

Spring 2024 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Echoes of the Past, Visions of the Future
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**Making the Desert Bloom:
The Art, Architecture, and Archaeology of the Nabataeans
Past and Present**

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Abstract: In the historical record, the Nabataeans were labeled as both “barbarians” and “exceptionally fond of freedom,” of living “like that of wild beasts” and in “magnificent style.” These contradicting accusations from ancient Greek and Roman writers present the image of a people desperately caught between the civilized world and that of the corrupting east. But the Nabataeans were far from bystanders in their own story. Instead, through their control of the incense trade and the natural landscape, they cultivated a beautiful and sophisticated architectural and artistic tradition that endured past the annexation of the kingdom by the Romans in the early 2nd century CE and which scholars are still uncovering. Through the exploration of two important Nabataean sites—Petra, the Nabataean capital city, and Khirbet et-Tannur, a Roman-period Nabataean temple—we will consider how the Nabataeans used material culture to assert their independence and transformed the landscape around them, making the desert bloom.

Timeline:

Second half of the 1st millennium BCE: Nabataeans as non-sedentary incense traders, a lifestyle that left few physical traces.

3rd/2nd century BCE: earliest evidence of the Nabataean in Petra.

Ca. 64 BCE: Romans gain a foothold in the region. Some scholars suspect the Nabataeans became a Client Kingdom (like Judaea) at this time, but others are unconvinced of a formalized relationship.

Ca. 31 BCE: Ptolemaic Egypt under Cleopatra falls to Rome. Augustus attempts to take over aspects of the incense trade from the Nabataeans.

Late 1st century BCE: the Nabataeans monumentalize many of their cities, most notably at Petra but also elsewhere in what is now southern Syria, Jordan, the Negev, and northern Saudi Arabia. Some incense is repackaged at Petra as perfume and sold to the Mediterranean world as a result.

1st century CE: the Nabataeans expand further into the landscape surrounding Petra.

Ca. 106 CE: the Romans annex the Nabataean kingdom, transforming it into the Roman province of Arabia.

2nd century CE: practitioners of Nabataean religion construct the temple at Khirbet et-Tannur.

Ca. 363 CE: the southern Levant is struck by a massive earthquake. Khirbet et-Tannur is destroyed and abandoned, and much of Petra destroyed. Formal practice of Nabataean religion ends.

1930s: rediscovery of Khirbet et-Tannur by the Transjordanian Antiquities Department and excavation of the site by Nelson Glueck (Hebrew Union College).

2013: publication of the Tannur excavation by Judith McKenzie

2021/2022: the most extensive installation of the Khirbet et-Tannur altar in the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Key Sites/Words:

1. Petra: the social, political, economic, and religious capital of the Nabataeans
2. Khirbet et-Tannur: a Nabataean temple in central Jordan
3. Baetyl/idol block: an aniconic representation of a Nabataean deity
4. Persepolis: an Achaemenid city from which the Nabataeans drew great inspiration
5. Façade tombs: tombs primarily found in Petra and Hegra (Saudi Arabia) carved into the local sandstone in a variety of styles. The number of tombs in Petra lead westerners to originally interpret it as a city of the dead.
6. Nabataean burial tradition: tombs were left open for the interment of individuals from the kin group. Ritual feasting and drinking events routinely occurred in or near the tombs.

Recommended Readings

Bowersock, G. W. *Roman Arabia*. Reprint edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998.

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Taylor, Jane. *Petra and the Lost Kingdom of the Nabataeans*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Wellman, Hannah, and Marlena Whiting. *A Gem of a Small Nabataean Temple: Excavations at Khirbet et-Tannur in Jordan*. Oxford: Groton, MA: Manar Al-Athar, University of Oxford, 2016.