees, etc. were strictly forbidden¹. Some of these reserves came to be respected by Muhammad himself, when their cult was abolished, and their traditional exemptions were confirmed, as happened with the *ḥīma* of Allat in Ta'if. The most outstanding example of a *ḥaram* remains, of course, the holy enclosure of Mecca.

These facts were often used for purposes of comparative religion, but much still remains to be done with regard to the cults of the neighbouring lands. The importance of Arab migrations to the area of the so-called Fertile Crescent in antiquity is well recognised, but not so, however, the importation of beliefs and rituals which should be expected as a corollary. Usually, the religions of such strongly arabised places as Palmyra, Hatra, and even the plainly Arabic Nabataean kingdom, are treated as so many separate developments, though parallel to each other and to the cults of the Peninsula. Only ten years ago, Jean Starcky remarked, in an evaluation of the state of Nabataean studies², that it is still not clear to what extent laws and customs of the Nabataeans had remained nomadic. He called then for a new evaluation of available sources, literary (e.g. Strabo) as well as archaeological (high places and baetyls). I am convinced that the civilisation of Jordan in the Nabataean period should be seen in the larger perspective of the Peninsula on the one hand, and of Syria and even Northern Mesopotamia on the other.

As it is well known, the notion of *ḥaram* in the pre-Islamic tradition implies a tract of land delimited by visible landmarks (*anṣāb*) and secluded from any profane use. Such

sacred ground may have belonged to a divinity who usually had a temple of some kind in the midst of it, but could as well have been attached to a tomb. Many passages of old Arab poetry, as quoted for instance by H. Lammens³, illustrate this particular form of respect toward the deceased, but do not necessarily prove the existence of a real ancestor cult.

Manifold, and apparently wide ranging meanings of the root *ḥrm*, 'sacred', 'impure', 'illicit', etc., can be gathered from several Semitic idioms, from Moabite to Syriac⁴. In the Mesha inscription and in Biblical Hebrew, the notion of *ḥerem* is related to the 'sacred war' giving no quarter either to people, animals or property. In Palmyrene, the word *mḥrmm* is translated as *anathemata*, and understood as 'religious offerings' of some kind. In Syriac, it also means 'anathema' in the Christian sense. The general meaning is that of something forbidden, exempt from ordinary use for ritual reasons, a taboo. In Nabataean inscriptions *mḥrmt*⁵, found in texts from Bosra and from the oasis of Dumat⁵, probably describes a sanctuary, an enclosed space directly comparable to *ḥīma* or *ḥaram* of Classical Arabic sources.

However, several other terms, with the general meaning of 'enclosure', could have described the same reality: when such place names as Hegra, Hatra, and possibly Hamat, meant etymologically just that⁶, the reference could possibly have been made simply to their walls, but a relation to sanctuaries cannot be excluded, and is even probable in the case of Hatra. On the other hand, there is a term *dayrâ*, known in Hatra with reference to the great temple complex of this city⁷, and in Palmyra, where it stands for the temple of Bel, for an archaic

³ H. Lammens, op. cit., pp. 167–168.

⁴ Cf. F. Jean—H. Hoftijzer, *DISO*, s.v., and other common dictionaries for Syriac and Hebrew.

⁵ CIS II 158, RES 2093, 2094 (?); J. Starcky, *RB* 64, 1957, p. 199. In CIS II 158 (= E. Littmann, *PAES IVA*, 1914, no 72) it is certainly not a reserved seat in the Bosra theatre.

⁶ Cf. *DISO*, s.v. *hgr*, *hmt*; for etymology of Hamat, cf. W. Robertson Smith, op. cit., p. 150; for *hgr*, cf. B. Aggoula, *Semitica* 27, 1977, p. 122; for *htr*, cf. M. Gawlikowski, *Syria* 51, 1974, p. 96.

⁷ Hatra no 35. Cf. B. Aggoula, *Berytus* 18, 1969, p. 92–93, *MUSJ* 47, 1972, p. 44 (translated as 'communauté'), and J. T. Milik, *Dédicaces Faites par des Dieux*, Paris 1972, p. 353 ('maisonnée'); cf. further M. Gawlikowski, *Le Temple Palmyrénien*, Varsovie 1973, p. 57 (*dwr* dy *yrbwl*, 'enclosure of Yarḥibōl'). The local sense seems advisable in all these cases.

¹ Cf. J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums*, Berlin 1897, p. 102 sq.; W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, 1889 (reprint New York, 1972), p. 142 sq.; H. Lammens, *L'Arabie Occidentale Avant l'Hégire*, Beyrouth 1928, p. 126, 141, 162; J. Chelhod, *Les Structures du Sacré Chez les Arabes*, Paris 1964, p. 209 sq., 331 sq.

² J. Starcky, 'La Civilisation Nabatéenne: État des Questions', *AAAS* 21, 1971 (= *Actes IX Congrès International d'Archéologie Classique*), p. 81.

enclosure of Yarḥibôl, and once probably for a precinct in a village out in the steppe⁸.

Another term, recently discussed by B. Aggoula, occurs in a Palmyrene text he has published⁹, seen in Northern Lebanon but coming probably from the Palmyrene region; the word *ḥugbâ* denotes there a place where an idol (*maṣṣebâ*) had been placed in 182 AD. Aggoula translates 'oratory', meaning that it was a building where the cult object was hidden, according to the Classical Arabic *ḥiğab*, 'veil' or 'barrier'. Instances from the Syriac, the Qur'an, and from the Arabic poetry he is quoting make it clear that the *ḥugbâ* was a secluded, sacred space, but not necessarily a closed building; on the contrary, in the Syriac translation of Paralipomena¹⁰, this term renders the Hebrew *bamôt*, that is, open air sanctuaries, 'high places'. Another, as yet unpublished instance of the use of the word *ḥugbâ* occurs in Palmyra itself, where the temenos of Allat is meant: the text calls a blessing of the goddess on anybody who shall refrain from spilling blood 'on the *ḥugbâ*', and is inscribed on a paw of a monumental lion guarding the courtyard of the sanctuary. From Mecca, through Palmyra, and up to Edessa, the same term was used, apparently describing sacred enclosures, just as the other terms I have mentioned of similar meaning in the same regions, do.

This is not a proof of the specific notions of an Arabic *ḥaram* being equally present in all the lands reached by the nomadic tribes from the Peninsula. Indeed, the name of *ḥaram*, when relative to the sacred space, appears only in Nabataean and in the Peninsular traditions several centuries later, but not among the settled populations further north. However, a survival of the customs related to it cannot be excluded in Syria. It is perhaps enough to recall what we learn from Lukianos on the practices of the great sanctuary of Mabbug¹¹; the sacred enclosure formed there a kind of reserve of wild animals which it was forbidden to kill. Exactly the same habit prevailing some centuries later in Ta'if provides an interesting parallel. On the other hand, the sacrificial ritual of Hierapolis, precluding bloodshed (the animals were instead hanged on trees and then burned, or else thrown from the stairs of the temple), reminds us of the recommendation in the Allat sanctuary in Palmyra already alluded to.

The notion of *ḥaram* was, in the Arabic traditions, attached to both sanctuaries and burials. In both cases, these places could serve as an asylum and were considered sacred; the same name was also used to describe their character. Some time ago I tried to show that the funerary monuments in the lands subject to Arab migrations in the Hellenistic period display some characteristic features that can be traced back to the beliefs of the nomads¹². The stelae called *nefesh*, repre-

senting deceased individuals placed usually but not necessarily on their tombs, have been identified, as is commonly accepted, with the souls of the dead who inhabited them, in the same way as a divinity inhabited a baetyl. Instances of such monuments, and texts explaining their meaning, can be found not only in Nabataean territory (Petra, Madaba, Umm el-Djimal, etc.)¹³, but also in Palmyra, in the Ituraean domains in Lebanon, and in the region of Edessa, in fact wherever the migrating tribes settled.

Later on, among the sedentaries, the primitive sense of such monuments was gradually lost, and *nefesh* became just one name among others for a funerary monument. Originally, however, the *nefesh* was always individual and related to a particular conception of the after-life.

One of the best documented sites is, in this respect, Petra. A number of stelae, often explicitly called *nefesh*, are engraved there on the rock, sometimes inside tombs, but in many cases without apparent relation to any tomb in the neighbourhood¹⁴. A burial was one thing, and the monument, a receptacle of the soul, another. Monuments of this kind, published and discussed by J. Starcky and F. Zayadine, leave no place for doubt about this distinction. The last named author is quite right, in my opinion, to place on the same footing the small pyramidal stelae in relief, the pyramids of the so-called Obelisk tomb, and figurative sculptures on some other tombs (e.g. 'Soldier's tomb'), and further to compare them with such a structure as the pyramidal monument in Hermel in Lebanon, a cenotaph or memorial upon a grave. To the same category belonged the *nefesh* of Hamrat in Sueida (Hauran), now destroyed without trace but recorded by a 19th century engraving¹⁵.

F. Zayadine suggests that the origin of the architectural form is to be looked for in Alexandria, which is indeed very possible. The underlying concepts and beliefs, however, need not be a tributary of the Egyptian practice. They seem, on the contrary, well in line with what is known about the customs of Arabia. They belong, in my opinion, to the religion of the nomadic tribes which migrated, during the Hellenistic period, northwards: the Nabatu and the Shalamu, founders of the Nabataean kingdom, the Ituraeans, and other groups who went as far as Palmyra and beyond the Euphrates. These people brought their beliefs with them and are responsible for the spread of a particular type of tomb monument, the *nefesh*, in their respective areas of settlement. The *nefesh* monuments are not mentioned in the Bible or other contemporary sources, and appear only in the Hellenistic period. Older populations have sometimes adopted the term *nefesh*, but not the notion

⁸ CIS II 4501; J. Starcky, *Semitica* 22, 1972, p. 60 and 64–65 (translated as 'communauté du village'); M. Gawlikowski, *Syria* 48, 1971, p. 417 (the word is partly restored).

⁹ *Semitica* 27, 1977, p. 117 sq.

¹⁰ 2 *Chron.* 33, 19.

¹¹ De Dea Syria, 41.

¹² *Berytus* 21, 1972, p. 5 sq.

¹³ Cf. M. Gawlikowski, *Monuments Funéraires de Palmyre*, Varsovie 1970, pp. 22–43; *Berytus* 21, 1972, p. 7, note 15.

¹⁴ F. Zayadine, *A New Commemorative Stele at Petra, Essays in Memory of Paul W. Lapp*, Pittsburgh 1971, p. 57 sq.; J. Starcky, *RB* 72, 1965, pp. 95–97, *ADAJ* 10, 1965, p. 44; cf. already R. Dussaud, *La Pénétration des Arabes en Syrie avant l'Islam*, Paris 1955, p. 32.

¹⁵ R. E. Brünnow—A. von Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia III*, Strasburg 1909, p. 98–100, FIG. 992–995; M. de Vogüé, *Syrie Centrale I*, Paris 1865, p. 29, PL. I.

of the soul incorporated in it; instances can be quoted of family tombs thus called in Palestine, Palmyra, and elsewhere.

Several foundation inscriptions from Hegra put it quite clearly that the family rock-cut tombs there were considered *ḥaram*, according to the ways of *ḥaram* of what is consecrated to Dushara among the Nabaṭu and the Shalamu¹⁶. They were thus the inalienable property of gods, for the exclusive use of the founder and his family. In the same way, sacred grounds inside their enclosures were inalienable property of a divinity.

Therefore, sanctuaries and burial places, different as they were from each other, both shared the characteristics of things forbidden and protected by religious sanctions. The double meaning of the word *ḥaram* (parallel to the Latin *sacer*), applying to anything excluded from everyday life, either by sanctity or impurity, is well illustrated by this situation.

There is every reason to believe that the rock-cut tombs of Petra did not differ in character from those of Hegra. Both groups should be, and are, considered together when their architectural forms are being analysed; they should also be considered together in regard to their meaning. Besides, the foundation inscription of the Qabr et-Turkman in Petra, which is the only one on this site except the late epigraph of Sextius Florentinus, irrelevant for our purpose, is written in exactly the same terms as the Hegra inscriptions, with one notable difference: there are no names except divine¹⁷. That is why I have insisted in the recent past that this strange anonymity of Petraean funerary monuments must have a profound reason behind it. It is far from obvious or self-explanatory¹⁸.

It was recently stated that this apparent mystery can be easily explained when one considers some fragmentary epitaphs mentioning the names of the queen Shaqilat and her 'brother' 'Uneishu, found in tomb no 813¹⁹. These finds, isolated in one tomb, do not prove a common use of epitaphs inside the rock-cut chambers (it is enough to recall the abundance of funerary inscriptions in Palmyra, where many tombs were also exposed through the centuries), but above all they do not explain the lack of foundation texts on the outside façades of the tombs, where large spaces invited such commemoration on the Hegra example. An epitaph inside could not possibly help to identify the monument, as the interior was inaccessible to anyone except the family. If these tombs are anonymous, they were made so intentionally.

In my quoted paper, I have expressed the supposition that

¹⁶ CIS II 197, 199, 206, 209.

¹⁷ CIS II 350; cf. J. T. Milik, *RB* 66, 1959, p. 555.

¹⁸ *Berytus* 24, 1975/76, p. 35 sq.

¹⁹ F. Zayadine, in *Petra et la Nabatène*, Museum de Lyon 1978, p. 68; *ADAJ* 18, 1973, p. 81.

there was an interdiction of religious character, barring the founders of tombs in Petra from putting their names on their monuments. The fact that the only inscription engraved on a façade there carefully omits these names, but not the mention of consecration to Dushara and other gods, seems to prove the point.

The reasons for such an unusual interdiction can only be guessed at. I have tentatively compared a passage from Diodorus where this author from the beginning of the Hellenistic period states that the Nabataeans were forbidden under the death penalty to build houses²⁰. This statement, if not fanciful, cannot reflect a general custom, and I have suggested that it was limited to the site of Petra alone, originally a *ḥaram*. The probable reason for the anonymity of the tombs could be this old interdiction.

Admittedly, nothing here can be proved, so it is perhaps enough to state the problem; although remaining open, it is a real one.

The great 'temple tombs', generally considered now as royal since their chronology is fixed, by keeping as they do strict anonymity, press the point even further. It was recently remarked by F. Zayadine that at least one of them, the Deir, was actually a temple of the deified king Obodas, with a baetyl in relief representing him on the back wall of the chamber²¹. Outwardly, however, there are no relevant differences between this façade and for instance el-Khazneh, certainly a tomb. Besides, certain triclinia, or rock-cut chambers serving for the ritual of sacred meals, often display the same kind of façades as do the funerary monuments. The distinction between the funerary and some of the cultural monuments is accordingly not always clear from the architectural point of view. In all likelihood, both kinds of monuments were placed under a similar religious protection, both were *ḥaram* 'according to the custom of consecration of the Nabaṭu'. This custom can be detected, as applied to sacred grounds and tombs alike, in pre-Islamic Arabia. When both categories cannot be considered the same, for that reason, they are both consecrated to gods according to one rule. This rule had very wide application indeed: from land to buildings and movable property, any of which could have been consecrated to gods and exempted by that means from transfer or profane use. It can be detected wherever the nomadic traditions of the Syro-Arabian desert survived: from the Biblical *ḥerem*, implying a wholesale slaughter of the enemy, to the consecration acts of the Nabataeans and the customs of pagan Arabia. Some ways of the settled populations in Syria, such as the keeping of protected animals in Hierapolis, might also reflect the same origin.

²⁰ *Hist.* XIX, 94, 2-5.

²¹ Cf. G. Dalman, *Neue Petra-Forschungen*, 1912, p. 92, no 73; F. Zayadine, *ADAJ* 21, 1976, p. 139 and *Petra et la Nabatène*, p. 70.