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An Archaeological Exploration of the Role of Votive Offerings in a Nabataean Burial

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The Brigham Young University Wadi Mataha Project for 2008 was sponsored by BYU’s Department of Anthropology and the David M. Kennedy Center. The excavations took place from 6 May to 3 June 2008, with the excavation of site 16I taking place from 21 to 27 May. The chief purpose of the excavation was to test the theory produced from the previous season’s excavations that artifacts such as ceramics, lithics, and fossils were used as votive offerings in Nabataean ritual situations.1 Site 16, a Nabataean rock-cut tomb, provided an ideal situation for this theory to be tested in the context of Nabataean burial rituals. Along with partner Krystyna Hales, I excavated one of the cists, or individual burial places, within the tomb. During the excavation and subsequent lab analysis of bones and artifacts, we determined that many of the artifacts recovered from our cist support the idea of Nabataean votive offerings being used in funerary rituals.

The entire tomb has been dated to use between the end of the first century B.C.E. and the end of the first century C.E.2 It is probable that loculi were carved out of the tomb as needed rather than all at once, with the earlier ones closer to the door. This is supported through the change of style seen in some of the cists. If this were the case, then cist I would have been carved towards the latter end of the tomb’s usage, most likely in the first century C.E. However, the artifacts recovered offer little diagnostic evidence of dating, so it is difficult to be sure.

Background Information

Many people have heard of Petra, Jordan, the rose-red city carved out of rock, but few people know where it is—not to mention who built it. The extent of most people’s knowledge is that the Treasury, one of its monumental tombs, was included in an Indiana Jones movie as the hiding place of the Holy Grail. The Treasury is a very impressive sight to behold, but there are much grander, more exquisite tombs located throughout Petra. So who were these

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people who spent years carving tombs out of the rocks? Known as Nabataeans, these people created a sanctuary in Petra, and it became their largest city in a kingdom that ruled from at least 323 B.C.E. to 106 C.E., when Rome annexed Arabia.³

Nabataean origins are foggy at best, and scholars have many different theories trying to explain where they may have come from. The best-supported ideas include beginnings in Mesopotamia or northwestern Saudi Arabia based on language comparisons and snippets of recorded history that have survived.⁴ We do know that the Nabataeans were a nomadic tribe of Arabs who settled the area known as Edom. When the Edomites moved into Judea after the Babylonian captivity of the Israelites during the sixth century B.C.E., the area east of the Arabah Valley became vacant. The Nabataeans, who mastered survival in the desert, soon inhabited the desolate desert between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba.⁵ Through the rising up of their kingdom, the Nabataeans subsequently spread as far north as the northern area of the Dead Sea and as far south as northern Arabia. They made their money running trade routes of frankincense, myrrh, bitumen, and other valuable trade items throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East. The Nabataeans’ cunning mastery of water supply in the desert fostered the rise of the kingdom. As their wealth increased, Nabataeans began to settle down; it was during this time that they built the city of Petra, probably during the second to third centuries B.C.E. It was here that the Nabataeans constructed a multitude of tombs, and it is one of these tombs which we excavated in order to gain further insight into the Nabataeans and their burial practices.

The burial practices of a society indicate the social, economic, ritual, and religious complications of that society. Ucko stated, “in the vast majority of cases known ethnographically, a culture or society is not characterized by one type of burial only; on the contrary, one society will undertake several different forms of burial . . . correlated with the status of the deceased.”⁶ In Petra, abundant rock-cut tombs appear in every direction, in every shape and size; some even have elaborate carvings and water features around the entrances, such as the Treasury and the Garden Tomb. There are also more humble and crudely constructed tombs, such as the one I helped excavate. The grander the tombs, the more resources and skill it took to construct, and therefore the more expensive they were; thus, by looking at just the basic tomb structure, size, and décor, we see evidence of social strata within Nabataean society.

Archaeologists have studied many aspects of the Nabataean world: temples, language, iconography, art, theology, and so forth. When studying their burial practices, there is one main source that we gather information from—a short passage recorded by the ancient Greek geographer Strabo: “They think dead bodies no better than manure; as Heraclitus says, corpses are more to be thrown away than dung heaps. Wherefore they bury even

their kings beside their privies." Strabo interpreted these practices among the Nabataeans as being disrespectful and irreverent towards their dead. However, the archaeological record suggests this interpretation was a classic case of cross-cultural misunderstanding. Strabo was raised in the Roman Republic, where cremation was the most popular burial practice.

The Nabataeans, however, left bodies by their dung heaps exposed to the elements and creatures until only bones remained. Then they gathered the bones, wrapped them in cloth shrouds, placed them in wooden boxes, or ossuaries, and finally interred the ossuary in the family tomb. These Nabataean burial practices had no relation to what Strabo knew or understood, resulting in his harsh disapproval. When almost everything else has disappeared with time, the Nabataean tombs have survived millennia; the sheer amount of time, effort, and energy that the Nabataeans put into constructing proper resting places for their dead actually suggests that the dead were a very significant part of the culture. A culture would not expend so many of its resources on something merely considered routine.

Nabataeans left votive offerings at tombs and other ritual sites, such as open-air shrines and niches. Votive offerings are objects deliberately placed in a sacred or special place. This practice can be traced back to ancient cults and continues even today. The common Western practice of taking flowers to the grave of a loved one is one such example. Nabataean votive offerings included common items such as stones, pottery, incense, and foodstuffs, as well as the uncommon shells, fossils, jewelry, and even vessels full of water, considered very sacred. Some votive offerings may have been plain and unaltered by human hands, whereas others show signs of alteration, such as painting, chipping, or carving. In our cist, both altered and unaltered votive offerings were found. Some of these human modifications appear clearly on the objects, but this is not always the case.

Description of Tomb and Cist

Site 16 is a rock-cut tomb located in the Wadi Mataha region of Petra prominently placed overlooking the bed of this ancient waterway. The tomb chamber is 4.6 meters wide east to west, 6.5 meters long north to south and 2.7 meters high. Only accessed by climbing directly up the rock face, the tomb is off of the most common paths used by the Bedouins and tourists. It faces east, as many of the tombs in Petra do, and it receives protection from high winds; its discreet location and its inaccessible entrance both contributed to its state of preservation. Although it was obvious to us that the tomb was raided, probably on multiple occasions, the Bedouins have not used it as shelter for themselves or their animals, at least long-term. There is only a small platform inside the door, which has successfully discouraged potential occupants. The tomb was carved into the rock by hand, with the chisel marks still visible. The architect created both a door to the north (right), and a window to the south (left) into the tomb, providing a substantial amount of light in the tomb during the morning hours (Fig. 1).

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8. Johnson, "Wadi Mataha."
The tomb has twelve loculi (cists) or individual burial chambers cut out of the rock: five on the north, five on the south, and two on the west wall. We excavated cist I, which was located in the center at the south end of the tomb (Fig. 2). Compared to several of the other cists, there were few large rocks on top, and it was only filled about two-thirds of the way with sand.

On this project, we excavated by natural stratigraphic layers or units (SUs), meaning that anytime the soil changed in color, compaction, composition, or artifact type, we started a new SU. Rather than excavating in arbitrary ten-centimeter levels, which is another common excavation method, it was more important for our data to note the natural changes in the soils. This helped in observing which levels had been disturbed, how the artifacts were deposited, and also which levels contained artifacts still in situ, or in their original depositional locations. There were four stratigraphic units in 16I consisting of very fine, light tan, gray sand with some small rocks of sandstone and gray chert. A white, pastelike clay mineral coated some of the rocks and artifacts throughout all four SUs. This mineral has still not been successfully identified, but the lack of its appearance in the other loculi suggests its (or its origins) deliberate placement in the tomb. Generally speaking, SU1 was disturbed and mixed with modern materials.
SU2 supplied a moderate amount of very scattered human bone, along with several ceramic sherds, many small rocks and one very flat, chiseled stone—likely spall from the tomb construction. SU2 also exhibited a very disturbed layer with scattered, broken bone and rock throughout. One item of note was a curved wooden branch about 30cm in length with charred textile wrapped around one end. This item seems to be some type of crude torch (Fig. 3). This was a unique find; so it was turned over to the Jordanian Antiquities Department for safekeeping. Unfortunately, this also prevented us from really studying and examining it further. It was definitely crafted in a deliberate manner and left behind, but it is unclear if it was a votive offering on its own, a tool used in the burial ritual, or merely just a means of providing light for those in attendance, among countless other possibilities.

SU3 contained a collection of scattered human remains in no apparent original context, even from secondarily deposited processes. The bones were nearly all very poorly preserved. A moderate number of Nabataean plain style ceramics were scattered throughout the layer, as well as patches of textile in the north-central portion of the cist. SU3 contained a moderate to heavy layer of rock, seemingly most abundant in the north section of the cist. Also, SU3 had some pieces of intact wood sections which showed evidences of carving and drilling. At this level, the wood pieces seemed to be associated with the textile. Much of the artifact concentration occurred at the north end of the cist, giving the wood and textile there possible significance as pieces of a shroud and ossuary, or bone box used for secondary burials, which could have been placed at this end of the cist.

SU 4 contained the final stratigraphic unit in cist 16I resting on bedrock. The layer contained a scattering of human bone, ceramics, wood, and textiles. A collection of seeds were scattered throughout SU4, but one concentration was noted in the north-central section. Two shallow depressions were observed in the final bedrock floor, one in the very north end and one in the south. These were chiseled out of the floor surface and measured 4–5 cm in depth at the deepest point. The depressions extended the entire width of the cist, forming a shallow, narrow basin at both ends of the cist. One of the other cists in the tomb had evidence of plans to make similar depressions, but they were unfinished. These depressions in cist 16I are unique among the other cists. It is still unclear what purpose these may have served, but a variety of ideas have been proposed. One interpretation suggests this was where the
Nabataeans originally placed offerings or grave goods during burial, because of the small concentration of pottery sherds found in the northeast corner. Another explanation says it may have been a headrest and a footrest, because it is the same on both ends. It also could be that this was where each ossuary was placed—one on either end and one in the middle—because it is estimated that there were three individuals buried here. However, none of these ideas have conclusive evidence that rule out other possibilities. The most important thing for us to recognize is that this particular cist was different from the others in the tomb. Did it have a different architect? Was there something different about the individuals buried here? Was it a stylistic change in Nabataean architecture? Unfortunately, we may never know!

**Human Osteology Analysis**

The purpose of our excavation was to recover the remaining contexts of original Nabataean burials, including the human remains and their votive offerings. However, since this paper focuses on the votive offerings, very little detail will be discussed in regards to the actual burials we excavated. Of course it is important to keep in mind that all of the votive offerings found in this cist were placed in honor of those buried here, which gives purpose and context to the other items of discussion.

Based on the osteological analyses performed, it is estimated that there were three individuals buried in cist 16I. One of these was a juvenile, while the rest of the human bones belonged to two adults, one male and one female. The male was sexed based on a sacrum found; excavated in two pieces that fit together, the sacrum was lighter in color and much more curved than the other sacrum found. The female was sexed according to a pelvis and sacrum found. The sacrum differed from the male in that it was larger, flatter, and darker in color. It was excavated in three pieces that all fit together. The pelvis was badly deteriorated (Fig. 4), but measurements taken in situ suggest that it belonged to a female younger than twenty-five years old. The four teeth found suggest that the individuals they belonged to were young adults, based on wear, with the age range of three of them being from twelve to twenty-four years old, and the other one being from twenty-four to thirty years old.

![Figure 4](image)
Though SU4 had the heaviest concentration of human bone, most of the bone recovered was very scattered. However, the placement of the female pelvis in the northwest corner is noteworthy. Separated from most of the other human bone and other artifacts, the pelvis was surrounded by several ceramic pieces. Bellwald mentions the discovery of an adult human pelvis surrounded by ceramics—“five, unpainted, nearly identical bowls”—in the main Siq of Petra. This suggests the possibility of a ritual practice by Nabataeans.

The bone must have been removed from the body after its decomposition because there are no traces of any cuts or other damage. Perhaps these deposits are the result of a commemorative rite, consisting of the removal of a bone from a skeleton and its careful reburial. . . . There are other examples of such Nabataean postfuneral rites in Petra. Apart from this new find in the Siq, a tomb in the northern part of Petra, either Nabataean or Roman in date, was excavated in 1958–59. The burial was well preserved and apparently undisturbed in modern times, but the feet had been severed and the pelvis was missing (Parr 1960). It is clear that the pelvis must have been removed after the decomposition of the body since the rest of the skeleton still lay in its original position and showed no sign of damage. This, together with the new find in the Siq, suggests the existence of a tradition among Nabataeans of the removal of certain bones, particularly the pelvis, after decomposition of the body for further commemorative rites.9

It is merely conjecture for us to suggest that this might have been the case with the female pelvis. However, its particular placement away from most of the other finds, its resting atop the north-end depression, and its being surrounded by ceramics all suggest a deliberate placing rather than its haphazardly ending up in that position after two millennia. Therefore, the suggestion that its placement might have been related to a postfuneral rite is not implausible, especially with similar evidence from other burials in Petra.

Faunal Bone Analysis

The analysis of faunal bones can tell a lot about the people and culture of a particular site. For instance, any butcher marks on the faunal bones may suggest certain ways the animals were being used by the habitants, tools they might have used, or their butchering methods. Also, the occurrence of faunal bone from one type of species with the absence of another common to the area may suggest the community preferred one type of meat, or that there may have been certain restrictions on usage of particular species. The presence of juvenile faunal bones versus adult faunal bones can also determine possible animal husbandry or merely someone’s preferred meal. Without a specific context to relate to, it is difficult to name all of the ways faunal bone analysis can contribute significant data; however, suffice it to say that because of countless possibilities in what it may or may not say about the people, culture, or specific archaeological site, faunal bone analysis is crucial.

There were only three faunal bone specimens excavated from 16I, and they

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all belonged to a juvenile goat. The inhabitants of Petra have herded goats for millennia, with record of this being the Nabataeans’ main occupation after settling. It is not surprising then that we found goat bones in the cist. However, it is unlikely, though not impossible, that a goat (particularly a juvenile) would have climbed up into the tomb on its own. Therefore, the possibility should be considered that a Nabataean deliberately placed a goat, or these particular parts of a goat, in the cist during the funerary rituals. Nabataeans commonly feasted as part of funerals, and these faunal remains could be evidence of such a practice for those buried in this tomb. Whether part of a feast or some other ritual, the evidence suggests that these goat bones are probable votive offerings.

Ceramics Analysis

In archaeology, ceramic analysis can often provide diagnostic evidence for dating purposes, as well as the types, forms, and decorations used by a culture on their ceramics. Though as a group, a pile of sherds may all look the same, a trained eye can separate out sherds based on wares, painting styles, and even whether it was a jug, bowl, or plate. In Petra, there is no want for Nabataean ceramics; sherds are so abundant that they crunch under your feet as you hike through the wadi. Archaeologists have been able to substantially study the Nabataean pottery, so it is very useful in dating sites down to a specific period of particular pottery. Unfortunately, cist I lacked any diagnostic pottery pieces that would help us specifically date the burials.

Three of the four stratigraphic units contained ceramic sherds but unfortunately no complete ceramic vessels. Eighty-six ceramic sherds were recovered from the cist, and they originated from no fewer than fifty-three vessels. More than 75 percent of the ceramics were modified after the vessels were broken, either with paint or mineral around the edges of the sherds or by chipping on the edges and surfaces. This suggests that the Nabataeans brought them as individual votive offerings rather than vessels to be used as containers.

Lithic Analysis

Archaeologists most often use lithic analysis to see what kinds of stone tools a particular people is using and making, as well as what materials they are using, where it comes from, and how they are getting it. The types of tools used can also help determine particular lifestyles among a people, such as what they were hunting and eating. Larger lithic samples can also supply loads of information, like what kind of grain was being ground into meal or possible building materials depending on their context. Larger rocks, natural or modified, as well as smaller lithic flakes left over from making stone tools were all used as votive offerings by the Nabataeans. They were common items, found along most paths a Nabataean would have walked, and therefore lithics were easily accessible like most objects used as votive offerings. Lithics are also easily altered for a worshipper’s particular purpose in offering. A few of the smaller lithic flakes appeared in our cist, but the majority of the rocks were much larger. The most noteworthy lithic was incised with a Nabataean “K” (Fig. 5). One interpretation is that this “K” stands for Kutba, the Nabataean equivalent for the Egyptian god Thoth, which gives substantial support to identify this lithic as a votive offering.
Wood Analysis

Wood is important archaeologically because it can be dated using carbon-14 testing. Though these tests are very expensive, it can be worth the cost when no other means of dating a site exist. Also, the types and forms of wood uncovered in archaeological situations can give insight into construction techniques, trading for foreign building materials, traditions of furniture, utensils, weaponry, transportation, and even burial rituals, depending on its context.

We recovered ninety-four wood fragments from the cist. All of the wood had been worked, and nail holes occurred in four of the pieces. The fragments included five pieces of planks, two wedges, and two corner pieces. The partial planks with nail holes (Fig. 6) and the corner pieces suggest that a type of square wooden object held together by nails was placed within the burial chamber. It is not outrageous for us to interpret these as evidence for the burial of at least one ossuary in this cist.

Textile Analysis

Textile analysis gives insight into production methods of cloth, styles of
clothing, and other forms of textiles, as well as their uses. In Nabataean burials, the bones were often wrapped in linen shrouds before being placed in ossuaries or burial chambers. We recovered ten pieces of linen from the cist. The largest piece contained three to four centimeters of the selvedge (the original edge of the textile). It also showed deliberate ribbing within the fabric, presumed to be decoration. In this same textile, there are two holes still visible, where it is possible a brooch or other jewelry was pinned (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, tomb raiders stole objects of value centuries ago. Another textile of note was a much smaller piece, but it had three pieces of dark purple wool embedded into the weaves of the linen. Purple often represented royalty, and it was a common practice by the “lesser” of society to decorate textile with it in order to imitate elevated status.10 Whether the family members were trying to imitate status, or they just put a special piece of cloth in the grave as a votive offering or shroud is hard to support without original context.

![Figure 7](image)

During the 2006 excavation season in the region near Petra, a Nabataean burial was uncovered, showing textiles laid over the deceased’s face. The rest of the burial was encased in a leather shroud. It is possible that our textile was used in the same manner, covering either the face, the body, or the bones.11 Even many cultures today cover up the faces and bodies of their deceased before or during burial. Though this practice can generally be interpreted as a sign of respect, it is presumptuous to assign more meaning than this to Nabataean burials because we simply do not know what significance the covering of a body may have held for them.

Miscellaneous Artifact Analysis

We also found a variety of other artifacts within the cist that were possibly used as votive offerings, including four fossils (one was manipulated), a piece of manipulated petrified wood, two nails made of iron, presumably used

to hold the ossuary together, and the most unique find in our cist—a small fragment of parchment (Fig. 8) inscribed with what Johnson thought to be two cursive Nabataean letters and dates from 1-100CE. The Jordanian Department of Antiquities is in possession of the parchment, because it is a rare find—particularly thousands of years later! Nabataeans commonly used parchment, but further analysis has not been possible. However, we can conclude that some type of written document was placed in with the burials—whether as being to the deceased or perhaps to a deity on behalf of the deceased, or countless other possibilities—and therefore it can be considered a votive offering.

Figure 8

Conclusion

We found substantial evidence that supports the theory that Nabataeans did use votive offerings in the burial ritual. This evidence includes the faunal bone, ceramics, lithics, wood fragments, textile pieces, fossils, and even the parchment recovered from the cist—all of which were deliberately placed in this cist by the Nabataeans during the funerary rituals or subsequent visits to the tomb. It is still unclear as to whether these offerings were being made to the deceased or on behalf of the deceased to one of the many Nabataean deities. It is hoped that further evidence recovered from subsequent excavations will help to more clearly and accurately answer these questions. We also conclude that the burials in cist I were secondary burials according to the typical Nabataean burial tradition. The sheer amount of wood retrieved, as well as their shapes, the presence of nail holes, and the discovery of two nails all suggest that the bones were placed in ossuaries and may have been wrapped in linen shrouds.