

Early Arabian Art

A review of Nelson Glueck's *Deities And Dolphins*

There have long been traditions in Arabia that there were earlier civilizations. They have pointed back more or less to the Patriarch Abraham (Ibrahim). Many of the folk traditions of the Arabs have been verified by archaeologists and explorers. The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society has many articles and records quite unknown to "newspaper scientists" and those who comment on the Near East imbroglio. "Arabia Desert" and Burton's adventures are only slowly being taken seriously.

There is now general agreement that Mohammed came to birth when the Arabs had reached a nadir. The passages in Qur'an alluding to Ad, Thamud, etc., have been verified. The rise and fall of Himyaritic and Sabeian cultures and others indicates that these people have incipient abilities, and once given an opportunity for expression, have been astounding. But part of these emotional reactions come because of lack of human consideration for the peoples involved.

Glueck has given us an excellent work, but monumental as it is with many excellent pictures, there are still so many gaps that these materials may only serve as introductions.

"Nabatean Agriculture" is mentioned in Jewish literature, particularly its mystical literature. It is evident that they had achieved some success in some forms of dry land farming. The importance of tanks and wells attest to that. The tank and well are exceedingly important not only in the lives of desert people but also in their mystical literature.

The term "Nabatean" began to appear as the empire of Alexander dissolved and was applied chiefly to merchant nomads who traveled back and forth from Parthia to the Mediterranean lands. Glueck indicates that they absorbed the people of Moab and Ammon and their cultures and there is no evidence to the contrary. But we have not fully studied much of early Arabian remains, nor their relations to other non-Jewish Semitic peoples. And the exact boundaries of their culture reminds one of the Pathans who are a culture rather than a discrete people. Yet for a short time there was an Empire. We can roughly date the political freedom as from 250 B.C. (stretching it a little) to 106 A.D.

At least superficially there may be a comparison with the Hyksos. That is the settlement of a nomadic people with the attainment of some political power. But the Nabateans seem to have some of the prowess of Mediterranean peoples in megalithic art. The last words in the megalithic arts are still far off.

We know much of the decadence of the Seleucid Empire from Jewish sources. But the same period showed the rise of Parthians and Bactrians. At first the Parthians accepted much of Hellenic culture but gradually became “Persianized.” The Bactrians and Nabateans continued “Hellenism” until their very ends. And both were dissolved and gradually faded away, and no doubt the weather itself was a factor. We have still to have a good meteorological study of this region, historically considered.

The ruins at Petra have long excited explorers. There have been several articles in the **National Geographical Magazine** during the years. The Nabateans seem to have mixtures of Greek, Aramaic and Parthian cultures. A general review bears this out but Glueck has failed to give us the evidence of inscriptions, though he has pictures of them. This stands in contrast to, and leaves the way open for work similar to that of the Royal Asiatic Society on the cultures of all parts of Central and South Arabia.

The Nabateans absorbed elements of Greek, Aramaic and Parthian cultures. The inscriptions may be in Greek, Aramaic, or Nabatean Arabic. They were essentially a religious people. Polytheism proved to be the stumbling block between them and the Jews. Commercially they were often allied and as the Nabateans progressed they adapted the Jewish habit of sending merchants and representatives abroad and of settling in various parts of the Roman Empire.

There are innumerable artifacts but there is no special indication of progressive evolution. Like the Arab cultures in general—and we are not out of it—there have been waves, rise and fall, progress and retrogression, and the monuments attest to this.

The Arab peoples seem to have had or developed skills in fine arts. The Nabateans themselves occupied Damascus for a considerable period but whatever has been has yet to be investigated. And this does affect a proper study of details in carving, etc. Indeed metal work is not discussed at all and the references to pottery are superficial. Glueck does state that there are many, many shards and artifacts but he has not studied them. Nor does he seem to be aware of the contemporary method of dating by magnetic properties of iron compounds. So despite an apparently monumental book, there is still very much to be studied.

These people were not only polytheistic but “astral.” Astrology had played an important role in both the Persian and Parthian societies. (Vide *Dabistan* published during the Moghul Empire in India.) Their astrology was not far from that of Emperor Julian in the prominence they gave to goddesses. And this is also reflected by the mention of their Queens.

Glueck indicates that there were parallels to the Palmyra Kingdom which also came under the control of a Queen (Zenobia). That country appears to have been more Hellenistic than Arabian, and certainly this is so in contrast with Nabatea. But it flourished at a later period too, and the parallels are not too well known.

The earliest remains show the Greek influences. The themes and many of the methods were

Grecian. But it is obvious the artists either were not, or were more eclectic and there was a rise and fall of Parthian elements. And the types of stone were more akin to those of Iran than of Greece, so on the whole the Nabateans were midway between the two cultures, as their social order, based on trade, was also between them.

The **dolphin** plays a most prominent part in architecture, sculpture and even painting. Though removed from the ocean, the Nabateans either inherited or absorbed fish-god worship. There are indications of relations or inheritance from the earlier Phoenicians. But there was more devotion to goddesses than in other Semitic people. The very stress on the divine fish was also a factor in their later, rather easy conversion to Christianity.

One here may wonder whether there may not be a parallel with the “whale” of Jonah.

In the earlier remains uncovered we find Aphrodite as the Dolphin-Goddess. The forms are remarkably Hellenic. But she was blended into the Asian Atargatis. And we find innumerable examples of Cerberos, a distinctly Greek feature. The architraves with busts remain in the same classical tradition and some of the sculpture of the gods were distinctly orthodox, almost like copies of Altic art.

Grain and flower themes dominate the few examples we have of painting. They also used the grape leaves, the acanthus and the olive. The few pictures in the book show naturalistic rather than a symbolic approach.

Sanctuaries dotted the land, generally connected with some tank or well. While the general techniques were more or less Grecian, the clothing of the characters shows the dominance of an eclecticism; it is evident the people did not dress exactly like the Greeks. The weather was no doubt a factor. (i.e. the miniskirt).

There were distinct Semitic features too and these seem to have been adopted from several sources. No doubt the peoples of Moab and Edom were partially absorbed. But the influence of the Greeks was so dominant, Glueck speaks of Architectural Orthodoxy. As one has not read his other works and as he is connected with Zionistic research there is still a big gap of parallels and borrowings of Jewish cultures. Glueck says they occupied the Negev and this book was undoubtedly published before major findings in that region.

We read (pp206-207):

One distinctive feature of the dress of several of the Nabatean gods of the Temple of Tanner is the use of the Torque. It is worn by Zeus-Hadad, among others. Immediately, this question arises concerning the source whence the Nabateans obtained it. While there are certain symbols such as the thunderbolt and the bull which occurred simultaneously both in the Orient and the Occident, the one employed at Khirbet Tanner stems solely from the East, It is the ornamental twisted metal neckpiece known as a torque. The Nabateans seem to have borrowed it from the Parthians who

inherited the domain and geopolitical compulsions of the Persians before them, and who maintained and transmitted many of their artistic and religious traditions.

The Nabateans were a culture rather than a distinct geo-political state. There were no exact boundaries in the desert region. They did occupy the Negev and Damascus from time to time. There was an ebb and flow and both the artisan and merchant seem to have stood over the agriculturalist.

We have still to study the part that metals played in the culture. On page 7 one reads:

Expressive bronzes indicate the metallurgical skills. They probably exploited the ancient copper mines in the Wadi Arabh, following the example of Solomon and some of his successors there, and others before his time going back at least as early as the Chalcolithic period in the fourth millenniums B.C.

We have therefore still to study the fine arts, the actual skills of the artisan and elements of folk-culture.

One element in their art is “distortion by design.” The gods should not be pictured merely as perfected human beings although the Nabateans never seem to have gone far in the direction of the Mesopotamian peoples here.

The main monuments—at least those examined by Glueck, are post-Alexandrian and even after Roman absorption. Thus triclinium benches are foremost. As a Jew Glueck might have mentioned Seder parallels, of the sitting of men and women and even of the appearance of certain Greek words in Jewish customs.

The rope played a prominent part in decorative art. We find it in pre-Buddhistic Japan. There its importance receded but not so in Nabatea. But we are here dealing with a desert people, with few or no trees to draw upon.

One is especially excited by the details of cornices and capitals. Well within the general Hellenic traditions, they did not pursue the very orthodox Ionic, Doric or Corinthian forms but were eclectic. The use of rosettes and floral decorations attained a nicety. And it would seem that there was a withdrawal for meteorological rather than political reasons.

After the conquest of Palestine in 70 A.D. with the fall of Jewish independent units, the Romans **had** to conquer the Nabateans to protect their flanks, the usually imperialistic policy. But they did not interfere with religion at all. Later when the Nabateans turned to Christianity they were regarded with high favor by the Byzantium empire and this also probably meant migrations to better climes. In other words, the country did not die, it simply faded away.

The position of womankind does stand out. The prominence of Atargatis, half-woman, half-fish has

meant an identification with Aphrodite. We also find mermen as well as mermaids, and why not? How much of this was inherited from the Phoenicians is still not known.

There is a question of the creative abilities of Arabs. Mohammed T. Mehdi, author of *A Nation of Lions Chained* states that his attachment to politics has caused him to overlook both the potentialities and accomplishments of these people in science and art. And the place of Damascus in the history of arts and crafts is still to be written up fully. Certainly the Arabs I have seen show remarkable abilities.

There is also to be written a more careful account of the accomplishments of the South Arabians. We do not know what happened later in the Islamic Empires but how much of these accomplishments were entirely or partially Arabian or borrowed, is a moot and very **unimportant** question. I think art is more important than its ethnical or political backgrounds.

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