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A Closer Look at Nabataean Burials
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Overview
The ancient city of Petra, capital of the Nabataean kingdom that flourished in present-day Jordan from 300 BCE to 300 CE, is famous for monumental rock-cut tombs. While much is known of their construction and artistic influences, little research has been conducted on the types of burial found inside them. The Nabataeans interred their dead in two principal ways: primary burial, in which a corpse was placed in a grave without significant postmortem alteration, and secondary burial, in which a corpse was exposed until the flesh had fully decomposed and bones could be collected and buried. It is still unclear under what circumstances individuals received primary versus secondary burial.

Methods
I studied trade routes and the expansion of the Nabataean kingdom in the first century CE, examined frequencies of burial types from Nabataean sites, and analyzed human remains in BYU’s Petra collection for evidence of post-decarnation manipulation of the bones. I also explored a possible emphasis on defleshing through comparative analysis of similar Near Eastern burial practices. Given the extensive contact Petra had with cosmopolitan Mediterranean cultures in the first century CE, there was likely mixing of religious ideas.

Results
• Both primary and secondary burials occurred alongside one another in the first century CE among both elite and lower-class families, with no apparent divisions based on age or sex
• Secondary burial is primarily seen in or near the city of Petra
• Comparative analysis indicates that the soul was closely linked to the flesh of the body (rather than the bones) in similar Semitic and Greek burial customs

Conclusions
These results indicate that to Nabataeans, the way in people were buried was less important than the place where their remains were interred. Nabataeans who traveled extensively or settled new towns still probably felt strong ties to their central “homeland”. Defleshing bones was not only the most practical way of transporting a body back to Petra, but such remains were also free of dangerous, contaminating flesh and the lingering presence of the deceased’s spirit.

Selected References