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THE *BASILEION* OF ISIS AND THE RELIGIOUS ART OF NABATAEAN PETRA

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Résumé – Cet article examine le culte d’Isis et l’emploi du *basileion* d’Isis dans l’iconographie de Pétra à l’époque nabatéenne. Il défend l’idée que la déesse ne doit pas être considérée comme « étrangère » dans la ville, et que l’emploi varié de son iconographie, à travers les sphères aniconique et anthropomorphique, est représentative de la manière dont on doit aborder les vestiges des idoles de Pétra. D’abord, l’idée que les modes de représentation aniconique et anthropomorphique avaient une signification opposée ne peut se maintenir, surtout en ce qui concerne la composition du sanctuaire d’Isis du Wadi Siyyagh. Ensuite, il nous permet d’appréhender la perception, par les fidèles, des idoles géométriques (« bétyles ») de Pétra, dont les multiples de formes ont été un sujet de perplexité pour des générations de chercheurs. Au lieu de réduire la complexité des formes représentées, et de tenter de les identifier avec des divinités de Pétra plus connues, cet article mettra plutôt l’accent sur la variété de ces monuments et ce qu’ils nous révèlent de la signification personnelle des divinités à Pétra et dans le royaume nabatéen.

Abstract – This article examines the cult of Isis and the use of the Isis *basileion* in the iconography of Nabataean Petra. It is argued that the deity should not be viewed as a ‘foreigner’ in the city, and that the variety in the use of her iconography, across both the aniconic and anthropomorphic spheres, is representative of how we should approach the rest of Petra’s idols. Firstly, the idea that the aniconic and anthropomorphic modes of representation had some kind of opposing significance cannot be maintained, particularly in light of the sculptural arrangement of the sanctuary of Isis in the Wadi Siyyagh. Secondly, it allows us an insight into how Petra’s geometric idols (‘betyls’), whose multitude of forms have puzzled scholars for generations, were perceived by worshippers. Instead of reducing the complexity of forms represented and attempting to equate these with Petra’s better known deities, we should rather emphasise the variety in these monuments and what they show us of the personal significance of gods in Petra and Nabataea.

خلاصة – يعالج هذا البحث عبادة إيزيس وإستعمال «بازيليون» إيزيس في أيقونوغرافية بترا في العهد النبطي. يدافع عن فكرة أن الآلهة لا يجب إعتبارها غريبة في المدينة، وإن الإستعمال المتنوع لأيقونوغرافيتها، من خلال التيارات الفكرية المناهضة للأيقونات أو المحبذة للأيقونات ذات الأشكال الإنسانية هي خير مثال على الطريقة التي يجب أن نتناول بها بقايا أصنام بترا. بداية، إن فكرة التناقض في تمثيل الأشكال الإنسانية أو عدمها لايمكن أن تصمد، بالأخص في تركيبة معبد إيزيس في وادي سياغ. من ثم، تسمح لنا إدراك تصوّر المؤمنين للأصنام ذات الأشكال الهندسية (الأنصاب) في بترا، حيث ان تعدد الأشكال كان موضوع محير لأجيال من الباحثين. بدل ان نقل من تعددية الأشكال الممتلئة، والشروع في محاولة مطابقتها مع الآلهة المعروفة أكثر في بترا، يضع هذا البحث، بالأحرى، الثقل على تعددية المباني وماتظهر من معانٍ شخصية/خاصة للآلهة في بترا وفي المملكة النبطية.

The unique iconography of Petra has puzzled scholars since the city was rediscovered in the 19th cent., and we are little further forward today in our understanding of the unrecognisable forms of the hundreds of geometric idols that line the wadis leading to the town centre¹. These played a central part in the patterns of worship that were played out by Petra's inhabitants, and of which the city's rock-cut monuments provide only a lifeless shadow. Occasionally, however, a recognisable form or inscription appears that may allow us a glimpse into the minds of those worshippers. The Isis *basileion* is one such example². This familiar symbol, consisting of the disc of the sun surrounded by two horns, has a long history in Egypt, where it is also associated with several other deities³. Of these, however, only Isis is attested at Petra, and so the discussion surrounding the *basileion* has focused on her⁴. Petra was the only place in Nabataea where the deity was certainly present, and she had a cult following there by the end of the 1st cent. BC. The city's close connections to Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, most visible in the tomb architecture⁵, make it likely that she was introduced from the west, where some of the caravans that passed through Petra were undoubtedly destined.

My focus here, however, is not the origin of her cult, nor do I intend to concentrate in great detail on the numerous instances where Isis has been identified in the city, although some of these will necessarily be revisited. I will rather use our evidence for Isis as an illustration of how we ought to approach Petra's religious monuments, and in particular its geometric idols⁶. We are fortunate in this case that we can follow the iconography, and to some extent the cult, of Isis across the city, which supplies an easily identifiable reference point among the largely 'aniconic' religious landscape, and this provides an example of how symbols, forms and motifs were employed by worshippers. It will first, then, be necessary to track the use of the *basileion* across Petra, and discuss its association with the cult of Isis, before moving to some more general conclusions about Petra's religious art.

* I would like to first express my thanks to T. Kaizer and A. Lichtenberger for their kind suggestions and comments on a draft of this paper. They cannot, of course, be held responsible for any errors which may follow.

1. The most comprehensive studies are still DALMAN 1908, 1912 on the Felsheiligtümer of Petra. The mantle was more recently taken up by H. Merklein and R. Wenning who began a project to record and catalogue those monuments not included by Dalman. After the first four survey seasons in the eastern parts of Petra almost double the number of niches were documented than those recorded by Dalman (WENNING 2001, p. 79). A similar number of extra niches were also uncovered in preliminary surveys of the western parts of the city (MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 421). Mention should also now be made of RAYMOND 2008, an M.A. dissertation submitted at the Brigham Young University, Utah, that records the details of 445 niches and their contents from different parts of Petra.

2. The term is used by Plutarch when describing how Horus, angry at his mother Isis' release of Typhon, wrenched the *basileion* from her head: "τὸν δ' Ὀρὸν οὐ μετρίως ἐνεγκεῖν, ἀλλ' ἐπιβαλόντα τῇ μητρὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἀποσπάσαι τῆς κεφαλῆς τὸ βασιλεῖον" (*De Iside* 19). *Horus could not endure this with equanimity, but laid hands upon his mother and wrested the royal diadem from her head.* (Text and Trans. Babbitt 1936, Loeb).

3. Malaise gives an overview of the use of the symbol in the Egyptian context. In Egypt, the association with Isis seems to have only developed in the Ptolemaic period (MALAISE 1976, p. 231-232), and from there it became a prominent part of her representations throughout the Graeco-Roman world.

4. Analysis of the cult of Isis in Petra has generated a considerable amount of literature. See MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 120-124, ROCHE 1987, LINDNER 1988, ZAYADINE 1991, DONNER 1995, MEZA 1996, PARLASCA 1998, HEALEY 2001, p. 137-140, MERKLEIN and WENNING 1998a, 2001 and JANIF 2004.

5. This has been most extensively analysed by McKenzie, who has shown that several Alexandrian architectural features were transmitted to Petra (MCKENZIE 2005, p. 85-104).

6. I am deliberately refraining here from the use of 'betyl' to describe these monuments. Gaifman has outlined problems with the term, and the impact it has on our understanding of the monuments. The main objections are firstly that the use of one term does not allow for sufficient appreciation of the diversity within these monuments, and secondly that its semantic origin (*byt 'l* - 'house of god') implies the presence of the deity in the stone - which cannot be taken to always be the case. The use of the term also overlooks the Nabataean words for such monuments: *nšbt*, *nšyby* and *mšb'* (GAIFMAN 2008, p. 53-62).

THE BASILEION

Wadi Siyyagh

Our only certain attestation of Isis in Petra comes from a narrow ledge high up on the bank of the Wadi Siyyagh before it opens out into the town centre ⁷. Here, four niches are arranged together, with a basin/niche set into the rock face further to the right (**fig. 1**). The ‘sanctuary’ could not contain large groups of worshippers, and it has been suggested that it was used by a private religious association, a *mrzḥ*’, devoted to Isis ⁸. It seems likely that the layout was conceived of as a whole, or at least that the monuments were incorporated together into rituals. The basin would provide water for lustrations or offerings, as was common in the city. Merklein and Wenning believe that there was a connection between this ledge and a larger platform below, where rituals involving larger groups of worshippers could have been held ⁹.

The first niche, slightly apart from the rest, is empty. The second niche is of most interest to us here and contains the figure of a seated draped goddess (**fig. 2**). An inscription surrounding this niche tells us that this is the image of Isis that was made in the fifth year of King Obodas III (26/25 BC) ¹⁰. The text is inscribed on both sides of the image, arranged as shown below, and badly eroded in parts:

1.	... 'lht'	<i>bḥd b'yr</i>
2.	d' 'sy	<i>bšnt</i>
3.	dy 'bdw bny br	<i>ḥmš</i>
4.	h.....qywm'	<i>'bdt</i>
5.	w.....	<i>mlk</i>

Thus, starting from the top left:

...goddess that is Isis which the sons of Bar...of Qaiuma...and...made / on the first of Iyyar in the fifth year of Obodas the king. ¹¹

7. The site was first published in MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 120-124, but they concentrated chiefly on the inscription and not the accompanying sculptures. Merklein and Wenning published more details of the sculpture, and then a further article with more emphasis on the setting of the ‘sanctuary’ (MERKLEIN and WENNING 1998a, 2001).

8. Nehmé classifies the site as a ‘private and collective’ cultic space (NEHMÉ 1997, p. 1047). We know of a *mrzḥ*’ from Petra devoted to Obodat the God (RES 1428), and another chamber in the Wadi Siyyagh, that seems to have been devoted to Kutba, could also have been a meeting place for a *mrzḥ*’ (MILIK and TEIXIDOR 1961, p. 22-23; also HEALEY 2001, p. 168). Another example from Nabataea comes from Oboda in the Negev where we have evidence of a *mrzḥ*’ devoted to Dushara (NEGEV 1963, no. 10, p. 113-117).

9. MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 424.

10. See MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 121, for the dating of the text. The decision is between Obodas I (c. 96-85 BC) and Obodas III, Obodas II only ruling for three years. This is against Milik and Starcky, who considered Obodas II to have a longer reign, but concluded that the script “paraît trop évoluée” even for the reign of Obodas II.

11. I am largely following here the reading of HACKL *et al.* 2003, p. 256. Since the first publication of MILIK and STARCKY 1975 there have been three further readings, none of which have changed the meaning of the text substantially. The first line seems to have held three characters before ‘lht’. Donner sees here the demonstrative *dnh* (This is the goddess Isis...), and claims that this is an unusual formula that was used as a way of ‘introducing’ this new deity to Petra (DONNER 1995, p. 13). Healey follows this, claiming that the ‘lht’ is largely superfluous (Isis clearly being a goddess), and makes the suggestion that Isis as a ‘foreign’ goddess needed explaining to Petra’s inhabitants (see HEALEY 2001, p. 139). The use of ‘lht’ or ‘lh’ with a divine name, however, is common in inscriptions from Petra and Nabataea, as well as elsewhere in the Near East. Examples include ‘l’z’ ‘lht’ (MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 124-126) and *kwthb’ ‘lh’* (MILIK and TEIXIDOR 1961, p. 22-23) from Petra, šy‘‘lqwm’ ‘lh’ in Hegra and the Hauran (HEALEY 2001, p. 144) and ‘lt’ ‘lht’ from Salkhad (CIS II, 182), among others. The formula is also particularly common in Palmyra, where we have ‘ršw’ ‘lh’, ‘glbwl wmlkbl’ ‘lhy’ and yrḥbwl’ ‘lh’ among many others (see respectively KAIZER 2002, p. 118, 132, 146). There is no need, then, to find a special explanation for its use here. HACKL *et al.* 2003 suggest ‘nh (I am the goddess Isis...)’ for the first line, and draw a link to the use of the phrase in aretologies of the goddess. *dnh* seems more likely: the demonstrative pronoun is a common way to begin a dedication, and the rest of the inscription does not resemble an aretology.



Figure 1. The sanctuary of Isis in the Wadi Siyyagh.



Figure 2. The statue of Isis in the Wadi Siyyagh.

The carving has unfortunately suffered considerable defacement; there is nothing left of the head and the arms are also missing. Indeed, Merklein and Wenning remark that were it not for the inscription we would not be able to identify her with any certainty¹². We cannot, therefore, know whether Isis here was wearing the *basileion*, although parallels with figurines, which we will see later, make it more than a possibility. We also cannot discern with certainty her pose. The right arm seems to be held across her breast, as in the Isis Lactans type, but the exact configuration is too obscured to be certain¹³. Some have seen rather Isis in mourning, no doubt keeping in mind the many figurines from Petra that show a goddess in this pose, but her right hand does not seem to be held to her cheek here¹⁴. Merklein and Wenning propose that we have the “Palliata type”, arguing that the “figure follows none of the common Isis types, but Hellenistic types of draped women in general.”¹⁵ What can be discerned is the very peculiar form of the throne Isis is seated on. This is made up of an asymmetrical series of spherical objects grouped on either side of Isis’ legs. The most convincing explanation is that we have here a representation of the precipitous surroundings of Isis’ location. Indeed, the intent may be to show here Isis presiding over the whole of Petra and its wadis¹⁶.

12. MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 426.

13. For Isis Lactans, see TRAN TAM TINH 1973. The figure is well attested in the art of Pharaonic and Roman Egypt, and from there spread throughout the Empire. Merklein and Wenning seem initially to have thought that we have here something resembling Isis Lactans (MERKLEIN and WENNING 1998a, p. 174).

14. Milik and Starcky proposed that the figure would have worn the ‘Isis knot’, and so the right hand could be held across the breast clasping this (MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 122-123). ROCHE 1987, p. 218, DONNER 1995, p. 14 and PARLASCA 1998, p. 65, see rather Isis in mourning.

15. MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 426.

16. DONNER 1995, p. 15. We should note that the motif of a goddess seated on rocks has a place in the official iconography of Petra in the Roman period. Spijkerman includes “Tyche seated l. on rock” as one of eight coin designs used by the city (SPIJKERMAN 1978, p. 218-219). The goddess first appears on coins of Hadrian and continues until the reign of Geta. A similar design also appeared on some of the city’s seals (GITLER 2005, p. 185).

There are three niches to the right of Isis. The furthest away is described by most as a basin, and so would have provided the water needed for certain rituals¹⁷. We should note also that there is a square recess in the base of this, clearly carved as part of the ensemble, which may have held a portable idol. The two niches to the right of Isis hold geometric forms (**fig. 3**), one with a triangular head and the other consisting of two recesses, one inside the other. It was initially thought that the first may have also originally been an anthropomorphic figure that was also defaced, but the smooth surface suggests that this has survived largely as it was carved¹⁸.



Figure 3. Idols in the Wadi Siyyagh sanctuary.

It is worth pausing here to consider Janif's peculiar analysis of the ensemble, as it is symptomatic of some of the problems with the interpretation of Petra's religious art¹⁹. His aim is to demonstrate that scholars place too much emphasis on inscriptions when interpreting Petra's monuments, and that more emphasis needs to be placed on the iconography. He argues that these two niches plus the Isis figure are in fact based around the iconography of the trio of Atargatis, Hadad and the *Semeion*, as described in Lucian's *DDS* (31-33)²⁰. Attention is drawn to the peculiar iconography of Isis which, it is true, does not seem to easily conform to any of the usual poses of the goddess²¹. Janif then claims that the objects to the sides of Isis' legs are lions, and that there is therefore a link here with the representations of Atargatis enthroned between two lions²². No such features, however, can be discerned today, and there is also no sign that that part of the sculpture underwent the same kind of defacement that other parts suffered. The theory does also not take into account that the fourth niche could have held a geometric idol, although Janif shows an awareness of it²³, thus adding a fourth member to the 'triad'. We also have the difficulty that the *Semeion* is considerably larger than Hadad, which is not the case in other representations of the trio²⁴. His comparison between the form of the central idol and a conical block shown in between two seated deities on a relief from Edessa is equally erroneous²⁵. This was originally interpreted by Drijvers as representing Atargatis and Hadad seated on either side of the *Semeion*, which is represented as a conical block²⁶. If the *Semeion* is represented in block form here, it is argued, then there should be less difficulty seeing it in the Wadi Siyyagh. Firstly, however they are clearly a different shape, the Edessan

17. DONNER 1995, p. 12; MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 426; JANIF 2004, p. 124.

18. MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 123. See DONNER 1995, p. 15, for further arguments as to why we should not see an anthropomorphic image here. Zayadine makes the suggestion that we should see here instead the phallus of Osiris (ZAYADINE 1991, p. 291). Janif reminds us, however, that "Aucune association entre Isis et un « bétyle phallique » n'est disponible" for the iconography of the goddess elsewhere (JANIF 2004, p. 125).

19. For what follows see *ibid.*

20. See LIGHTFOOT 2003, p. 446-449 and 540-547 for a discussion of the *Semeion* and its iconography.

21. JANIF 2004, p. 123.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 124. Janif was no doubt working from earlier suggestions here. Milik and Starky had described the seat as follows: "La déesse est assise sur un siège sans dossier, mais sculpté à droite et à gauche, sans qu'il nous soit possible d'affirmer qu'il s'agissait d'animaux." They did not, however, make any connection with lions or Atargatis (MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 122).

23. JANIF 2004, p. 124, n. 32.

24. Coins from Hierapolis show this arrangement of the two gods on either side of the *Semeion*, with Atargatis always slightly larger than Hadad, as does the famous relief from Dura-Europos showing the group (LIGHTFOOT 2003, p. 542-547). The arrangement from the Wadi Siyyagh in no way resembles this.

25. JANIF 2004, p. 126, fig. 4.

26. DRIJVERS 1980, p. 80-81.

block being a plain narrow cone. Secondly, the closest parallels from Petra's iconography for such a form are the numerous nepheshes carved throughout the city. The block on the Edessan relief is certainly not a nephesh, showing that iconographical parallels alone sometimes carry no great significance. In any case, the Edessan block has now been dated to the 3rd millennium, making any comparison with the Hierapolitan trio redundant²⁷. A further difficulty is that a block further along the Wadi Siyyagh, a c.30 mins walk from the town centre, is explicitly identified as Atargatis with the inscription: *'tr't' mnbgyt' - Atargatis Manbigitess*²⁸. Janif does not explain why the figure here is not identified similarly, although he shows an awareness of the inscription²⁹.

In any case, even if the iconography here was based around the deities of Hierapolis, it is not clear how this would get us closer to the ancient understanding of the ensemble. Janif takes great leaps to show how the arrangement resembles that of Atargatis, Hadad and the *Semeion* elsewhere, but offers little suggestion as to how this should impact our understanding of the deities worshipped in the Wadi Siyyagh. Surely the arrangement rather reinforces the importance of the epigraphic over the iconographic. If the resemblance to the aforementioned trio was as strong as Janif suggests then other researchers would have already been led to exactly the same suggestion, and the Hierapolitan triad would be well ensconced in the discussion of Petraean religion. It is only thanks to the inscription that we have been saved from being so grievously misled.

Wadi Abu Olleiq

Another statue of an enthroned goddess was found on the side of the Wadi Abu Olleiq, near the Jebel Harun, to the southwest of the town centre (**fig. 4**)³⁰. This monument was again carved on a terrace above a ravine, but in this case there seems to have been room for a greater number of worshippers. Parr also notes evidence for permanent settlement at the site, including pottery, building blocks and even a column drum³¹. The site should therefore be seen as one of the many smaller satellite settlements that surrounded Petra's town centre. Numerous graffiti lined the rock faces nearby, suggesting that the site was frequented by travellers moving westwards from Petra³².

In this case there is no inscription to identify the figure, but the similarities in dress and pose have led most to identify her as Isis. Parr suggested that a rectangular recess beneath her feet may have held a dedicatory inscription, but similar shapes on figurines suggest rather that this was intended to represent a pedestal³³. Again she sits on a throne, although this time the seat is represented in a more regular fashion. The head and arms have again been defaced, so there is uncertainty as to her pose and we cannot discern whether she was wearing the *basileion* or not. The position of the arms is hard to

27. LIGHTFOOT 2003, p. 542.

28. I am following here the reading of HEALEY 2001, p. 50. He notes the unusual spelling of Atargatis, which is usually spelt with an initial *'ayin* (p. 140). However, the mention of Manbig (Hierapolis), the famous cult centre of Atargatis, makes her identification certain.

29. JANIF 2004, p. 121.

30. Parr was the first to publish the site, although he was helped by earlier reports from many others (PARR 1962, p. 21, n. 1). See also LINDNER 1980, p. 257, and 1988, p. 87, for details of a geometric idol and further graffiti discovered in the gorge below the plateau with the statue of the draped goddess. For further analysis of the site see LINDNER 1989 and 2003, p. 178-184.

31. PARR 1962, p. 21.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 22 only makes a brief mention of these graffiti, with no attempt to decipher them. The site has unfortunately still not received attention from an epigrapher. The route is described as the primary artery for movement westwards from Petra (p. 23). A somewhat similar site has been documented in the Siq Um el 'Alda to the north of Petra (ROCHE and ZAYADINE 1999). It has been identified as a caravan halt on the route from Petra, and has yielded a number of inscriptions as well as rock-cut installations including cisterns and a stairway. Roche and Zayadine draw a parallel between the site and the Wadi Abu Olleiq (p. 138).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 22. Several examples of similar 'panels' can be seen in El-Khouri's catalogue of figurines (EL-KHOURI 2002). The clearest examples are figurines 41 and 42 (fig. 7, p. 122) which show the feet on a "high rectangular pedestal" (p. 53).

discern from the available photos. Roche remarks that “La pose est hiératique, les mains sur les genoux”, but goes on to comment that many details have been lost as a result of later iconoclasm³⁴. It seems, in any case, that, like the statue of the Wadi Siyyagh, the pose of this goddess does not easily conform to any of the well-known Isis types. Milik and Starcky, however, remarked that the ‘Isis knot’ can be seen on her breast, and so suggest that the same symbol adorned her statue in the Wadi Siyyagh, although this has now disappeared³⁵. There is a more specific link beyond the dress and pose, then, with the wider iconography of the goddess, but without an inscription we can have little certainty as to how this figure was understood in Petra.

Figurines

A number of terracotta and stone figurines have been found during excavations at Petra that show an enthroned goddess wearing the *basileion*. In her catalogue of Nabataean terracotta figurines, El-Khoury lists twenty examples from Petra which she identifies as Isis³⁶. These can be broadly split into two types: the first shows the goddess in the characteristic pose of ‘Isis in mourning’, with her right hand raised to her cheek³⁷ (El-Khoury nos. 33-39, 43 and 45), the second has her hands held together on her lap (nos. 40-42, 44, 46-52). Although the goddess is similarly draped, none of these poses seem to correspond exactly to the statues of the Wadi Abu Olleiq or the Wadi Siyyagh. One noteworthy similarity with the Wadi Abu Olleiq figure is that a few of these figurines have under the feet a similar rectangular plaque (El-Khoury fig. 7, nos. 41-42). El-Khoury makes no mention of markings within the space and interprets it as part of a pedestal, which seems the most likely suggestion³⁸. Although the provenance of many is unknown, the figurines seem to come mainly from the town centre. Examples of El-Khoury’s Isis types were found in excavations at Ez-Zantur, El-Katute, Zurrebah and the Temple of the Winged Lions. Apart from the two examples from the Temple of the Winged Lions, then, El-Khoury can classify all of these as coming from a domestic context. Information as to their date is very scarce, mainly relying on the finding of coins in the same context. Of El-Khoury’s Isis types, only four can be loosely dated by associated finds, spanning 1st–4th cent. AD. They were, then, being produced in the Nabataean period³⁹.

A few more specific points must be made before we move on. Of El-Khoury’s twenty ‘Isis’ figurines six wear the *basileion*, and these are split into two different styles: in the first, the headdress consists



Figure 4. Enthroned goddess in the Wadi Abu Olleiq (LINDNER 1989, p. 287, fig. 3).

34. ROCHE 1987, p. 218.

35. MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 123.

36. EL-KHOURY 2002, p. 11 and p. 52-54.

37. The mythical reference here is to Isis mourning the death of her husband Osiris. See BRICAULT 1992.

38. EL-KHOURY 2002, p. 53. A clear parallel can be seen in a figurine now in the Louvre which shows Isis Lactans (TRAN TAM TINH 1973, p. 82, no. A-36, fig. 61b).

39. Those dated examples are nos. 33 (second century AD), 44 (fourth century AD), 51 (dated by coin to the reign of Aretas IV, 9 BC–40 AD) and 52 (dated by a coin to the reign of Malichus II, 40–70 AD). El-Khoury has a brief analysis of the chronological development of Petra’s figurines where she is able to draw some broad conclusions (p. 35-40). The first general points are that most figurines seem to have been produced in the 1st cent. AD, which also include the most detailed examples, and those figurines that have more rudimentary features are much later. The Isis figurines include both detailed and rudimentary examples of both types, and so El-Khoury cannot date their production any more specifically.

of a circular dish with three shapes protruding from it (**fig. 5**), which Zayadine identifies as a “*plante trèflée*”⁴⁰. In the second type (**fig. 6**), the disk is surrounded by two stylised horns and a feather or palm protrudes from the top. In all these cases the goddess holds a palm or a feather in her left hand, and the ‘Isis knot’ is clearly visible on her breast. Two further figurines have the arms in the same position and a feather/palm in the left hand, but no *basileion* (nos. 43 and 45). The rest have neither the *basileion* nor a similar pose; their association with the Isis types seems to rest either on their similar hairstyle or the fact that they are draped and seated. El-Khouri’s unqualified identification of all these figurines as Isis, then, may need to be somewhat tempered by cautioning that we have very little idea of who the figurines were intended to represent in Petra. They do, however, seem to form a broad typological unity within Petra’s figurines.

We should also stress here some of El-Khouri’s conclusions about Petra’s figurines as a whole, as they will have relevance later. While the pose of ‘Isis in mourning’ has many parallels from Egypt and elsewhere, there can be no doubt that these figurines were produced in Petra. Beyond the fact that moulds and kilns have been found there⁴¹, it seems that there was a recognisable style to Petra’s figurines. El-Khouri lists lack of attention to anatomical details, disproportionately sized body parts, rounded faces and asymmetrical limbs among the distinctive features of Petra’s figurines⁴², and her Isis types are more or less in line with these. They are, then, first and foremost a local expression of piety.



Figure 5. ‘Isis’ Figurine
(PARLASCA 1990, p. 99, fig. 13).



Figure 6. ‘Isis’ Figurine
(PARLASCA 1990, p. 99, fig. 12).

40. ZAYADINE 1991, p. 297.

41. El-Khouri mentions that two moulds are included among her catalogue of figurines (EL-KHOURI 2002, p. 34, nos. 75, 76). She goes on to describe the moulding and firing techniques required to produce Petra’s figurines.

42. Ibid., p. 45-47. She sums up: “In general, the terracotta figurines of Petra are evidence of the wide cultural connections of the Nabataeans with Hellenistic Greece, Egypt, Parthia and southern Arabia. They are also evidence of a personal and genuine character of the Nabataean craftsmen, which can be easily identified through their unique style and form and this might be characterized as, in most of them, what can be called, a local style of art” (p. 47).

Eye idols

‘Eye-betyls’ or ‘Gesichtsbetyls’ have formed a distinctive category within Petra’s geometric idols since their first discovery⁴³. They vary greatly in the detail and manner in which facial features are represented, some showing just a pair of thinly incised square eyes, others including a nose, mouth and even a headpiece⁴⁴. Perhaps the most famous, and the most detailed, example was uncovered in excavations at the Temple of the Winged Lions in 1975 (**fig. 7**)⁴⁵. The face here is set within an architectural frame, with a decorated column on either side and a frieze with dentils running along the top. Below the frame the carefully carved letters *’lht ḥyn br nybt* identify the block as “The goddess of Ḥayyan son of Naybat”. On either side of the inscription there are carved two symbols, perhaps palms or feathers, and we are reminded of the numerous figurines showing ‘Isis in mourning’ that have the goddess holding a similar object in her left hand. The face itself is the most anthropomorphic example of the eye idols so far discovered in Petra. The shape of the lips is clearly outlined, and the mouth within this. The eyes are oval shaped, not the usual rectangular form, and are covered by thick curving eyebrows. Similarly, the long nose is a more rounded form than is usual. The inscription does not include a date; the best we can do is to recall that the temple had been built by AD 27/28, and that the block must have been installed either at this point or sometime afterwards⁴⁶.

For our purposes, however, it is the wreath or diadem that runs across the block above the eyes that is of most interest. In the centre of this there is a deep round recess, which may have originally held a precious stone, surrounded by two crescent shaped symbols. Zayadine has suggested that we have here a stylised version of the Isis *basileion*, with a disk surrounded by two horns—a suggestion which seems to have gained a general acceptance⁴⁷. It is one of the pieces of evidence, rather confusingly, that led Hammond to identify Allat as the chief deity of the Temple of the Winged Lions⁴⁸. His analysis is based on extremely fragmentary evidence, much of which does not have a direct relevance to cult practice inside the temple, and involves drawing connections between deities and pieces of evidence that come from very different contexts⁴⁹. In any case, the Goddess of Ḥayyan did not stand on the podium at the heart of the building but was probably set into the wall at some point in the interior. The *basileion* symbol takes an unusual form: setting it inside a laurel is peculiar to Petra’s block idols, as we shall also see in the next example, and the ridges on the horns are not found elsewhere in the city. However, the basic components are still there, and we can accept that the inspiration for this design is likely to have been another example of the *basileion* from Petra.

43. Wenning provides an overview of the place of eye idols within the discussion of Petra’s religious art. He also mentions several blocks which have not yet been published (WENNING 2001, p. 83-84). Note also MERKLEIN and WENNING 1998b for an overview of known eye idols.

44. For a discussion of the variety of forms of this type of monument, see GAIFMAN 2008, p. 56-58. She has rightly stressed how these should be viewed as the product of local artistic traditions, and not some sort of compromise between wider aniconic and anthropomorphic influences. I adopt the term ‘eye idol’ here to avoid the problematic use of ‘betyl’.

45. HAMMOND 1980.

46. See HAMMOND, JOHNSON and JONES 1986. The temple had been dated on the base of stratigraphic data to the reign of Aretas IV, and then in 1981 an inscription, dated to 27/28 AD, was uncovered that gave some details as to the financial regulations of the temple and priesthoods.

47. ZAYADINE 1991, p. 289. Healey, for example, identifies the block as an ‘Isis Figurine’ (HEALEY 2001, pl. IVa).

48. HAMMOND 1990, p. 123-124.

49. Hammond brings in architectural decoration, a ring-seal, fragments of figurines, a lamp, pieces of lead (which he identifies as curtain hangers) among other material in his attempt to recover the ‘nature’ of the deity that occupied this temple. Much of his analysis is based on Glueck’s equally dubious conclusions as to the ‘nature’ and identity of the supreme gods of Khirbet et-Tannur (GLUECK 1965). The approach assumes that certain motifs or designs have a static significance that applies wherever they are found, and so a very wide net (both geographically and chronologically wide) is cast to find parallels which are then brought to Petra. This is misguided and contaminates the religious landscape with ideas for which there is no direct evidence. Discussions as to the chief deity of the Temple of the Winged Lions will not progress unless an inscription emerges. For the moment we should content ourselves with suggesting that it is very unlikely that the sanctuary was entirely devoted to one deity, and that several gods and goddesses probably received a cult following here.

The second example shows the motif a lot more clearly (**fig. 8**). This smaller block was found in the domestic area of Ez-Zantur and labelled by Lindner “Eine *al-‘Uzzā*-Isis-Stele”⁵⁰. Again a wreath runs along the top of the block, and at the centre of this we have another version of the *basileion*. This time the disk is surrounded by a ring, a feature that may just be visible in some of the figurines, and the two horns protrude upwards. The facial markings are more in line with other eye idols. There is a rectangular nose set in between the two eyes which are not completely square, but curve inwards a little on either side. Lindner draws a parallel here with a block from the Ain es-Shalaleh sanctuary in Wadi Rumm⁵¹. This has a similar set of eyes, although these seem to be even further away from square, leading some to suggest that they should be seen as stars and that they refer to the astral aspect of the deity represented⁵². Absent from the Wadi Rumm example, however, are the inner details on the eyes, perhaps intended to represent pupils. Lindner and Zayadine see the block as confirmation that Isis and Al-‘Uzza were assimilated in Petra, but we should avoid such conclusions⁵³. The Wadi Rumm block is identified as Al-‘Uzza in an accompanying inscription, but it appears alongside another idol with the same form of eyes that is identified as Al-Kutba (**figs. 9-10**)⁵⁴. The form, then, was clearly not particular to one deity. The block cannot be dated with any certainty.



Figure 7. Eye idol from the Temple of the Winged Lions (HAMMOND et al. 2003, p. 225, fig. 246).

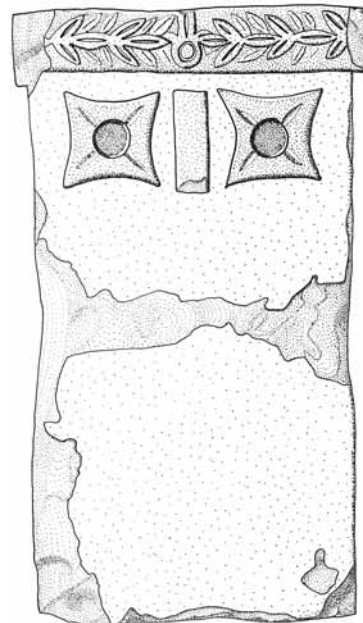


Figure 8. Eye idol from ez-Zantur (LINDNER 1988, p. 85, fig. 1).

50. LINDNER 1988, p. 84.

51. Ibid., p. 85. The sanctuary was first published in detail by Savignac (SAVIGNAC 1932, 1933 and 1934).

52. The two ‘star-eyed’ idols from Ain es-Shalaleh were argued by Starcky to represent the stellar aspects of al-‘Uzza and al-Kutba and their association with Mercury and Venus (STARCKY 1966, col. 994-995). Wenning prefers to see an association with the morning and evening stars (WENNING 2001, p. 83).

53. Zayadine’s position is a little more complicated than this. He sees ‘al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite’ as the principal deity of Petra. He also sees evidence of an identification between Isis and Aphrodite elsewhere in the Mediterranean as a sign that the two were also identified at Petra. This is in accordance, apparently, with his theory of the Temple of the Winged Lions being dedicated to Isis and Osiris, and the Qasr el-Bint to ‘al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite’ and ‘Dusares-Zeus’ (ZAYADINE 1991, p. 285-286). There is danger in such an approach that seeks to determine the character or nature of the deity that inhabited a temple. ‘Al-‘Uzza-Aphrodite-Isis’ is a creation of Zayadine, under whose large umbrella the variety of cultic evidence from the Temple of the Winged Lions can be satisfactorily explained. This firstly downplays the complexity of the evidence and secondly introduces a divine identity to Petra for which there is no evidence.

54. SAVIGNAC 1934, p. 574-574, no. 17, pl. XXXVIII. Savignac did not recognise the exact form of the divine name, transcribing ‘*lrb*’ instead of ‘*lktb*’. Strugnell, after re-examining the inscription, concluded that it must be a kaph instead of a resh (STRUGNELLS 1959, p. 29-31).



Figure 9. Eye idols in Wadi Rumm.

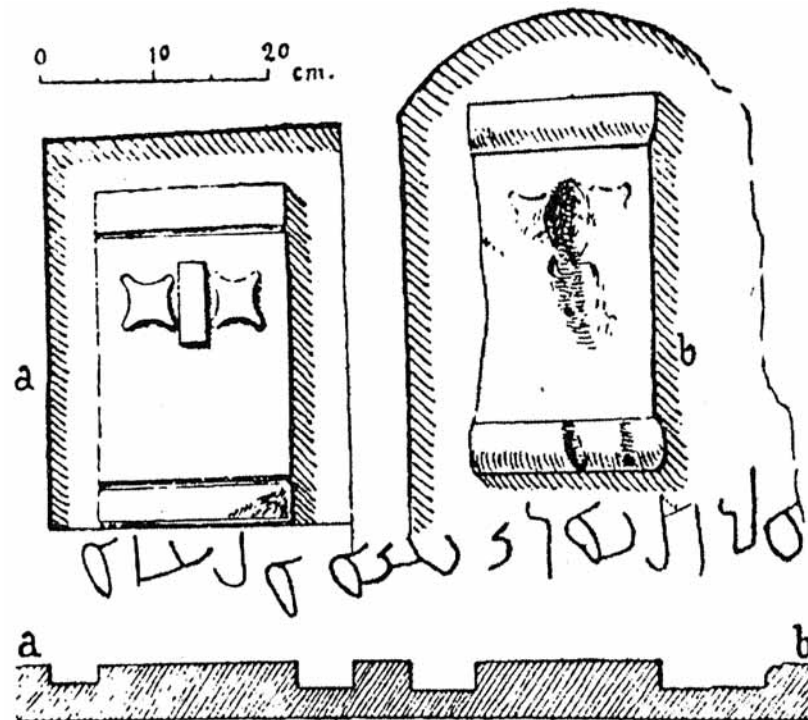


Figure 10. Eye idols in Wadi Rumm (SAVIGNAC 1934, p. 587, fig. 10).

The Khazneh

Every visitor to Petra is greeted with a view of the *basileion* at the centre of the city's most famous façade (**fig. 11**). The series of female figures along the top row clearly take their inspiration from Hellenistic models, although there has been found no parallel of the whole arrangement and attempts to decipher a meaning behind the whole scene have not been successful⁵⁵. The date of the monument has also been a source of considerable debate, with suggestions ranging from the early 1st cent. BC to well after the Roman annexation in AD 106. There now seems to be consensus that the structure is a product of the Nabataean kingdom. McKenzie's detailed analysis of the architectural features gave it a *terminus ante quem* of the beginning of the 1st cent. AD, but recent excavations in front of the façade have suggested a date in the first half of that century⁵⁶. The prominent position of the Khazneh has given rise to the idea of it serving as a royal tomb, and in this context the most likely occupant is Aretas IV (9 BC–AD 40).

For our purposes, it is the central figure above the door and the symbol below, perched on the top acroterion of the pediment, that are of most interest (**fig. 12**). The symbol was quickly recognised as the Isis *basileion* with two horns curving around the central disk, and an ear of corn on either side. This led early commentators to suggest that the building was a temple to Isis, but the layout of the interior has now shown beyond doubt that it was a tomb. The female figure clearly takes its inspiration from Ptolemaic models, the closest parallels coming from figures on faience vessels dating from the 1st cent. BC. There, such figures are explicitly identified as Isis, Tyche, the Queen, or any combination of the above⁵⁷. No inscription identifies the figure on the Khazneh, but this has not stopped scholars trying to give her a name, with most suggestions surrounding Isis, Demeter, Tyche or various combinations of the three. It seems more likely that she could be interpreted in numerous different ways by different viewers. There is, however, a clear link with royal iconography. She holds a cornucopia in her left arm, which also appears on Nabataean coins from the earliest designs to the very end of the kingdom⁵⁸. We shall see that coins make a more explicit link between the *basileion* and the queen.

Coinage

A later development in Nabataean coinage, starting under Obodas III (30–9 BC), was the inclusion of the bust of the queen alongside the king, or sometimes alone on the reverse. From the time of Aretas IV, she could be shown wearing a stylised version of the *basileion*. Schwentzel has tracked this phenomenon, suggesting that it appeared on both the queens of Aretas IV, Huldu and Shaqilat, and those of Rabbel II (AD 70–106), Hagiru and Gamilat⁵⁹. Those of Huldu (**fig. 13**) and Shaqilat (**fig. 14**) take different forms, the first showing the two horns and the disk and the second showing a disk with four protrusions, perhaps intended to show two horns with two ears of corn, as on the Khazneh. Those of Hagiru and Gamilat have not been published in enough detail for us to discern the exact form of the symbol⁶⁰.

55. See, for example, LITTLETON 1990 and STEWART 2003.

56. MCKENZIE 2005, p. 40. See FARAJAT and AL-NAWAFLEH 2005 for the results of the excavations.

57. See THOMPSON 1973, although the figure there usually appears without the Kalathos. See p. 51–62 for the cult affiliations of these vases.

58. See MESHORER 1975. The coins of Aretas III (87–62 BC), based firmly on Seleucid models, show on the reverse a Tyche carrying a cornucopia in her left hand (MESHORER 1975, nos. 6, 6A). Under Malichus I (60–30 BC), the cornucopia takes a more prominent role, occupying the whole of the reverse by itself (nos. 13, 18). A second cornucopia was added under Obodas II (62–60 BC) (nos. 24, 26), and this remained an important type in the coinage of the following kings.

59. SCHWENTZEL 2005, p. 162. The symbol was first identified by Parlasca on an unpublished coin of Huldu (PARLASCA 1998, p. 69).

60. They are MESHORER 1975, nos. 163 and 164 respectively, although Meshorer did not recognise the exact form of the symbol.

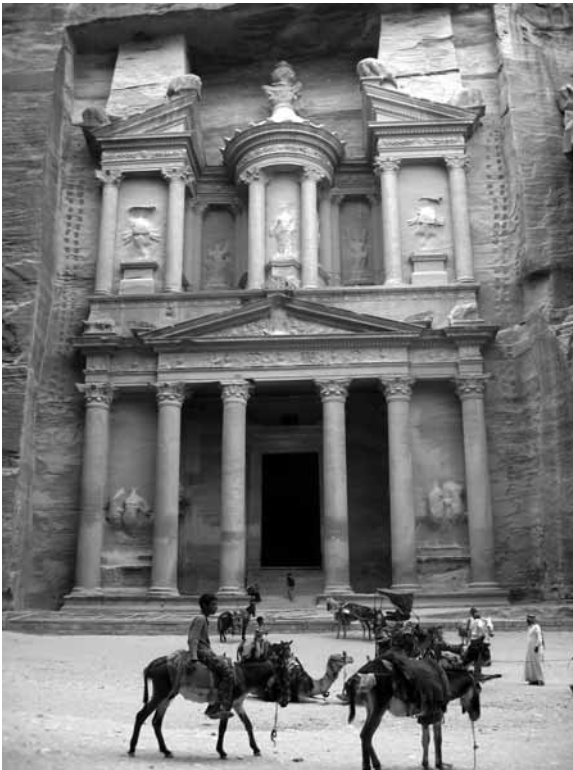


Figure 11. The Khazneh.

Figure 12. The *Basileion* on the Façade of the Khazneh.Figure 13. Huldu
(SCHWENTZEL 2005, p. 155, fig.10).Figure 14. Aretas IV and Shaqilat
(SCHWENTZEL 2005, p. 157, fig. 15).

Schwentzel sees the symbol as evidence that “les reines nabatéennes à partir de Huldu étaient sans doute assimilées à Isis et Al-Uzza”⁶¹, basing himself on the idea of an assimilation of Isis and Al-‘Uzza in Petra. A link is then made with the figure on the Khazneh, and the suggestion is made that we have here a queen, perhaps Huldu herself, assuming the role of the deity in Petra⁶². While the evidence cannot take us this far, and we should avoid ascribing names or characteristics to figures unless they are explicitly identified, Schwentzel is more convincing in his analysis of Ptolemaic parallels. It has long been established that the Nabataeans looked to the neighbouring Seleucids and Ptolemies for inspiration in their coinage, and this clearly extended to the imagery and titles of the queens⁶³. The connection

61. SCHWENTZEL 2005, p. 162.

62. SCHWENTZEL 2008, p. 276, although in this case it is the role of “Isis-Tyche” that he sees the queen assuming.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

between the Ptolemaic queen and Isis was well established, culminating in Cleopatra VII (51–30 BC) adopting the title *Nea Isis*. The supreme nature of the deity complemented and reinforced the position of the Hellenistic sovereign, as has been analysed by Versnel⁶⁴.

THE CULT OF ISIS

This examination of the *basileion* across Petra allows us first to make some suggestions as to the worship of the goddess in the city. We have seen that the appearances of iconography associated with her have led scholars to numerous suggestions of her assimilation with Petra's more familiar goddesses and her presence and cult in the Temple of the Winged Lions. It must be emphasised, however, that the only certain attestation of Isis in the city is her mention in the inscription of the Wadi Siyyagh. If we are to approach Isis and her worshippers, then, our focus must be here.

There is one characterisation of Isis that has persisted throughout the examination of her in Petra: she is a 'foreign' goddess, somehow distinct from those deities more at home in the city⁶⁵. It is argued that the location of her cult sites, in the Wadi Siyyagh and Wadi Abu Olleiqā, are evidence of the importing of Isis from Egypt, and that her cult may have been established and maintained by merchants moving between Petra and Egypt. The Wadi Abu Olleiqā site, as we have seen, is on one of the main routes out of Petra to the west, and it is also remarked that the Wadi Siyyagh leads westwards out of Petra. Both these sites were on the fringes of the town and they could not hold a large number of worshippers. Added to this, Isis is attested nowhere else in Nabataea, although she was known in other areas of the Roman Near East⁶⁶. This is in contrast, of course, to her considerable following in Egypt. Those who introduced Isis to Petra, and she must have been introduced at some point, had most likely then first encountered her in Egypt, as the cultural and mercantile connections between Petra and Egypt are well documented. She then seems to have failed to make any further progress within Nabataea. Furthermore, Isis is represented anthropomorphically, certainly in the Wadi Siyyagh and in figurines and perhaps in the Wadi Abu Olleiqā. This is unusual against the background of Petra's hundreds of geometric idols, and the anthropomorphic Isis stands out in the 'aniconic' religious landscape.

The classification of Isis as 'foreign' to Petra, however, may be more damaging than helpful to our understanding of the goddess in the city. We should first draw attention to the date of the dedication, 26/25 BC, which makes this the second earliest certain attestation of a deity in Petra. If this was the date when Isis was first introduced to the city, then as far as we know she was one of the earliest deities to have received a cult in Petra⁶⁷. Secondly, we should take note of the names of the dedicants, which unfortunately do not survive well⁶⁸. All commentators, however, have agreed on *Qywm'*, a name which is not at all out of place or 'foreign' in Nabataea⁶⁹. We can certainly take issue, then, with the idea that the cult was established or maintained by Egyptians who moved through Petra. It is the manner of Isis' representation, however, that most significantly sets her apart in the eyes of the modern observers. Anthropomorphic sculptures are very rare among Petra's rock-cut monuments, although they are more

64. VERSNEL 1990, p. 39-95.

65. Gawlikowski remarked of Isis in Petra: "C'est le seul cas certain d'une divinité étrangère adoptée à Pétra" (GAWLIKOWSKI 1990, p. 2671). Healey follows this classification and describes Isis, along with Atargatis, as a 'foreign goddess' (HEALEY 2001, p. 137).

66. For an overview of the material from the Decapolis and surrounds, see LICHTENBERGER 2003, p. 313-314. Isis also appears in a Greek inscription from Palmyra (KAIZER 2002, p. 71, n. 27).

67. The earliest being the inscription from the Aşlah triclinium before the entrance to the Siq which mentions Dushara and is dated to 97/96 BC. For a summary of the dated religious material from Petra see NEHMÉ 1997, p. 1043. The data is admittedly slim, but it certainly does not show Isis as being out of place among Petra's deities.

68. Milik and Starcky restored *Brhbl*, *Qymw'* and *Tym'*, but later commentators have not been able to follow this (MILIK and STARCKY 1975, p. 121). Merklein and Wenning remark that only the reading of Qaiuma is clear (MERKLEIN and WENNING 2001, p. 426).

69. The exact form *Qywm'* is not attested elsewhere in Nabataea, but it is very similar to the forms *Qwmw* and *Qymw* which are well attested in different parts of the kingdom (see NEGEV 1991).

common in the architectural sculpture of the city centre, and so they have often been considered a separate category to the rest of Petra's religious monuments. In the Wadi Siyyagh, however, we should not lose sight of Isis' surroundings. She is carved on a narrow ledge, immediately alongside three other niches, two of which certainly contained geometric idols. While Janif goes too far in classifying the group as a triad, it seems likely that the four niches, and perhaps the empty niche to the left, were employed together in ritual practice. Those who worshipped here, then, must have seen no conflict between the anthropomorphic and 'aniconic'; these modes of representation were used in unison and not seen to be in opposition, and this has important implications for how we should view the wider religious art of Petra.

Isis should therefore not be viewed as a foreigner to Petra's religious landscape, or at least in no way more 'foreign' than Petra's other deities. She had worshippers with personal names common in Nabataea, was one of the earliest deities we have evidence of, and she appears at ease alongside Petra's characteristic geometric blocks. Indeed, her representation here, carved into the rock, suggests rather a deity just as 'at home' in the city as any other. Her throne is the strongest confirmation of this. There has been so much difficulty in establishing its exact nature because no parallels exist; the design is unique to Petra. Although the common elements of Isis' many representations throughout the Mediterranean, a seated draped goddess, are reproduced here, a local interpretation is also added: "ein Bergthron also, der Isis als Herrin des Gebirges erkennen läßt, in welchem Petra liegt und in dem sich auch das Nischenheiligtum befindet."⁷⁰ The cult of Isis in Petra, then, is not merely a reflection of the iconography and rituals of the cult elsewhere, but just as much the product of local religious ideas and practices.

THE RELIGIOUS ART OF PETRA

Outside the sculpture of the Wadi Siyyagh and the cult of Isis, tracking the use of the *basileion* allows us to make some more general suggestions about the religious art of Petra. If the worshippers in the Wadi Siyyagh showed no difficulty in incorporating the anthropomorphic and 'aniconic', then the use of the *basileion* similarly shows no conflict between these modes of representation. The figurines show that it was certainly applied to anthropomorphic representations, and we have seen that it appeared on geometric blocks. If the symbol did have some consistent significance, then, it was not felt to be particularly attached or restricted to one of these forms of representation.

This should be put into the context of the debate over 'aniconic' representations of the gods in Petra and Nabataea as a whole. Mettinger and Patrich have amply illustrated this phenomenon, and shown that there was a longstanding tradition of such modes of representation in Nabataea and surrounding areas⁷¹. The minority of anthropomorphic representations are treated as the product of foreign influences, most notably as the product of Graeco-Roman artistic traditions that are seen to have moved into the Near East during the Hellenistic Period⁷². This explanation is able to also conveniently explain the eye idols, like those we have seen above, that show anthropomorphic features on geometric blocks. They are the result of an intermediary stage, where these outside anthropomorphic influences have started to leak into Petra's religious art⁷³. We therefore have a scale with entirely 'aniconic' rectangular blocks, the product of a true 'Nabataean' culture, at one end and anthropomorphic representations like Isis in the Wadi Siyyagh, the product of a 'foreign' culture, at the other end.

70. DONNER 1995, p. 15.

71. PATRICH 1990 and 2007; METTINGER 1995.

72. Both Mettinger and Patrich consider that there was an injunction against graven images among the Nabataeans. Patrich summarises his position: "The Arab-Nabataeans were very conservative in their centuries-long adherence to the aniconic representation of their gods" (PATRICH 2007, p. 100). The figurative representations we find at Petra are not part of this tradition: "This ancestral tradition ignited an iconoclastic reaction against western, figurative influences" (p. 101). The evidence for this "iconoclastic reaction" happening in the Nabataean period is extremely slim, as has been discussed elsewhere (PARLASCA 1993).

73. GAIFMAN 2008, p. 57, n. 57 cites HEALEY 2001, p. 156, METTINGER 1995, p. 63 and PATRICH 1990, p. 86. We can now add PATRICH 2007, p. 90-91.

This model must now be challenged in Petra, and not only from the evidence of the Wadi Siyyagh and the use of the *basileion*. Figurines and geometric idols of a similar size have too often been overlooked in the debate. El-Khouri's catalogue shows that such figurines have been found not only in Petra but all over Nabataea. Patrich treats them very briefly and concludes that miniature geometric blocks "may have been used as cult objects in conservative circles" whereas "the goddess figurines were used by those who either did not strictly adhere to the desert tradition or, not having been the descendants of the earlier settled agricultural inhabitants of the land, never inherited it at all."⁷⁴ Mettinger downplays the importance of figurines as religious artefacts, arguing that they are only the "quasi-subject" of a cult, and so should not be included within his definition of aniconism⁷⁵. However, they are found in considerable numbers all over Nabataea, and El-Khouri has demonstrated how they formed a distinctive local style and so were the product of local religious ideas. We can also comment that, as far as we know, anthropomorphic figurines were a lot more common than geometric, but we should caution that the anthropomorphic are far more likely to be identified and recovered in excavations. Mettinger is correct to draw a distinction between cult images and figurines, but he is not correct to downplay the significance of the latter. While they were not the direct object of veneration in temples, they were undoubtedly representations of deities and had an important function in the household, where most examples from Petra were found. It is difficult to see how worshippers with religious objections to anthropomorphic representation could include them in their rituals.

This should be placed in the context of recent discussions of the aniconic image in the Near East and the Roman World, which have shown that the categorisation of all kinds of geometric idols as 'betyls' has provided a false sense of opposition between these and anthropomorphic idols. Stewart examines the reception and presentation of non-anthropomorphic images both inside and outside the Near East, and concludes that the modern emphasis on the difference between these modes of representation may not be an entirely accurate reflection of ancient attitudes: they were seen as different, and indeed non-anthropomorphic images were chosen exactly because of their 'otherness', but they were not so fundamentally different that they could not be represented side by side⁷⁶. Stewart unfortunately does not examine the position of the aniconic image in Nabataea, but Gaifman does pay more attention to this⁷⁷. Her central point is that the use of the term 'betyl' oversimplifies what is a very complex category of monuments, and assumes "that the importance of the form is simply the fact that that object is non-figural"⁷⁸. She goes on to show how the use of geometric forms to represent facial features on eye idols should not be seen as a concession to Hellenistic influences, but rather a product of "local taste and preference"⁷⁹. The linear scale, then, with Hellenistic anthropomorphism and 'Nabataean' aniconism at opposite ends, has clearly skewed our perception of this kind of monument and oversimplifies the different artistic influences visible in Petra.

We should finish this discussion with an examination of another of Petra's unique monuments, the so-called 'Medallion and Block Relief' on the way down from the El-Madbah high-place (**fig. 15**). This shows the bust of a deity within a medallion surmounting a rectangular geometric idol. No inscription accompanies the sculpture but there have been attempts to identify the deity, inevitably resulting in the conclusion that we have here Dushara in some form or other⁸⁰. The iconography cannot tell us his identity

74. PATRICH 1990, p. 113.

75. METTINGER 1995, p. 27.

76. Stewart ends with a revealing passage from Pausanias (2.9.6) describing statues of Zeus and Artemis at Corinth. Two of these are geometric idols (a pyramid and a pillar), while two are anthropomorphic. Stewart stresses the fact that Pausanias "moves from aniconic pyramids to a masterpiece of Lysippus in a few steps" without expressing surprise and concludes that "His language elides that boundary between them... It is a salutary reminder of how we might re-present the bizarre baetyl-statues of Near Eastern cult" (STEWART 2008, p. 314).

77. GAIFMAN 2008, p. 53-62.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

80. Hammond had first considered the relief to be feminine, and suggested that Atargatis was represented here (HAMMOND 1968). Zayadine proposed rather that the figure should be identified as Dushara, who had been influenced by the iconography of Dionysus (ZAYADINE 1975, p. 336). Tran Tam Tinh followed this interpretation (TRAN TAM TINH 1990, p. 110).

with any certainty, but it does show better than any other monument how aniconic and anthropomorphic representation could be combined in Petra. Patrich's conclusion is that we have here a somewhat confused artisan "caught between two worlds, between two polar iconographic conceptions of how to represent the deity", who ended up making a compromise⁸¹. We can see now that this was probably not the case. Patrich and Mettinger see a need to provide a social explanation for conflicting anthropomorphic and aniconic representations, but the conflict is mostly a creation of modern observers. The geometric blocks of Petra are too often approached against the background of 'normal' Graeco-Roman anthropomorphism, with an interest in emphasising and explaining their 'otherness', and not taken on their own merits. Hellenistic anthropomorphism is seen as the superior cultural force, inevitably encroaching on and replacing Nabataean traditions even though the meagre evidence does not support this⁸². On the contrary, the evidence suggests that Petra's worshippers saw no conflict between anthropomorphic and aniconic. We can perhaps imagine a situation in reverse to that which Stewart outlines for the Mediterranean more generally. The various forms of geometric representation were clearly the norm in Petra, and anthropomorphic representation would have stood out as unusual against this background, but there is no evidence of conflict or competition between the two modes of representation. Rather, it seems that worshippers could and did draw on geometric and anthropomorphic forms to express their interpretations of Petra's deities.

There is one other longstanding debate that our examination of the *basileion* of Isis is able to shed light on. The identity of Petra's geometric idol blocks has long puzzled scholars. They were mostly first identified as Dushara, and so sometimes designated 'Dushara-blocks', after an often quoted passage from the tenth century Suda that describes the chief god of Petra, Theos Ares, as a square block⁸³. This designation has now been abandoned after the discovery of several inscriptions identifying the blocks as different deities in Petra⁸⁴. It seems clear that Petra's worshippers could choose to represent a number of deities in this manner. Discussions therefore revolve around the shape, position and setting of the blocks



Figure 15. 'Medallion and Block Relief'.

81. PATRICH 1990, p. 109.

82. The evidence for any chronological development in Petra's rock-cut religious monuments is unfortunately extremely limited. Nehmé provides a summary of all the dated evidence, from which very little can be concluded. It does show, however, that purely geometric forms of representation were in use from 96/95 BC-256 AD (NEHMÉ 1997, p. 1043).

83. "Θεὸς Ἄρης· τουτέστι θεὸς Ἄρης, ἐν Πέτρᾳ τῆς Ἀραβίας. σέβεται δὲ θεὸς Ἄρης παρ' αὐτοῖς. τόνδε γὰρ μάλιστα τιμῶσι. τὸ δὲ ἄγαλμα λίθος ἐστὶ μέλας, τετράγωνος, ἀτύπωτος, ὕψος ποδῶν τεσσάρων, εὖρος δύο. ἀνάκειται δὲ ἐπὶ βάσεως χρυσιλάτου. τούτῳ θύουσι καὶ τὸ αἶμα τῶν ἱερῶν προχέουσι. καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς ἡ σπὸνδῆ. ὁ δὲ οἶκος ἅπας ἐστὶ πολύχρυσος, καὶ ἀναθήματα πολλὰ."

Theus Ares: this is the god Ares in Petra of Arabia. The god Ares is worshipped among them, for they honour him especially. The image is a black stone, square, unshaped, four feet high, two wide. It is placed on a gold-plated base. To this they sacrifice and pour out the blood of sacrificial victims. This is for them the libation. The whole building is rich in gold and there are many dedications. (Text: ADLER 1931, p. 713, Trans: HEALEY 2001, p. 96).

84. See, most conveniently, NEHMÉ 1997, p. 1044-1045. As well as Dushara, al-'Uzza, Atargatis, the 'Goddess of Hayyan' and the 'ms'b' [idol] of Bosra' are certainly represented in geometric form in Petra. See now WENNING 2007, p. 247-257, for one of the most recent introductions to Petra's geometric idols.

in an attempt to uncover their identity. Parallels are brought in from other Nabataean sites, and the hope is that, as long as all the evidence is collected and analysed correctly, it will become apparent that certain iconographical features were peculiar to particular deities, and we will therefore be able to understand who was represented where in Petra.

There have been several recent attempts to ‘solve’ the problem of Petra’s geometric idols. Wenning is in the process of creating a new catalogue of the monuments, and has published several times on how the idols should be approached. He has constructed a typology of the monuments and the methods of carving, following the examples of Dalman and Patrich, but cannot produce a scheme for recognising their identities, and concludes by hoping that further research will lead to a solution⁸⁵. On another occasion, Wenning summarises the different ways the idols can be approached, concentrating either on the inscriptions (“The Epigraphical Approach”), the shape (“The Typological Approach”) and the context (“The Functional Approach”)⁸⁶. Presumably any solution would have to explain all these frames of reference. The epigraphy is of little help, as Wenning himself highlights, as those few examples that are identified do not allow us to attach any particular forms to particular deities⁸⁷. Avner has recently taken the typological approach in comparing the idols to standing stones in the Negev and Sinai⁸⁸. These stones have no inscriptions to accompany them, but Avner nevertheless attempts to decipher their gender and identity. This produces a number of interesting parallels, but the system Avner constructs is incomplete for Petra’s idols and does not take into account the variety of forms represented there. When he comes to compare his system against the named idols of Petra, it does not find much support, and he acknowledges that there are differences between the arrangements of blocks found in the desert and those carved in relief at Petra⁸⁹. Other typologies also suffer from the same issues: they inevitably reduce the complexity and variety of the monuments and cannot be satisfactorily used to determine the identity of the idols. The third approach, which takes into account the surroundings of the idol, has been partially addressed by Raymond who has made a study of the form of the idols, the niches containing them, and their orientations⁹⁰. The niches are just as varied as the idols themselves, ranging from entirely blank recesses to those framed with elaborate architectural features. She concludes: “This suggests that in Nabataean society, individual deities did not necessarily require a particular niche shape or type”, and also argues that niche orientation is determined largely by the topography and not any wider religious considerations⁹¹. There is no need to go into any more detail here; the point is that attempts to explain Petra’s geometric idols in this way do not work: they cannot be satisfactorily categorized to produce a solution as to their identity.

The reason for this, I would suggest, is that, like the debate between anthropomorphic and aniconic modes of representation, the ‘problem’ and so the need to ‘solve’ or ‘decode’ it, exists only in the minds of modern observers, and not ancient worshippers. All those who have approached Petra’s betyls begin by remarking on the bewildering variety of forms represented, but then seek to reduce this complexity into manageable categories that should have some consistent meaning. The idols are taken out of their

85. See WENNING 2001, p. 85, for his typology. He concludes that a “typological approach is of limited help in the search for the identification of the deities and the interpretation” (p. 87), and suggests that more emphasis of the context of the idols may move us further forward.

86. WENNING 2008.

87. One of the clearest examples of this is the identification of the eye idols. For a long time it was considered that these could only represent female deities, largely on the basis of the Ain es-Shalaleh sanctuary. Wenning, however, has brought to our attention an eye idol identified as Dushara, thus showing that this form was not always confined to goddesses (WENNING 2001, p. 83).

88. AVNER 1999-2000.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

90. RAYMOND 2008.

91. *Ibid.*, p. 145. As regards orientation, Raymond concludes that although this was largely defined by topography, some areas showed a preference for an east or west facing orientation, perhaps in relation to the rising and setting sun (p. 144). She also concludes that there was no relationship between the shape of the idol and the form of the niche (p. 145).

context and arranged alongside those of a similar shape in the pages of an article or book; this is not how they were experienced by ancient worshippers. The assumption behind this approach is that the monuments in Petra conformed to a coherent system of iconography and that, as we have some parts of the system, we should be able to reconstruct the whole thing. Greek religion is clearly in the background here; it is expected that the worshippers of Petra also had a ‘pantheon’ filled with recognisable divine characters, and that these were somehow translated into geometric representation. The fault here is with the modern observer, whose first understanding of ancient polytheism is almost invariably grounded in an understanding of Homer’s Olympus.

We should begin to take the evidence at face value, and examine rather what this variety and lack of consistency can tell us about Petra’s religious practices. It suggests numerous different interpretations of the deities, and this seems to be the result of the personal or familial nature of these monuments. Beyond those figurine-sized geometric idols, which were certainly personal objects, the isolated nature of many geometric idols, and the small numbers of worshippers that they could accommodate, suggests that many of these monuments were the responsibility of small groups, families or even individuals⁹². They were therefore the product of their interpretation of the deity they chose to represent⁹³. The personal significance of the gods is well-attested in Petra and Nabataea, one of the best examples being the ‘Goddess of Ḥayyan’ mentioned above⁹⁴. The modern reaction has been again to reduce the individuality of the deity in an attempt to link her to one of Petra’s better known goddesses: Isis, Al-‘Uzza, Allat or Atargatis. She is, however, first and foremost the goddess of Ḥayyan, and there is no need to see another deity in the background here. Again the assumption is that she must fit into a wider coherent system of Petraean deities with static identities, and as long as we recognise the iconographical clues properly we will be able to put her in her correct place, and get back to her ‘true’ identity. There is no evidence, however, that she was understood in this way. We should rather take the name at face value: the worshipper has chosen to stress the personal significance of the deity, and similarly the iconography would have been the result of his personal interpretation.

It is, then, precisely the *variety* of Petra’s geometric idols that ought to be stressed. There are certainly some normative tendencies within this. Most, for example, are plain rectangular blocks, and we can see certain motifs, like the base or *mwtb* beneath the idol, appearing with some consistency⁹⁵. Undoubtedly, the idols were to some extent mutually understandable among Petra’s worshippers, but this may have been limited to certain areas or social groups that we have little understanding of today. It seems clear, however, that they do not form part of a universally recognisable system of iconography where different symbols were understood consistently. It is likely that the same shapes, attributes and motifs had different meanings to different worshippers and could be employed to represent different deities.

And so we can return to the *basileion* and its appearances in Petra. Like the hundreds of geometric idols that appear throughout Petra’s wadis, what strikes us first about the *basileion* is the variation in how it is represented in its various different contexts. We have an ‘official’ version shown on coins, and perhaps the Khazneh, that appears outside an immediately cultic context. Those appearances that are more immediately connected with cult appear on anthropomorphic and geometric idols, and show no great consistency in their form. On the stele of the ‘Goddess of Ḥayyan’ it is reduced to two semicircular

92. In her analysis of the cultic space of Petra, Nehmé includes ‘private and individual’ space as one of the three categories that she identifies in the city, but notes that larger groups of niches could also be interpreted as a series of individual offerings. She notes that “Cette interprétation rend compte à la fois du nombre et de la variété des niches taillées.” (NEHMÉ 1997, p. 1047-1048).

93. Patrich makes this point succinctly: “At the same time there are deviations from the fixed forms, a phenomenon appropriate to a popular cult in which the connection between man and god is personal - where the mediation of a religious establishment or of absolutely obligatory cultic formulas was not required” (PATRICH 1990, p. 109). As we have seen, however, the idea of there being “fixed forms” of certain deities is not convincing.

94. Healey provides a useful summary of these personal or family deities (HEALEY 2001, p. 151-152).

95. The *mōtab* can be understood as the seat or throne of the deity. Two inscriptions from Petra mentioning “Dushara and his *mōtab*” suggest that it may have sometimes been treated as a distinct object of veneration (see WENNING 2001, p. 88-90).

shapes surrounding a disk, whereas on the figurines we have a more complex headdress with associated features that is more recognisable in the wider iconography of the goddess. No 'canonical' version emerges: the symbol was treated by worshippers with a high degree of malleability, and its form was the result of their individual interpretations as to its significance. The *basileion*, therefore, serves as a reminder of how we should treat the religious art of Petra. The city's rock-cut monuments are a testament to the vibrant diversity of interpretations and attitudes that found expression among its wadis, and trying to fit this evidence into convenient categories inevitably oversimplifies the situation and does an injustice to the complex religious beliefs of Petra's worshippers.

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