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Nabataean Painted Pottery Wares: Core vs. Periphery

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Introduction

The Nabataeans were an ancient civilization contemporary with the Romans who, through trading, were able to exert influence over a large portion of the Middle East. Their capital of Petra is well-studied, and many of the cities on the outskirts of the Nabataean kingdom have just recently been studied more in-depth. Hegra, located in the northern part of modern-day Saudi Arabia, is one of such cities located in the south of the Nabataean kingdom. By studying the different motifs found on Nabataean painted pottery found in both Petra and Hegra, we have come to understand the relationship that the capital and metropolitan city of Petra had with cities on the periphery of the kingdom such as Hegra. It has also opened more questions that can further be researched.

Methodology

In order to see the differences in style between Petra and Hegra, a solid sample of each was needed. When Dr. Johnson and I were in Petra this past field season excavating the site of Wadi Mataha, we were able to add to his collection of hundreds of sherds of painted pottery. I used the pottery found at Wadi Mataha since 1999, counting currently to around 800 pieces of pottery, to represent Petra in my study. A joint French and Saudi excavation in Hegra has provided detailed drawings and reports of painted pottery found during their field season. I used these to compare to the Petra pottery found at Wadi Mataha. I classified each pottery sherd individually using the typology created by Hammond (1959) and dated them according to Schmid’s chronology (1997). Once each sherd was dated and categorized, both factors could be considered in comparing the painted pottery techniques of Hegra and Petra.

Results

All the pottery analyzed in this study ranged from the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. to the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Pottery, especially in Petra, dating to the 2nd century B.C.E. to the middle of the 1st century B.C.E. adhered to geometric floral designs. In the middle of the 1st century B.C.E., the major floral motifs became less geometric and fatter in thickness and more realistic. This continued until the middle of the 1st century A.D as these floral designs became augmented with cross-cutting lines and dots that peppered the background of the painted designs found on the pottery. While there is a significantly smaller sample size of pottery found in Hegra, the same transition from geometric floral designs to more robust floral designs with a background of dots and cross-cutting lines except for one exception. Bowl fragments with two pairs of wavy, parallel lines that cross in the center of bowl make up a large minority of the painted pottery found in Hegra. Four of these distinctly southern motifs were found amongst the pottery in Petra.

Discussion

The fact that both pottery samples from Petra and Hegra follow the same stylistic trends show that both cities were affected similarly by the gradual change in motifs on painted pottery of the region. The appearance of four bowls with red, wavy, parallel lines in Petra show that there was contact between
Hegra and Petra. Whether the bowls were produced in Petra based off southern designs or the bowls were made in Hegra and then traded to Petra is unknown. If the bowls were produced in Petra, this would support the hypothesis that increased contact with the periphery regions of the Nabataean kingdom influenced those living in Petra to adapt cultural traits that were existent in the outlying regions of the kingdom. The fact that these bowls were all dated to the 1st century A.D. suggest that the longer the city of Hegra belonged to the Nabataean kingdom, the more those in Petra adopted stylistical trends from the southern region.

Conclusion

Much more research including other periphery cities in the Nabataean kingdom is needed to corroborate the findings of this research. In the coming years, the uncovering of numerous Nabataean painted pottery sherd s at locations and sites throughout the ancient Nabataean kingdom will help to better establish the connection between the Nabataean capital of Petra and other cities that has been suggested by this study.