Friends, Foes, and Trading Partners: The Exchange of Architectural Styles between Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra

Rachel Huntsman
INTRODUCTION

Literary evidence from ancient historiographers, such as Josephus, describe extensive political connections between Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra. For instance, Herod the Great (ruled 37–4 BCE) was connected to the Nabatean royal house through his mother, but Josephus’s writings depict a strained relationship between the rulers of these two kingdoms. Such writings, however, are largely silent on matters of social and material history. On the other hand, archaeologists have spent much time tracing Herodian and Nabataean architectural features to Hellenistic or Roman sources without always spending much time examining unique connections between these neighboring kingdoms. Material evidence suggests important economic ties and cultural interaction between these neighboring kingdoms; however, this paper will demonstrate that Herod’s building program not only served as a conduit for Roman techniques and styles but sometimes exerted a direct, unique influence on architecture in Petra.

As Alexander the Great conquered the Near East, Hellenism followed closely behind him. This process of Hellenization continued and was accelerated as his successors followed the Alexandrian precedents by establishing Greek poleis in their kingdoms. For instance, Ptolemaic kings founded Ptolemais in Palestine, and Philadelphia in modern Amman. As the spread of Hellenism continued, Greek temple styles flooded the Mediterranean and the Near East. Examples of Hellenistic buildings and architecture continued to shape the entire Near East, with some of the largest classical cities being built outside of Greece. The Ionic order and, in particular, Greek models began to define how temples were built, and palaces, fortresses, and civic buildings were increasingly adopting Greek forms. Notably, Hellenism even encroached on the conservative Jewish kingdom. Before the Maccabean revolt (167–160 BCE), a gymnasium was built in Jerusalem and, less shockingly, the first agoras and burial loculi began to appear in smaller communities in the northern Negev. Because Roman architecture itself was heavily influenced by Hellenistic styles, the advent of Roman power and influence in the first century BCE reinforced Greek influence, adding to it new features of Roman engineering and stylistic elaboration.

2 Ehud Netzer, The Architecture of Herod the Great Builder (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 288–92; Jane Taylor, Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 91. While Taylor observes that the two kingdoms “doubtless . . . lifted ideas from each other” as well as from Hellenistic and Roman sources, she only notes direct architectural connection between Herodian Judaea and Nabataea in passing.
6 Ward-Perkins, Roman Imperial Architecture, 309.
By observing the pattern of Hellenization and then Romanization and using similar vessels to duplicate building layouts, scholars have made several proposals on the trajectory of the cultural influence between Herodian Judaea and Nabataea. Two of these proposals I will mention specifically. Andreas Kropp has observed that the diffusion of architectural features seems to follow a consistent pattern: generally there was overall eastward progression from Rome to Herodian cities and then to Petra. Stephan Schmid, however, has suggested that there may have been a reciprocal exchange of goods and ideas between Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra. This is seen in the use of planting pots in Petra’s city center which resemble ones used in Jericho and pseudo-Nabataean fine ware used by the elite in Jerusalem. Significantly, these two theories do not have to contradict each other, because while the trajectory of architectural trends proceeded eastward, I assert that there was simultaneously trade between the nations of Judaea and Nabataea which influenced each other. Another remarkable recent connection between Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra was made by Leigh-Ann Bedal in her research about the “Lower Market” next to the Great Temple in Petra. Bedal has documented how the pool complex, which was previously thought to have simply been a market, in fact mirrors the layout of Herod’s pleasure garden at the Herodium. Because this pool complex dates to the reign of Aretas IV (ruled ca. 9 BCE–40 CE), this layout likely originated in Judaea and was later replicated in Petra’s city center.

As a result, Bedal’s approach, which sees important Herodian mediation, is particularly helpful because rather than only looking at general Hellenistic or Roman features that might have been duplicated by the Nabataeans, it considers specific examples, such as floor plans and layouts. This paper will review some of these specific examples—such as similar implementations of Roman engineering in porch extensions and local adaptations of Hellenistic features, such as the placement of urns on funerary monuments—which reinforce the proposition that there was a path of influence from Rome to Petra through Judaea, because these archaeological features appear in Judaea before they do in Petra. New evidence also needs to be considered—namely the use of hexagonal flooring first in Herodian Masada and then in the Great Temple complex in Petra contemporary with the creation of this flooring pattern in Italy—suggesting an even closer architectural connection than previously thought between these two kingdoms.

SETTING THE HISTORICAL STAGE

---

7 Andrea J. M. Kropp, “Nabataean Petra: The Royal Palace and the Herod Connection,” Boreas 32 (2009): 43–60. Kropp notes a pathway from Rome through Judaea to Nabataea. This view may be preferable to direct Roman influence since Nabataea had been resistant to Rome until Aretas IV, who only began his reign at the end of Herod’s life. This is based on the story that Josephus presents in AJ 16:271–355 and because the Petran era of building projects (which were built in a more classical style) does not begin until Aretas’s reign or possibly until the very end of Oboda III’s reign. See Taylor, Petra and the Lost Kingdom, 104–19.


10 Bedal, “A Pool Complex in Petra’s City Center,” 23–41.

11 Bedal, “A Pool Complex in Petra’s City Center,” 23–41.
The relationship between Judaea and Nabataea can best be termed as strained. One of the earliest mentions of the relationship between the Jews and the Nabataeans dates to before the independence of Judea. Soon after the Jewish revolt (167 BCE), the Jewish leader Judas Maccabeus (influential from 167 BCE until his death in 160 BCE) is reported to have met the Nabataeans “peaceably.”12 This peace ended in Alexander Jannaeus’s reign (103–76 BCE) when Aretas II (103–96 BCE) gave aid to Gaza, which Alexander was trying to capture. Under Obodas I (96–86 BCE), the Nabataean army defeated Alexander in the Golan, but later the Nabateans, under Aretas III (86–62 BC), were beaten after they attempted to invade Judaea from Damascus.13

A shift in Judaean-Nabataean politics came with the introduction of Herod’s father, Antipater, to the Judaean political scene. After being appointed as the chief official of Hyrcanus (king of Judaea 67–66 BCE; ethnarch 47–40 BCE), one of the first accomplishments Josephus attributes to Antipater was the establishment of friendly relations with the Nabataeans and other peoples who had previously been antagonistic to Judaea. The diplomatic relationship between Judaea and Nabataea was sealed with a personal one, with Antipater marrying Cypros, the daughter of a Nabataean nobleman. When Aristobulus (king of Judaea 66–63 BCE) took Jerusalem from his brother Hyrcanus shortly after their mother’s death in 67 BC, Antipater took the dethroned Hyrcanus to Petra, where Hyrcanus promised Aretas III that he would return cities to Nabataea that had been taken by Alexander Jannaeus. Aretas then took the combined forces of the Nabataean army and the Jews who followed Hyrcanus in order to attempt to take Jerusalem back from Aristobulus.14

During the squabbles between the Hasmonean brothers Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, Antipater brought his Nabataean wife back to Petra, along with their children, one of whom was Herod. Nevertheless, when Herod came into power (37–4 BCE), he was not friendly with the new Nabataean king, Malichus I (ruled 59–30 BCE). When Herod was fighting against Antigonus, the son of Aristobulus, for control of Judaea, he sought aid from Malichus, but Malichus refused to help him. Relations continued to sour until 32 BCE, when Judaea and Nabataea went to war against each other, resulting in Jewish victory in 31 BCE.15 Relations improved under the next Nabataean king, Obodas III (30–9 BCE). This can be seen through Josephus’s records, which state that Obadas’s minister, Syllaesus, was dining with Herod when Syllaesus saw his host’s sister, Salome, and started pursuing her to be his wife. He and Salome started a scandalous affair, but Herod refused a marriage between the two unless Syllaesus was willing to convert to Judaism, which he was not.16

While Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE) was a much younger contemporary of Herod, their reigns overlapping less than five years, they had similar approaches to their relationship with the Roman Empire. When Syllaesus went to Rome to complain about Herod and to try to take the Nabataean throne after the death of Obodas III in 9 BCE, he was surprised to find that Aretas had already risen to power. Because Augustus was not pleased with Aretas’s accession without his acknowledgement,17 Aretas sent many gifts to Augustus in an effort to please him, but they were refused. Augustus even considered giving the Nabataean kingdom to Herod and probably would

12 1 Macc 5:25.
14 Josephus, AJ 14.8–21, 121.
17 He was displeased because Aretas’s succession was not authorized by Rome.
have it not for Herod’s declining health and his bad relationship with and murders of his various sons. Eventually, Augustus finally accepted Aretas’s ambassadors and gifts, confirming his kingship and establishing a similar relationship with the Nabataeans as he had with Judaea.\(^\text{18}\)

After Herod’s death, Aretas IV had another connection with the Herodians through his daughter. She married Herod Antipas, who was the tetrarch of Galilee (4 BCE–49 CE), but he divorced her in 27 CE to marry his lover Herodias.\(^\text{19}\) This marriage and the attempted marriage between Syllaeus and Salome are important to establishing a connection between Herod and Aretas IV because they are specific examples of situations in which influential figures of both Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra would have been able to see the architectural styles their neighbor was implementing. Similarly, Herod’s matriarchal line, through Cypros, suggests that there were opportunities for noble men and women, along with any handlers, servants, or guards, to have direct exposure to each other’s architecture.

**HEROD’S AND PETRA’S BUILDING PROJECTS**

After acquiring his kingdom, Herod began his next great accomplishments: his extensive building projects.\(^\text{20}\) The Jerusalem temple, Fortress Antonia, Masada, Caesarea Maritima, palaces at Jericho, and the palace and tomb complex known as the Herodian are just a few of these. The rebuilt and expanded Jerusalem temple is one of his most well-known projects, leading it to be known as “Herod’s temple,” but he also built other religious buildings—such as a memorial for the patriarchs and matriarchs in Hebron, and temples for the imperial cult.\(^\text{21}\) His appreciation for Hellenistic and Roman traditions can be seen in cultural buildings like hippodromes, amphitheaters, baths, and gymnasia.\(^\text{22}\) He built “fortlets,” established military colonies to defend his borders,\(^\text{23}\) and implemented infrastructure such as water systems, sewers, and roads.\(^\text{24}\) While his rationale behind all of these building projects is unknown,\(^\text{25}\) these structures no doubt advanced his public reputation and pleased multiple groups of people. For his Jewish subjects he rebuilt the temple, making sure that it would not be defiled in doing so by having it built by Jewish priests.\(^\text{26}\) To appease and seek favor with his Roman patrons, he established the imperial cult in Gentile regions of his kingdom, building temples to Roma\(^\text{27}\) and Augustus in Caesarea Maritima\(^\text{28}\) and another temple to Augustus in Paneias.\(^\text{29}\)

Similarly, the Nabataean kingdom started a large building project in Petra years later during the end of Obodas III’s reign and at the beginning of Aretas IV’s. It was at this time when Nabataean leadership started following Herod’s lead in cultivating a relationship with Rome, as

---


\(^{20}\) There were also familiar, local, and intraregional conflicts which can be read about in Josephus *AJ* 15.

\(^{21}\) Peter Richardson, *Herod, King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 183–84.

\(^{22}\) Richardson, *Herod*, 186.


\(^{24}\) Richardson, *Herod*, 188–91.

\(^{25}\) For more information on reasoning behind these projects, see Richardson, *Herod*, 191–95.

\(^{26}\) Richardson, *Herod*, 195. Richardson also states that this is one of the examples in which Herod needed to “play up” his Jewishness because he came from an illegitimate Jewish line.

\(^{27}\) The patron goddess of Rome.


seen by Syllaeus’s visits to Rome and Aretas’s attempts to get in the favor of Augustus. The specific examples of architecture I will be examining come from these building periods.  

ARCHITECTURAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN JUDAEA AND PETRA

Of all Herod’s building projects, the most famous was his rebuilding and massive expansion of the Jerusalem temple. He first doubled the external size of the temple proper while maintaining the internal dimensions of the porch, holy place, and Holy of Holies (cf. 1 Kings 6). Most of the overall precinct’s expansion, however, took the form of an extension of the platform. Originally constituting a five-hundred-cubit square, in 23 BCE the platform began to be expanded by Herod to its current irregular rectangular shape, which is the platform upon which the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque now stand. Herod’s extension of the platform employed Roman technology and engineering, creating a *cryptoporticus*, or a system of arches, which supported the platform above it (See figure 1). This technology avoided the expensive and difficult process of filling in the space between retaining walls and also created a large open space beneath the southern end of the Temple Mount that is now known as Solomon’s Stables.

Similarities to this platform can be seen in the porch of the Urn Tomb in Petra. The Urn Tomb, dated approximately to the first century CE, is numbered among the Palace Tombs because it is adjacent to the Corinthian Tomb and the Tomb of Sextus Florentinus. While the Urn Tomb is like other tomb façades in Petra in its general shape and function, it also features its own artificial platform in the front of the façade (seen in figure 2). This platform consists of arched structures similar to the *cryptoporticus* used by Herod’s Temple Mount extension mentioned previously (compare the close-up of the vaulting in figure 3). These two buildings are thus examples of using Roman engineering to create platforms for local monuments, but because Herod’s temple was completed earlier and was much more famous, the builders of the Urn Tomb would certainly have been familiar with it and may well have patterned their platform on it.

The Use and Placement of Funerary Urns at the Mausoleum at the Herodian and the Lion Triclinium

The Herodian, built between 23–15 BCE, was a large complex encompassing twenty-five hectares that included a palace-fortress, bathhouse, pool complex, and mausoleum. Ehud Netzer’s excavations have revealed that the mausoleum, described by Josephus as the burial place of Herod, was a three-story monument with a pedestal and a *tholos* above it and with funerary urns as decorations (see figure 4). This type of structure was unusual in the Hellenistic period, but Herod’s use of it can be seen as paying tribute to the earlier Mausoleum of Augustus,

---

30 Taylor, *Petra and the Lost Kingdom*, 104–19.
34 Richardson, *Herod*, 199.
37 A cylinder usually topping a structure.
which took a similar form.\textsuperscript{39} What sets the building apart is not its decoration with funerary urns but rather their placement on the roof of the monument. Herod’s tomb has one central urn and six urns on the edge of the roof, which was not usual for this time.\textsuperscript{40}

Parallels can be seen in certain tomb façades in Petra that likewise have funerary urns on the edge of the roof rather than in other places where they are usually found. For instance, the Lion Triclinium, dated to the first century CE, has a façade similar to other monuments at Petra, including a gable over the entryway (see figure 5).\textsuperscript{41} Cut from the rock, this monument does not have a physical roof, but the gable serves, for the purpose of this paper, as a pseudoroof. This gable includes an urn at the apex, another on the right-hand corner of the gable, and the remains of an urn on the left-hand corner.\textsuperscript{42} In many places around Petra, there are also \textit{acroteria}, or platforms where it appears an urn could be placed, and once again these are found on both the apex and the sides of these gables.\textsuperscript{43}

While urns began to be widely used in the Levant for funerary purposes between 100 BCE and 100 CE, Peleg-Barkat has noted that the specific placement of urns along the edges of the roofs of funerary monuments presents similarities between monuments in Judaea and Nabataea that are not widely paralleled elsewhere.\textsuperscript{44} While there are differences between a freestanding monument and a stone-cut façade, a similarity can be seen by the additional placement of funerary urns on the edges of monuments as well as simply on the top.

\textit{Hexagonal Flooring Patterns in Masada and the Great Temple}

Masada, which was constructed between 37 and 10 BCE,\textsuperscript{45} is one of Herod’s grand projects and the most notable of his desert fortresses. This is due in part to the fame Josephus gave it in describing the Roman siege and the mass suicide of the zealots who held the fortress during the First Jewish Revolt (66–73 CE).\textsuperscript{46} Positioned on top of a massive plateau, this desert fortress-palace was well protected as well as luxurious. The Northern Palace was a feat to build, as it cascades down the side of the mountain in three tiers that include sleeping quarters, a courtyard, and baths.\textsuperscript{47} In this palace we find another example of a connection between architectural décor used in both Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra. In rooms seventy-eight and eighty-eight in the Northern Palace, as well as in the \textit{palaestra}\textsuperscript{48} of the bathhouse, is an allover hexagonal flooring pattern, the earliest example of which is found outside of Italy (figure 6).\textsuperscript{49} Besides being the first example outside of Italy, the usage of the allover hexagonal flooring patterns here follows so closely the stylistic trends in Rome that some scholars attempt to move the dating of these rooms so that they will postdate the introduction of the style in Italy.\textsuperscript{50}

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{40} Peleg-Barkat, “Fit for a King,” 155.
\bibitem{41} Kloner, “Amphorae and Urns,” 68–69, 74.
\bibitem{42} Kloner, “Amphorae and Urns,” 68–69.
\bibitem{43} Kloner, “Amphorae and Urns,” 73.
\bibitem{44} Peleg-Barkat, “Fit for a King,” 155.
\bibitem{45} Richardson, \textit{Herod}, 148.
\bibitem{46} \textit{BJ} 7.252–406
\bibitem{48} Wrestling field in the gymnasiuor or bathhouse.
\bibitem{50} Rina Talgam and Orit Peleg, “Appendix 5: Mosaic Pavements in Herod’s Day,” in Netzer, \textit{The Architecture of Herod}, 288–92. Talgam, Peleg, and Foerster conclude that these floors can be dated between 37 and 30 BC: the earlier date as opposed to the proposed dating at 12 BC, after Herod’s return from Rome.
\end{thebibliography}
Herod’s quick adoption of this new trend seems to attest to his close connections with his Roman patrons and his personal visit to Rome at the advent of the reign of Augustus.

This same allover hexagonal flooring pattern is found in the Lower Temenos of the Great Temple in Petra, where it is executed on a much bigger scale than in Herod’s palace at Masada (see figures 7 and 8). One of the many new construction projects started in the late first century BCE, the Great Temple may have been commissioned by Obodas III and its completion may be attributed to Aretas IV.51 A similar allover hexagonal flooring is present in a much bigger setting than in Masada. Given that the end of the reigns of Herod and Obodas was a period when relations between Judaea and Nabataea were reasonably friendly, builders in Petra may well have picked up this very new style from Herodian projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at some similarities in architecture between Herodian Judaea and Nabataean Petra, tying the archaeology with the history provided by Josephus. The historical ties need to be taken critically because Josephus wrote literarily as opposed to scientifically, as history is written today, with the result that some of the stories he recorded concerning Judaeans and Nabataeans may have been distorted. In addition, further research needs to be done to find more connections between the Herodian building project and the one undertaken during the end of Obodas III’s and Aretas IV’s reign. Nevertheless, existing archaeological evidence supports important connections between Herodian Judaea and Nabataea Petra.

The first indication of this connection is in the general trend of an eastward progression of architectural styles and engineering techniques from Rome through Judaea to Petra. The literary accounts of the responses of these kingdoms to growing Roman influence support this transfer of engineering and styles. While Hellenism had already strongly influenced different forms of architecture in the Levant,53 this growing progression of Roman influence is evident specifically in the construction of artificial platforms through cryptoportici and the use of allover hexagonal flooring patterns. The implementation of this pattern resulted from the relationship specific leaders had with the Roman Empire. It was in this very period that Antipater and his son Herod began actively seeking out Rome’s help for Judaea. Likewise, with Syllaes’s visit to Rome in the same period, we have our first literary evidence of a Nabataean leader going to Rome to try to establish a relationship, a precedent which Aretas IV followed.

Strikingly, Aretas IV seems to have tried to follow the lead of Herod, who strived and succeeded in forming a close relationship with Rome; subsequently, it is during the reigns of these two kings that the biggest expansion of building projects occurred.

Thus, it seems that as the leaders of Herodian Judaea and Nabataea Petra realized the necessity of a relationship with Rome, their openness to Roman influence allowed, or even encouraged, adoption of architectural styles from Italy, beginning a blending of Roman architectural styles with local features. Interestingly, the period in which Judaea and Nabataea had the closest relationship—which was marked by accounts of Herod dining with Syllaes, the minister of Obodas III, and by Syllaes’s attempted marriage to Salome, Herod’s sister—coincided with the arrival of shared architectural features.54 This period was shortly before the appearance of allover hexagonal flooring, first in Masada and then in the Great

51 Taylor, *Petra and the Lost Kingdom*, 113-119.
Temple, which may suggest that this style traveled more easily between Judaea and Nabataea due to a less strained political situation.

Fig. 2. The Urn Tomb, featuring the artificial platform creating a porch (Photo by R. Huntsman June 6, 2016).
Fig. 3. Interior of the *cryptoporticus* providing support for the porch in front of the Urn Tomb (Photo by R. Huntsman, June 6, 2016).
Fig. 5. Lion Triclinium in Petra, with visible Urns on the top of the gable and on the right side (Photo by R. Huntsman, May 3, 2017)
Fig. 6. Allover hexagonal mosaic flooring at Herod’s northern palace at Masada (Photo by R. Huntsman, May 8, 2017)
Fig. 7. Allover hexagonal flooring design in the Great Temple at Petra (Photo by R. Huntsman, May 27, 2016)
Fig. 8. Allover hexagonal flooring design in the Great Temple at Petra. Original on bottom of image, reconstruction on top (Photo by R. Huntsman, May 27, 2016).