

SOCIAL HISTORY

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RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HISTORY OF THE NABATAEANS ACCORDING TO THE EVIDENCE OF ANCIENT NARRATIVE SOURCES

The article is dedicated to the consideration of the problem of comparing the data of two ancient authors, contemporaries of Emperor Augustus, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus, about the Nabataeans. Studying of the history of the Nabataeans in the context of their contacts with neighboring states and nomadic Arab tribes, determining the degree of influence of the Hellenistic culture on the Nabataean, as well as clarifying the role of the Nabataean kingdom in the historical processes taking place in the Middle East, are important for the reconstruction of a complete picture of the history of Western Asia in antiquity. The history of the Nabataeans, which can be reconstructed basically from Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources, is the history of the contacts of the Nabataeans with other peoples. However, the available sources suggest a view of the Nabataean society from the outside, by people who were not the Nabataeans, so they are able to cover only a part of the Nabataean history. The works of any Nabataean authors have not reached us, and the epigraphic, numismatic and archaeological sources found do not allow filling in the gaps in the history completely. There are two reports about the Nabataeans, the first of which reflects the events of the end of the 4th century BC, and the second shows the end of the 1st century BC. These data allow tracing changes in the way of life of the Nabataean society. Both stories belonged to the contemporaries of the emperor Augustus: the first one belongs to Diodorus of Siculus, and the second one – to Strabo. In the course of the research, an attempt was made to compare the testimonies of two ancient authors and, on their basis, to determine the peculiarity of the development of the Nabataean society. Based on the narrative sources, it had been established, that the authors used different sources while writing their works. However, these two written sources allow coming to the most important conclusion confirming the amazing development of the Nabataean society and culture: the Nabataeans had passed from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled one during two centuries.

Keywords: Nabataeans, Diodorus, Strabo, narrative sources, nomads, historical source

The history of the Nabataeans, which can be reconstructed from Greek, Roman, and Jewish sources, is the history of the contacts of the Nabataeans with other peoples. However, the available sources suggest a view of the Nabataean society from the outside, people who were not the Nabataeans, which ultimately leads to coverage of only part of the Nabataean history. The works of Nabataean authors have not reached us, and the found epigraphic, numismatic and archaeological sources do not allow to completely fill in the gaps in the history. That is why every mention is valuable, even point evidence, which forces a thorough collection and analysis of all available information.

The historiographic base of the research was the works of such scientists as G. W. Bowersock¹, A. Negev², R. McLaughlin³, K. Al-Bashaireh⁴ and others.

¹ Bowersock, G. W. (1971). A Report on Arabia Provincia. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 61, 219-242;

Bowersock, G. W. (1994). *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge.

² Negev, A. (2005). *Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*. N.Y.; Negev, A. (1979). *The Nabataeans and the Provincia Arabia. Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, hrsg. von Hildegard Temporini und Wolfgang Haase. Berlin-New-York.

³ McLaughlin, R. (2010). *Rome and the Distant East: Trade Routes to the Ancient Lands of Arabia, India and China*. N.Y.

⁴ Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008). *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson.

The first written sources about the Nabataeans in the ancient narrative tradition date back to the Hellenistic era. Sufficiently detailed information about the Nabataeans contains two works: one belongs to Diodorus Siculus, and the second to Strabo¹. Despite the fact that these authors lived approximately at the same time (Strabo wrote his work several decades later), their stories about the Nabataeans are fundamentally different: Diodorus wrote about the Nabataeans as the nomadic people², and Strabo showed them as already a settled population³. The reason for this was in the sources that the authors used when compiling their works. Diodorus used the testimony of the ancient Greek historian Hieronymus of Cardia, which was the earliest historical description of the Nabataean population known today. Strabo, having familiarized himself with the available data on the Nabataeans from the later Hellenistic author Agatharhides of Cnidus, also possessed information contemporary to him, obtained from an eyewitness who visited the Nabataean capital, Petra.

Thus, although Diodorus and Strabo lived at the same time, they left two completely different descriptions of the Nabataeans, one of which reflected their life at the end of the 4th century BC, the second showed the end of the 1st century BC. This allows to find out how the way of life of the Nabataeans changed over three centuries.

Diodorus wrote that in 312 BC Antigonos I Monophthalmus, a former general of Alexander the Great, decided to annex the territories in Syria and Phoenicia “the lands of the Arabs, called the Nabataeans” (“ἐπὶ τὴν χώραν τῶν Ἀράβων τῶν καλομένων Ναβαταίων”⁴). Antigonos dispatched Athenaeus, one of his officers, at the head of an army of 4,000 infantry and 600 horsemen, so that he, catching the “barbarians” unexpectedly, led away their herds of cattle. Athenaeus had information that the Nabataeans gathered annually for the festival, leaving their old men, women and children in shelter in a certain rock (“ἐπὶ τινοῦ πέτρας”⁵), which was described as powerful and without any enclosing walls, and it was a natural fortification. Athenaeus waited for the festivities and at night he approached with an army to the rock from the western side. Catching the Nabataeans by surprise, Athenaeus interrupted some of them, took some captives, and also took an impressive amount of their property – incense, myrrh and silver. Having departed at dawn, he and his army hastened to retreat as far west as possible, fearing the persecution of the returning Nabataean men. Athenaeus set up a camp, believing that he was safe, but the Nabataeans followed him and at the first opportunity attacked the offender's camp, killed almost all the infantry and part of the cavalry. Returning to the rock, the Nabataeans composed a letter in “Syrian letters” (“ἐπιστολὴν γράψαντες Συρίοις γράμμασι”⁶), addressed to Antigonos, which contained an accusation against Athenaeus⁷. In response, Antigonos lied, claiming that his officer had acted contrary to his orders, apparently wishing by this explanation to return the disposition of the Nabataeans and use it in the next attack. The Nabataeans pretended to be satisfied with the king's response, however, in turn, they took precautions, placing watchmen on their territory in case of another sudden invasion.

Antigonos, believing that he had again returned the trust of the Nabataeans, sent another expedition, led that time by his son Demetrius I Poliorcetes, whose aim was to compensate for the failure of Athenaeus and take revenge on the Nabataeans. That time, Antigonos's plan initially failed, as the guards immediately reported the invasion of the Greeks with a series of signal lights, and the Nabataeans met Demetrius with a garrison lined up in front of the rock. At the same time, they hid their herds in various shelters in the deserts, where the Greeks could not reach. Thus, Demetrius's enterprise failed. Subsequently, the Nabataeans sent him a message, which contained simple truths: the Greeks have no point in waging war with people who have neither water, nor grain, nor wine, who do not live like the Greeks and do not want to be their slaves. After negotiations, Demetrius agreed to leave, taking captives and some gifts⁸.

The given evidence was the first appearance of the Nabataeans in ancient narrative tradition. However, it is still not known how long they had already been staying in the region where the Greeks discovered them. G. W. Bowersock believed that there was no convincing basis for identifying the Nabataeans with the ‘Nebayot’ tribe of the Old Testament or with peoples bearing similar names that were mentioned in Assyrian

¹ Evenari M. (1982). *The Negev: The Challenge of a Desert*. Cambridge, 18.

² Diodorus Siculus (1993) *The Library of History*: in 12 vol. Trans. from Greek. Cambridge, 1933, 10, 2.48-49; 19.94-100.

³ Strabo (1854-1885). *Geography of Strabo*: in 3 vol. London, 16.4.21-26, C 779-84.

⁴ Diodorus Siculus (1993) *The Library of History*: in 12 vol. Trans. from Greek. Cambridge, 1933, 10, 19.94.1.

⁵ Ibid, 19.95.1.

⁶ Ibid, 19.96.1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 19.98.1.

sources¹. Until 312 BC the history of the Nabataeans seemed extremely vague, and the reconstructions that exist were not convincing enough.

Nevertheless, the testimony of Diodorus about the Nabataeans, the source of which was the work of Alexander the Great's officer, Hieronymus of Cardia, allowed to some extent recreate the picture of their way of life at the end of the 4th century BC. The evidences also allowed to judge an important fact: the Nabataeans at that time were already literate and knew the written language, in any case, there were scribes among them who composed the message to Antigonos in "Syrian letters", using, apparently, the Nabataean form of Aramaic writing². Inscriptions dating from a later time indicate that the Nabataeans communicated in their own dialect of Aramaic.

At the time when Demetrius undertook the unsuccessful expedition against the Nabataeans in southern Palestine, as Diodorus reported, the Nabataeans lived in the open air in the wilderness, which they considered their home. Their territories were unsuitable for a sedentary lifestyle, since there were no conditions for successful agriculture or craft. The Nabataeans were guided by the custom that it was forbidden to have a garden, field or house, in order to exclude any kind of dependence. They had only camels and sheep, moving with their flocks from place to place in search of new pastures. According to Diodorus, the Nabataeans were few in number, but at the same time they were richer than the rest of the inhabitants of the deserts. This was due to the fact that the Nabataeans were able to take control of the overland trade routes, along which incense and spices were supplied, and South Arabia and the East traded with the Mediterranean countries³. That means that all trade of South Arabia and the East with the Mediterranean was completely dependent on the Nabataeans and their overland routes⁴. It can be assumed that during the first years of the reign of Antigonos, this trade route passed to the north to Transjordan, then to the west to Gaza⁵. By becoming intermediaries in international trade, the Nabataeans thereby acquired a reliable source of income, which later had a decisive influence on the course of their historical development.

According to the testimony of Diodorus, the Nabataeans at the end of the 4th century BC led a nomadic lifestyle, engaged in intermediary trade, exchanged goods, knew cattle breeding. The unfavorable climate of the desert region protected them from the Persians and the troops of Alexander the Great. Despite the fact that strong states of the Seleucids and Ptolemies were formed in the neighborhood, the Nabataeans retained their independence.

Diodorus's testimonies made it possible to assert that the Nabataeans at the dawn of their history operated with robberies, then exchanged goods, they also knew cattle breeding⁶. An extremely unfavorable climate protected them from the Persians and the troops of Alexander the Great, besides, Arabia was located between the kingdoms of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, which, nevertheless, did not prevent the Nabataeans from maintaining their independence.

The ancient city of Petra, carved into the rock, was the capital of the Nabataean kingdom and was located in a ring of sandstone mountains in the desert southwest of modern Amman, 50 miles to the south of the Dead Sea in Jordan⁷. The sources have preserved a lot of testimonies about that city. Before the arrival of the Nabataeans, that territory was the part of two states: Edom and Moab (about 1300-600 BC)⁸.

Diodorus reported that the Nabataeans lived in a large rock, which had only one guarded approach, thus being a natural huge fortress⁹. It was possible to get there only along one narrow path, on which several people could hardly disperse. In addition, the Nabataeans had a large asphalt lake, and trade in that raw

¹ Bowersock, G. W. (1994) *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge, 35.

² Ibid, 15.

³ Diodorus Siculus. (1993) *The Library of History: in 12 vol.* Trans. from Greek. Cambridge, 1933, 10, 19.94.5; Young, G. K. (2003). *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD, 305*. London, 85-86; Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008) *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson, 157.

⁴ Young, G. K. (2003). *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD, 305*. London, 85-86; Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008). *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson, 157.

⁵ Bowersock, G. W. (1994) *Roman Arabia*. Cambridge, 15.

⁶ Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008) *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson, 157.

⁷ Haughton, B. (2007). *Hidden History: Lost Civilizations, Secret Knowledge, and Ancient Mysteries*. N.Y., 24.

⁸ Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008) *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson, 156.

⁹ Diodorus Siculus (1993) *The Library of History: in 12 vol.* Trans. from Greek. Cambridge, 1933. Vol. 10, 2.48-49.

material brought considerable income. However, “the water in the lake was not drinkable and there was no fish in it”. In Petra, the Nabataeans stored accumulating goods, which were later sent to Gaza which was the center of their redistribution¹. How that city came under the rule of the Nabataeans is still unclear. Perhaps they conquered Petra from its most ancient population the Edomites, the tribes of the Semitic language group, who were referred to in the Bible as the owners of those territories². However, architecture of Petra was undoubtedly a merit of the Nabataean culture³.

It was also worth mentioning the information about Petra by Josephus Flavius. He pointed out that the Nabataeans considered the city of Petra as their metropolis⁴, and the “king” Rekem is considered the founder eponym: “... there was a Rekem, after which the most outstanding city of Arabia was named, which is still called by the name of its royal Arab founder Rekem, while the Greeks know this city as Petra”⁵.

From the descriptions of the city of Petra, we turned to the testimonies of Strabo. He described the Nabataean capital of the late 1st century BC⁶. His story about Peter as the so-called “Rock” of the Nabataeans contained the information that it was located on a smooth and level place, surrounded by a rock. From the outside, the city was a steep wall, and inside there were water springs suitable for consumption. The area around the city walls was mostly deserted, especially towards Judea⁷. Petra also had a good irrigation system. That could be concluded from the testimony of Strabo, who mentioned the distribution of fruits in the local market, even the presence of orchards⁸. He also spoke of the abundance of imported goods, which indicates that in the 1st century BC the Nabataeans continued to maintain an active foreign trade.

Strabo also wrote that Petra had an excellent administrative structure, which was admired by his friend and informant [18, p. 33]⁹. There were many Romans and other foreigners in it, and “the strangers were in litigation with each other and with the citizens, but the citizens never accused each other in court, but lived among themselves in complete peace”¹⁰. In the courts of Petra, litigation was conducted among foreigners, since the Nabataeans were so peaceful people that they rarely got involved in litigation, probably because they believed each other's word, like Chinese merchants. Probably, however, here we were dealing with some exaggeration, and the Nabataeans avoided bringing internal conflicts to the attention of everyone.

Thus, Petra was the largest political and cultural center of North Arabia¹¹. In addition, it was also the most important caravan station in front of Gaza on the way from India and in general from the South to the Mediterranean¹². The trade of Arabia and India with the countries of the Mediterranean basin went along the caravan road leading from Leuke Kome through Petra¹³.

So, the difference in the way of life of the Nabataean society between the end of the 4th century BC and the 1st century BC was huge, that can be explained by the various sources that Diodorus and Strabo used. However, with two starting points, it is difficult to connect and trace the process of change. No information that would describe the events of more than two centuries has survived to this day, however, the available evidence allowed to confidently speak about the intensive development of the Nabataean culture in general, as well as its spread to nearby territories. The campaigns of Antigonus guaranteed the presence

¹ Young, G. K. (2003). *Rome's Eastern Trade: International Commerce and Imperial Policy, 31 BC-AD, 305*. London, 85; Haughton, B. (2007). *Hidden History: Lost Civilizations, Secret Knowledge, and Ancient Mysteries*. N.Y., 24.

² Gen., 25, 25; 36, 1, 8-9; Шифман, И. Ш. (2007). *Набатейское государство и его культура. Из истории доисламской Аравии*. СПб., 18; Haughton, B. (2007). *Hidden History: Lost Civilizations, Secret Knowledge, and Ancient Mysteries*. N.Y., 24.

³ Patrich, J. (1990). *The Formation of Nabataean Art: Prohibition of a Graven Image Among the Nabataeans*. Jerusalem, 33.

⁴ Jos.Fl., Antt., IV, 4, 7.

⁵ Ibid, IV, 7, 1.

⁶ Strabo (1854-1885). *Geography of Strabo: in 3 vol.* London, XVI, 777.

⁷ Ibid, XVI, 780.

⁸ Ibid, XVI, 4, 26.

⁹ Patrich, J. (1990) *The Formation of Nabataean Art: Prohibition of a Graven Image Among the Nabataeans*. Jerusalem, 33.

¹⁰ Strabo (1854-1885). *Geography of Strabo: in 3 vol.* London, XVI, 4, 21-26

¹¹ Al-Bashaireh, K. S. (2008). *Chronology and Technological Production Styles of Nabataean and Roman Plasters and Mortars at Petra (Jordan)*. Tucson, 159; Patrich, J. (1990). *The Formation of Nabataean Art: Prohibition of a Graven Image Among the Nabataeans*. Jerusalem, 33.

¹² Strabo (1854-1885). *Geography of Strabo: in 3 vol.* London, XVI, 780; Beek, G. W. (1996). *Retrieving the Past: Essays on Archaeological Research and Methodology*. Jackson, 56.

¹³ Haughton, B. (2007). *Hidden History: Lost Civilizations, Secret Knowledge, and Ancient Mysteries*. N.Y., 24.

of the Nabataeans in Transjordan at the end of the 4th century BC. In the middle of the 3rd century BC they were seen to the north in the regions of Hawran, which was to be as important territory of the Nabataean kingdom in the north as the capital of Petra in the south. In the period from the end of the 4th century BC to 31/30 BC there was a huge breakthrough in the development of the Nabataean culture under the external influence of the Hellenistic world, the Nabataeans had passed from a nomadic to a settled lifestyle during two centuries.

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