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**Jane Taylor, *Petra and the Lost City of the Nabataeans*
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002**

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One of the abiding mysteries of ancient and classical history is the nearly complete disappearance of the Nabataeans from history even though the ruins of its splendid capital, Petra, remain a major tourist attraction today in Jordan. This was a people, most probably of Semitic origin, whose ethnicity was probably Arabic but whose pre-history includes connections with ancient Mesopotamia. They were present from perhaps as early as the eighth century B.C.E. to the conquest by the Muslims in the seventh century C.E.

At their height, from approximately the second century B.C.E. until the first century C.E., they ruled over what is now northeastern Arabia (the ancient land of Edom), most of Jordan, the Negev and the Sinai. For a period, they even controlled Damascus and part of Lebanon. Originally nomads from the desert, they came to dominate the trading routes between Egypt, Syria, Arabia and Mesopotamia. They were famous as the purveyors of the biblical plant-based substances of frankincense and myrrh. They also dominated the trade from Yemen and South Arabia to Syria. As such, they were active in the trade of pepper, ginger, sugar and cotton. They were also participants in sea trade with links all the way to China.

The Nabataeans as traders established a number of cities, but the most spectacular were Petra in the center and Bostra in the north. Petra is so spectacular that it has now been declared a United Nations landmark. It is noted for its public buildings and especially for its gardens and waterworks. Above all, Petra is noted for its many tombs and temples so that it was a religious center as well as an urban trading nexus. The Nabataeans were able to support their culture in an arid and semi-arid environment through a highly developed hydraulic system which collected water from cisterns that gathered water from the mountainside.

And yet, this civilization, which emerged from the ancient lands of Edom and Moab (where Arabia meets Jordan) in the seventh century and was powerful enough to ward off attacks by the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Ptolemys and Seleucids, has become a cipher. Part of the reason for this is that it apparently never developed a fully written language of its own (although there is a Nabataean script). Its dealings were conducted in Aramaic. Much of what we know about the kingdom including its capital city is in the language of outsiders—Greek, Latin, Hebrew.

It seems odd given their eminence in commerce, architecture and hydraulics, their spectacular capital built out of rock, and their longevity that the Nabataeans should be a 'lost kingdom.' The vicissitudes of history largely account for this submergence. The kingdom became a tributary of Rome in 63 C.E. and was annexed in 109 C.E. Gradually, Petra sank to a position of a provincial capital. Riven by religious strife in the Byzantine

period from the fourth to seventh century, the Nabataeans gradually lost their identity. The final step in the road to anonymity was the Muslim conquest after 630 when the Nabataeans disappeared into a local, mainly Bedouin population.

In recent years, there have been attempts to uncover Nabataean history at Petra and other Nabataean cities. This book is one attempt. The author does not claim to be a scholar in ancient or classical history. Rather she is a professional photographer. As a result, this work is a prime example of a 'coffee table book.' In this respect, it succeeds. There are magnificent photographs of all eras of Nabataean history from the beginning until the Muslim conquest. Accompanied by text, various aspects of Nabataean life are reproduced including ancient scripts on inscriptions, temples, tombs, and daily life. The centerpiece is, of course, Petra, which is reproduced through colored pictures in all its grandeur. Other cities that were part of the Nabataean realm, such as Hegra and Bostra, are also subjects of photographs with accompanying text written in clear and precise prose.

This work should be taken for what it is: an introduction to a culture and its capital, which have been unjustly forgotten. It is not meant to be an analytical examination of socio-economic conditions in Southwest Asia in ancient and classical times. It is rather a very beautiful travel book with such high caliber photography that it lends itself for possible use as a slide presentation for educational purposes and for civic organizations. It could also be a basis with narration based on the excellent accompanying text for a film series. However, the book is not just for laymen. It has copious citations and an extensive bibliography. The author also appends a very useful chronology and glossary. As a result, the book is recommended not just for laymen interested in the topic but also for scholars in various disciplines who wish to pursue the topic further. It is worth pursuing!