

The Betyls of Petra

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Helmut Merklein in memoriam

The Nabataeans venerated their deities in betyls (aniconic stone slabs). This contribution, based primarily on a survey carried out by the author in Petra, offers an overview of the main aspects of these betyls. After a discussion of the terminology of the term "betyl," the deities connected with betyls in Nabataean inscriptions are listed, resulting in the conclusion that the betyl indicates the divine presence of whatever deity is being represented, and is not restricted to Dushara and Al-^cUzza. The relation of the betyl and the nephesh is sketched. A typology of betyls based on their shapes shows possible varieties and peculiarities. The criteria for the classification are enlarged to include the niches and their surroundings. The placement of the niches, their functional setting, the installations associated with the niches, some pictures with betyls, and the mōtab as a sacred area for Dushara contribute to establishing the role of the betyl in cultic practices of the Nabataeans.

One of the phenomena at Petra is the presence of many rock-cut votive niches with betyls all around the city; these betyls are often explained as representations of Dushara, the main deity of the Nabataeans. Considering the differences in their shapes, their groupings, and their niches, placement, contexts, and functions, it becomes obvious that the betyls may represent more than just Dushara. Since Nabataean religion is polytheistic, the betyls may be attributed to deities other than Dushara. The question of who is represented in a betyl remains an enigma, although the meaning of the betyls might have been easily recognizable for the Nabataeans (Dalman 1908: 72–73). Assuming we can identify the differences among the monuments, we may have some guide to their interpretation. In 1995 Helmut Merklein and I started a thorough survey of the votive niches and betyls at Petra. This survey is part of a greater project, "*Die Götter der Nabatäer*," which is being carried out on behalf of Bonn University under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. After four survey seasons we had documented the niches in

the eastern parts of Petra, including Ad-Dara, Ar-Ramle, Al-Wu^cayra, Sh^cub Qais, Bab as-Siq, Eagle Valley, Al-Madras, Al-Hremiye, Al-Qantara, Siq, Wadi al-Mudhlim, Sidd al-Ma^cajin, and Jabal al-Khubtha (except the western slope). Dalman (1908; 1912) listed 295 votive niches for these areas. We found an additional 234 such niches! Unfortunately, Helmut Merklein died of cancer on 30 September 1999 at the age of 59; the author is continuing this project.

THE DEFINITION OF BAETYL AND BETYL

The Nabataeans observed what is called "aniconism" (Gladigow 1988; Mettinger 1995: 18–20) in the veneration and representation of their deities. Aniconism means that rather than using figural images as objects of worship, symbolic forms such as standing stones are taken as the representation of the deity. Aniconism is a phenomenon found in various religions. It is not restricted to monotheistic religions; rather it is a feature of polytheistic belief systems.

Nabataean aniconism differs from a strictly obeyed aniconism like the Israelite prohibition of the graven image because it allows anthropomorphic representations of the deities, although the aniconic veneration is preferred (Patrich 1990; but cf. K. Parlasca 1993). The most common aniconic representations of deities are “standing stones.” These can be categorized according to their function as memorial, legal, commemorative, and cultic stelae or betyls (Graesser 1969). The Nabataeans used two main types of stelae: the “betyl,” meaning the representation of a deity, and the “*nephesh*,” a memorial mark for the dead.

The term “baetyl/baetyl/betyl” derives from the Greek βαιτύλια. Philo of Byblos (FGrHist 790 F 2,23) in the second century A.D. explains that βαιτύλια were invented by the god Ouranos when he managed to create λίθοι ἔμψυχοι, meaning animated stones, which fell from the heavens and possessed magical power. The same view is shared by other Greek and Latin sources (Fauth 1975; Kron 1992: 59–60). The features described point to round or spherical, red or black meteorites that were especially venerated as sacred stones in the Roman East. The two most famous of these βαιτύλια are the meteor of Kybele from Pessinus in Asia Minor and the omphaloid Elagabal-Ammudates from Emesa, both of which were transferred to Rome (Cook 1940: 893–907).

The Greek word βαιτύλια itself is related to the Semitic “beth-el (*byt^l*),” which means “dwelling/house/temple of god/El,” and seems to refer to open-air sanctuaries. This tradition can be seen in Gen 28:10–22. Here the site Bethel is interpreted as a place where YHWH was/is present and deserves a sanctuary, but the specifics of the story do not describe the stone that Jacob erected as a betyl, but as a commemorative stone. Jacob promises to build a sanctuary (“beth-el”) at the place of the stone (Gen 28:22). Three Aramaic stelae from Sfire from the eighth century B.C. are regarded as the oldest known evidence for the connection of “beth-el” and standing stones. On these stelae, treaties of the kings of KTK and Arpad in Northern Syria are written. Stela II (Donner and Röllig 1964: no. 223 C) contains three mentions of the formula “to remove the inscriptions from the *byt^l lhy^l*, where they should remain engraved.”¹ It is possible that the Phoeni-

cian-Aramaic god Bethel, as an oath-god, originated in such commemorative stelae, but became a deity. Bethel is mentioned for the first time in 675/674 B.C. in a treaty between Tyre and Assur (Röllig 1995). However, it is Philo of Byblos who seems to connect the god Bethel with the sacred stones by identifying them as βαιτύλια. For Philo, Bethel is one of the four sons of Ouranos and Ge.

The term βαιτύλια for round, black sacred stones may occur in the lost work of Sotakos from the third century B.C., from which we have a quotation in Pliny (Natural History XXXVII, 135, “*baetuloi*”). We do not know whether the term to describe particular sacred stones as fallen from the heaven and animated with divine power has an older Eastern tradition or is in its precise meaning rather a Hellenistic erudition. It was but a small step to connect “beth-el” with the sense of the “dwelling of the god” or as the presence of the god in the stone. That is precisely what a betyl represents.

The Nabataean betyls do not correspond to those described by Philo. Rather than round, black stones, they are stelae or shaped slabs raised in relief. But since they too are aniconic sacred stones, in modern research the term “betyl” is associated with these types of monuments. One may distinguish between “baetyls” for the meteorites and the Greek idea of sacred stones, including the omphalos, and “betyls” for stela types and the Semitic tradition of standing stones, although this is a modern distinction.²

NABATAEAN/ARAMAIC TERMS FOR BETYLS AND RELATED MONUMENTS

Nabataean inscriptions include two terms for betyls: *nšb* and *mšb^l* (Starcky 1966: col. 1014). Both terms are related to the Semitic root *yšb* and describe an erected/standing stone/stela (Jean and Hoftijzer 1965: 184). Betyl types and shapes do not indicate any difference between the two terms.

At the northwestern stepped path to Jabal al-Khubtha, the representation of the deities of a niche (fig. 1) is explained by a votive inscription on the face of the rock to its left ^lh nšyby ^ll^z wmr^l byt^l / [dy] ^lbd whb^llhy šyr^l / [b]r zydn, “These are the betyls of Al-^lUzza and of the Lord of the House, made by Wahballahi, the caravan-leader, son of Zaidan” (Dalman 1912: 96–98, 171 no. 85). If the

¹ *byt^l lhy^l* is understood by most scholars as referring to a sanctuary, but others argue that the phrase “where they are engraved” refers instead directly to the stelae (Fitzmyer 1995).

² Dalman called the betyls “*Idol, Pfeileridol*” (1908: 53, 70), but because the term “idol” can be used in a derogatory way in the sense of graven image (*Götzenbild*), this term should be avoided.

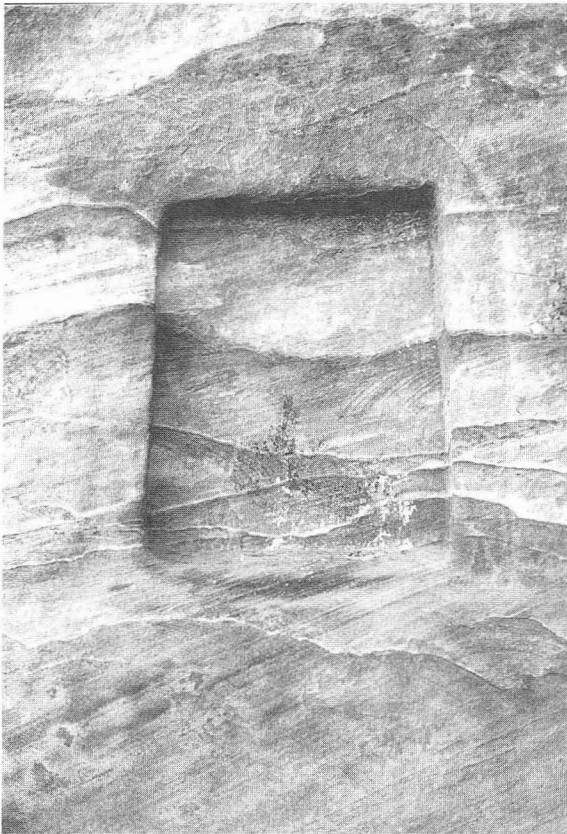


Fig. 1. Petra, path to Jabal al-Khubtha: Votive niche of Wahballahi for Al-^cUzza and the "Lord of the House." Photo: H. Merklein.

profession of Wahballahi is to be read šyd^{p} , then he was a plasterer. Both readings are possible. Al-^cUzza was the main goddess at Petra. The "Lord of the House" ($\text{mr}^{\text{p}} \text{byr}^{\text{p}}$) is understood by most scholars as a title of Dushara, the main deity of Petra and the tutelary deity of the Nabataean tribe and its royal dynasty. *Bayt* could be related to a temple of the god, but probably indicates a connection to the dynasty (see below).

The niche is described as empty (Dalman 1912: 46 no. 760, fig. 42). For certain events, portable betyls may have been placed in the niche. The fact that we do not find grooves in the floor of the niche for a portable betyl is not conclusive, because we should expect some betyls to have been self-standing. Possibly the emptiness can be explained in a different way. The tapering niche seems itself to have the shape of a betyl. Such recessed shapes are a kind of negative space compared with the betyls raised in relief, and these are also common among the betyls at Petra. An arched frame is engraved

around the recess. Normally, such frames are raised in relief; this one is sunken. Merklein suggests that these arches are associated with male deities, especially with Dushara (1995: 111–14). Therefore, the "niche" could represent Al-^cUzza, and the arch the "Lord of the House"/Dushara. Both deities turn up again in a votive niche at Wadi Ramm, where they are depicted as betyls in bas-relief inside a rectangular niche (Savignac 1934: 587–88, fig. 11, pl. 36.2; see below). This niche, however, does not change the above interpretation.

Inscription no. 16 from Wadi Ramm to the right of the niche of the Allat from Bosra (Savignac 1934: 575, fig. 2, pl. 6.1) is read by Starcky in its beginning $\text{nšbt}^{\text{p}} \text{lt}^{\text{p}} \text{lt}^{\text{p}}$, "The betyl of Allat, the goddess" (Milik 1958: 247). Inscription no. 2 to the left of that niche (Savignac 1933: 411–12, no. 2, fig. 3, pl. 24.2) describes the betyl of the niche as $\text{d}^{\text{p}} \text{lt}^{\text{p}} \text{lt}^{\text{p}} \text{dy} \text{bšr}^{\text{p}}$, "This is Allat, the goddess, who is in Bosra." This relief of Allat has attracted different interpretations (Savignac 1934: 582–85, fig. 7, pl. 39; the drawing is misleading). I am not convinced that the figure is a betyl with anthropomorphic features. A small, square base stands above the original lower frame of the niche. The part below does not appear to belong to the original niche, and it is not a pedestal. What is carved on both sides of and behind the square base is unclear. However, the lower part of this element is cut off. Arms, horns, or wings, and the crescent moon have all been suggested. On the base stands a rectangular betyl, and above that, another smaller, almost square one. Both betyls are slightly rounded. The upper, smaller betyl is a little bit narrower at its base, creating the effect of a spherical shape. The votive is carved by Taymallahi and . . . (name lost), servitors of the "afkal." The pkl^{p} ("afkal") was a kind of a local high priest (cf. Healey 1993: 37, 160–62).

On the side of the stepped path to Ad-Dayr there is a gorge, called Qattar ad-Dayr, where water is dripping from the rock. This was a sacred place to the Nabataeans (Dalman, "*Tropfheiligtum*"), where we find various votives hewn in the rock. One of the niches (fig. 2) has a votive inscription from the reign of Rabb³el II (A.D. 70–106). It was published by Milik (1958: 246–49, no. 7, fig. 3, pl. 17b; 1980: 15 no. 4, fig. 12): $\text{dnh} \text{mšb}^{\text{p}} / \text{dy} \text{bšr}^{\text{p}} \text{d[y]} / [\text{c}] \text{bd} \text{w}[\text{hb}^{\text{p}}] \text{lhy} \text{b[r]} / [. . .] \text{wh}[\text{yy}] / \text{rb}^{\text{p}} \text{mlk} \text{nb}^{\text{p}}/\text{w}$, "This is the betyl of Bosra, which was made by Wahballahi, son of . . . (name lost), for his own life and the life of Rabb³el, king of the Nabataeans." Milik sees the two possible interpretations for mšb^{p}

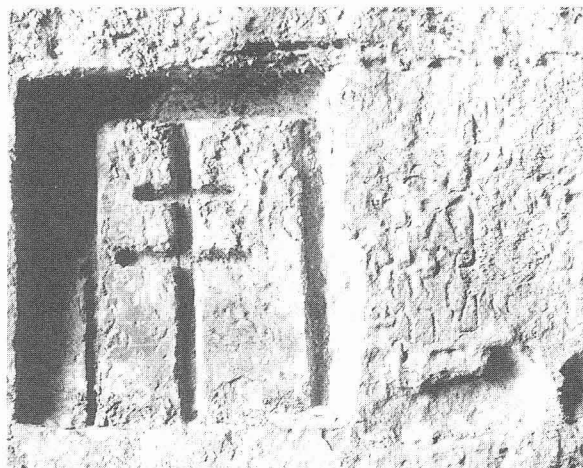


Fig. 2. Petra, Qattar ad-Dayr: Inscribed votive of Wahballahi for Allat or Al-^cUzza, the goddess from Bosra. The carved cross on the front of the betyl is secondary. Photo: H. Merklein.

*dy bšr*². He prefers to read “the betyl of the goddess Bosra” because of the absence of the preposition that would allow a reading “the betyl from Bosra.” I cannot exclude the second reading, assuming haplography or an error by the mason. Personifications of cities are very unusual in Nabataean inscriptions, if they exist at all,³ while formulations like “the god/goddess from . . . (place name)” are widely attested, among them *dy bbšr*². Starcky suggests that Dushara A^cra is indicated (1966: col. 988).⁴

A different identification is possible because there are two betyls in this niche (Dalman 1908: no. 431, fig. 193): a large rectangular betyl is paired with a much taller one to its right. While the inscription speaks of only the large one, there must be an explanation for the two betyls. Milik (1958: 248) suggests that the small betyl represents the insignificant *paredros*⁵ of the main deity. My suggestion is to identify the large betyl with Al-^cUzza, who is “the goddess of Bosra.”⁶ An alternative identification would be with Allat from Bosra (discussed above). In both cases the goddesses are described in other sources

³ *RÉS* 1092, the statue of Seeia, belongs to Hawranite traditions.

⁴ In two inscriptions from Imtan (*RÉS* 93) and Hegra (*CIS* II 218), from A.D. 93 and 106, this god is said to be ²*lh mr²n² dy bbšr*², “the god of our lord (Rabb²el II), who [the god] is in Bosra” (concerning *mr²n²*, cf. Merklein 1998).

⁵ The “*paredros*” is a deity that joins the main deity of a sanctuary. Both shape a pair. Normally, the *paredros* is of lower rank.

⁶ If the reading of *RÉS* 2091 is correct: . . . [*ty*]*mw br bdrw l²l² lht bš[r²]*, “Taimu, son of Badru, for Al-^cUzza, the goddess of Bosra.”

as mother goddesses.⁷ I suggest, therefore, that the small betyl depicts Dushara as the child of Al-^cUzza or Allat. Otherwise, it cannot be excluded that such small betyls represent the individual family god added to one of the high-ranking deities.

The face of the large betyl is deeply carved with a cross with two bars, which we know as the Patriarchal cross. Strangely, the cross is not aligned centrally, and the technique of its cutting differs from Nabataean carving. Contrary to the suggestion of Roche (1985: 110) that this carving represents three betyls, the cross seems to be secondary (cf. Dalman 1908: 254). As a nearby cave was used by a Christian hermit (Dalman 1908: 252, no. 427), and other hermitages are not far away (Wenning 1987: 262–63), it is conceivable that one of the hermits engraved the cross. Therefore the interpretation of Milik—who saw anthropomorphic features (“arms”) in this carving (Milik 1958: 248–49; Roche 1985: 110–11) and took it as Nabataean—is not acceptable. He refers to some rock drawings that might be tribal signs of families (*wusūm*). These can hardly be taken for representations of figures, and they do not fit with the carving of the cross.

Only one other Nabataean inscription uses the same term *mšb*² for a betyl, even in a different form. Inscription no. 58 from Hegra reads *mšp mr² byth dy ^cbd whblhy šy^{c2}*, “The betyl of the Lord of the House, which was made by Wahballahi the goldsmith” (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 216–17 no. 58, pl. 26, 58; Dalman 1912: 97).⁸ Here the *mšp* is read as *mšb*. If the word derives from the root *nšp*, “to honor,” then it can be compared also with the *msgd*² (see below).⁹

⁷ The worship of Allat in an Arabian tradition which is also found in the Hawran (*CIS* II no. 185; the reading ²*m / ²lhy²*, “the mother of the gods,” is not accepted by all scholars; cf. further the votive niche of Allat-Atargatis [Dalman 1908: no. 149, fig. 68] with features of the mother goddess; cf. Krone 1992: 339–42). Al-^cUzza seems to be the great mother goddess in Petraean mythology as reflected in a late source (Epiphanius of Salamis, Panarion 51, 22, 9–11; cf. Cook 1940: 912–16). The related figurines of a goddess and a child among the Nabataean terracottas (I. Parlasca 1997: 127–28, figs. 139–40) may be taken as an earlier indication for this tradition.

⁸ There is no published drawing to illustrate the surroundings of this inscription.

⁹ The connection of the term *msgd*² with Nabataean betyls is correctly rejected by Roche (1985: 206–7). Ten *msgd*²-inscriptions are known from the Hawran, one from Ad-Dmayr, two from Hegra. With the exception of an altar from Ad-Dmayr, all the others are from Nabataean areas and are addressed to Nabataean deities. Three complete monuments (*CIS* II 161 and 190,

Finally, the term *wgr* had been related to a betyl in a Nabataean votive inscription from Salkhad (*CIS* II 183; Milik 1958: 227–31): . . . $l^{\text{2}} \text{ } wgrh$. . . , “for Allat and her *wgr*.” The term describes in Aramaic a heap of stones set up as a memorial, in Hasmaitic a *nephesh*, in Sabaic a tumulus above a tomb, and in Arabic a grotto or a tomb (Milik 1958: 230–31; Healey 1993: 133). Referring to the late meaning “grotto,” Starcky (1966: col. 1001) suggests an interpretation as a safe niche or an adyton. Concerning the early inscriptions, it is likely that *wgr* originally was a kind of a memorial stone. There is no reason to connect the term in the Salkhad inscription with the cult of the dead. Therefore, it is possible that *wgr* is to be taken as another term for both *nephesh* and *nšb*/betyl. If the meaning is closer to “a heap of stones,” then it may be suggested that the seat of Allat in her sanctuary is indicated. That would be in parallel with the phrase “Dushara and his *mōtab*” (see below).

EYE BETYLS WITH INSCRIPTIONS

A special type of Nabataean betyl is called the “eye betyl.” Here the high, rectangular, plain slab is represented with square “eyes” and a straight “nose.” So far, 27 eye betyls are known. Twelve other monuments have been classified in this group, but they are not eye betyls (Merklein and Wenning 1998a).¹⁰

and *RÉS* 2052) demonstrate that the *msgd*² is a tall votive altar with upper and lower profiles. This function fits well with the meaning of the term *msgd*², which is related to the root *sgd*, “to venerate,” and concerns the place of the veneration (Starcky 1966: col. 1007). *CIS* II 218 is from Hegra, dated A.D. 106, and is associated with a votive niche, in which not the betyl of Dushara A^cra, but the *msgd*² for this god is represented. In this particular case, the inscription and the altar are separated. To find a *msgd*² in a votive niche is unique among Nabataean monuments and can be explained by the Hawranite tradition and the Nabataean custom of depicting the Nabataean horned incense altars in such niches. The Nabataean horned altar is not a *msgd*², and the Hawranite Nabataean *msgd*² does not seem to be an incense altar.

¹⁰I refer to our report, and I need not discuss the eye betyls at length. Since our 1998 report, four examples can be added, not yet published. Three have been found at Petra: (1) in 1999 I found a fragment of a marble stela of an eye betyl on the western path to Jabal al-Khubtha; (2) M. Lindner has informed me of a new stela found at Jabal Ma²iz during road construction in 2000; (3) and B. Kolb has sent me photographs of another new stela found in his excavations at az-Zantur IV in 2000. I am very grateful as well to P. C. Hammond, who kindly sent photographs of the eye betyls from his excavations for the full documentation of all the eye betyls I am preparing. In 1999 U. Avner kindly informed me about a relief from Nahal ^cAmram, 12 km north of Elath, to be published by him (Avner in press).

provide the name of the deity venerated. Two niches from the sanctuary at ^cAyn ash-Shellaleh in Wadi Ramm dominate the discussion (Savignac 1934: 586–89 no. 12, figs. 9–10; no. 20, fig. 11, pl. 36; Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 77–78 nos. 6–7). Both inscriptions refer to the goddess Al-^cUzza, and in both, the related betyl is an eye betyl. The betyl of niche no. 12 ($l^{\text{2}} z^{\text{2}}$, “Al-^cUzza”) is placed side by side with an almost identical betyl in niche no. 11 ($lktb^{\text{2}} dy bgy^{\text{2}}$, “Al-Kutba, who is in Gaia”) (Strugnell 1959: 29–31).¹¹ In niche no. 20, Al-^cUzza is shown beside a smaller rectangular plain betyl, who, according to the inscription, represents the “Lord of the House”: $d^{\text{2}} l^{\text{2}} z^{\text{2}} wmr byt^{\text{2}} / dy^{\text{2}} b d^{\text{2}} qbr p^{\text{2}} hm whgy^{\text{2}} mny^{\text{2}}$, “These are Al-^cUzza and the Lord of the House, which were made by ^cOqbar, son of Fahim, and Hagay, the artisans.” The “eyes” of Al-^cUzza in niche no. 20 are plain squares, but in the two niches of the female deities Al-Kutba and Al-^cUzza, both eye betyls have star-shaped eyes. Following Merklein’s suggestion (Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 77), the eyes can be interpreted as the morning and the evening stars, the two aspects of the planet Venus, rather than the planets Mercury and Venus as suggested by Starcky (1966: cols. 994–95). In this case the “nose” between the “eyes” is either a stylized betyl of Dushara as the lord of heaven or as the sun (cf. Healey 1993: 83–84, Dushara, “he who separates night from day”) or just a partition. If we compare the Nabataean eye betyls with similar monuments in which eyes are depicted, especially with the well-known Aramaic and South Arabian face stelae, we find that in these monuments, eyes, nose, or a face are clearly meant. Therefore, we must assume that also in the Nabataean eye betyls, we must see eyes and a nose. In this case, the “astral” version among the eye betyls might reflect a particular belief.

Since the report by Savignac (1934), the eye betyl has been generally identified with Al-^cUzza or at least with a female deity. The eye betyl of the goddess Atargatis (fig. 3) from Syrian Manbiġ/Hierapolis ($tr^{\text{2}} t^{\text{2}} / mnbgyt^{\text{2}}$, “Atar^cata, the one from Manbegita”) in the Wadi as-Siyyagh (Lindner and Zangenberg 1993; Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 76 no. 1) seemed to support this assumption. But this may be doubted now because of a new discovery of a still unpublished eye betyl of Dushara at Petra (Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 84 no. 30). Obviously,

¹¹Gaia is the Nabataean place name of modern Wadi Musa.



Fig. 3. Petra. Wadi as-Siyyagh: Nabataean eye betyl of the Syrian goddess Atargatis, identified by a Nabataean inscription. Photo: H. Merklein.

the eye betyl indicates the divine presence of any deity just as the plain betyl.

If the eye betyl is not necessarily Al-^cUzza, then the stela from az-Zantur (Lindner 1988: 89–91, fig. 5, pl. 10; Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 83 no. 27) possibly represents Isis (Zayadine 1991: 284) rather than Al-^cUzza or Al-^cUzza-Isis as has been assumed. This identification is based on the emblem of Isis in the middle of the wreath that crowns the stela. The famous stela of Hayyan, which is also crowned by a wreath, unfortunately has lost its emblem or jewel (Hammond 1980; Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 80–81 no. 18). Here too Al-^cUzza and Isis are suggested, but of this we cannot be sure, because the inscription does not mention the name of the deity (*ʿlht . ḥyn . br . nybt*, “The Goddess of Ḥayyan, son of Naybat”). Furthermore, the betyl belongs to the type of the Arabian face stelae.¹² Unless

¹²I have argued that the adoption of this Arabian type of the face stela could belong to what I call a “renovatio,” a religious restoration under Rabb²el II, taking up old Arabian and Nabataean

we can identify the deity of the Temple of the Winged Lions, we have no grounds for the identification of the stela, which was incorporated into the north wall or a niche of the temple (Hammond 1980: 138; cf. the side view Wenning in 1990: pl. 23.2).

A BYZANTINE SOURCE FOR THE NABATAEAN BETYLS: THE SUDA

In the Byzantine lexicon entitled *Souda* (ἡ Σοῦδα) of the tenth century A.D.—Suidas is not a name of an author (Gärtner 1979)—we read under the entry Θεὸς Ἄρης (a corruption of Δοῦς Ἄρης, Dousares, the Greek form of Dushara):

Theus Ares—That is the god Ares at Petra in Arabia. The god Ares is worshiped by them, for they venerate him above all others. The image (ἄγαλμα) is a black stone (λίθος μέλας), rectangular and unshaped (ἀτύπωτος), measuring four feet in height by two feet in width (Georgius Codinus adds: and one foot in thickness; Dalman 1908: 49). It is set on a base (βάσις) worked in gold. To this they burn incense and against it they pour the blood of the sacrificial animals. And that is their form of libation. The whole building abounds in gold and many dedications. (Adler 1931: 713; cf. similar sources listed by Patrìch 1990: 51–52)

It is commonly held that the entry describes the cultic image of Dushara at Petra, possibly in the Qasr al-Bint. At the rear of the central adyton is a recess of approximately the same size as the cultic image described in the *Souda*, which may indicate the place of that image. Molded stucco fragments from that temple coated with a gold leaf seem to illustrate the above passage (Zayadine 1985: 240). Although it is called a black stone, it seems not to have been a meteorite because of its clear proportions. The stone seems to be worked by a mason. Therefore, “unshaped” means nonfigural or aniconic. Nabataean aniconism does not generally avoid images, but it does avoid the anthropomorphic form of images (cf. Gladigow 1988).

Most of the Nabataean betyls represented in the niches are high and rectangular (from a few centimeters to about 1.20 m). Only a small group of them shows exactly the same 1:2 proportions as the cultic image (Roche 1985: 91). These proportional ex-

traditions (Wenning 1993: 92; Merklein and Wenning 1997: 110, fig. 81), whereas other scholars have explained this type as an attempt to give the betyl anthropomorphic features (Freyberger 1997: 83).

amples could be an imitation of the cultic image and may indicate a particular function of that betyl. While all betyls combine dedication, veneration, and divine presence, this type could primarily point to the sacrificial veneration of the cultic image (Merklein 1995: 114).¹³

TYPOLOGY OF BETYLS

The first systematic classification of the Nabataean betyls was published by Dalman (1908: 70–74). His typology was revised in other classifications (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 437–38; Starcky 1966: col. 1009; Roche 1985: 88–138; Patrich 1990: 75–91). These classifications were based on the shapes of the betyls:

- A. Plain betyls can be subdivided into the following types:
 1. rectangular slab (*Pfeiler*, block, stela) (fig. 4a)
 2. high rectangular slab with a rounded top (*abgestumpfter Kegel*) (fig. 4b)
 3. semicircular or hemispherical slab (fig. 4c)
 4. dome-shaped spherical betyl (squat omphalos, ovoid)
- B. Eye betyls
- C. Face stelae

Besides these shapes, four possible techniques should be considered for the betyl:

1. sculptured in the round (stela, portable)
2. cut into the rock and raised in relief (*erhaben*, plastic)
3. cut as outlined shape by a deepened recess (*vertieft*, negative space)
4. outline carved slightly into the rock-face (petroglyph)

The betyls are shown without base, with base, sometimes standing on the floor of the niche, and some are positioned on a bench or a pedestal. The trapezoidal base of the betyls may be a reduced form of the base/pedestal of the cultic image (Dalman 1908: 71; Starcky 1966: col. 1009), but in some

¹³The Nabataeans burned incense and poured blood on the sacred stone. Possibly this custom is reflected in the epithet used for Dushara at Bosra. A^cra means “the extraordinarily anointed one” (Starcky 1966: col. 989; Wenning 1993: 88). Only the blood of animals was offered to the deity (cf. Mettinger 1995: 191–92). The custom of burning animal sacrifices is not found with the Nabataeans. Indeed, the only occurrence of large altars is found in association with monumental architecture, whereas small incense altars are often depicted in reliefs.

cases betyls with a base are set on a separate pedestal (cf. Dalman 1908: no. 198).

Roche has suggested (1985: 90–92) that it probably makes sense to distinguish between a short betyl and a lengthened betyl. At the moment it seems of greater interest to research those betyls with proportions of 1:2 or those that are relatively broad. Once all betyls from Petra are cataloged, we will have a better basis for an interpretation of the sizes. A high rectangular slab is by far the most common type. Contrary to some of Dalman’s drawings, we have not found any rounded pillars among the betyls researched so far. The mushroom-like, the bottle-like, or T-shaped betyls were classified as distinct types by Roche (1985: 99) and Patrich (1990: 88–89). But this classification is a misinterpretation of the shapes, which can be better explained as rectangular and semicircular betyls placed one on top of the other. The dome-shaped spherical betyl is best known from the Roman coins of Adraa and Bostra and the Adraa votive in the Siq (Dalman 1908: 146 no. 150, fig. 69; Kindler 1983: 58–60). This provincial-era type seems to combine Nabataean traditions with Greek, Syrian, and Roman traditions. The face stela is only found at Petra represented by the Hayyan-stela.¹⁴

Triclinium no. 17 in the Bab as-Siq (Dalman 1912: 40), according to an inscription hewn out of the rock in the year 96/95 B.C., was devoted to Dushara by Aşlaḥ, son of Aşlaḥ (Dalman 1912: 99–101 no. 90). At the rear an aedicula is carved with a hemispherical recess (Dalman 1912: 40, fig. 35). Researched and published by Merklein in an important contribution (1995: 109–15), this is the oldest dated Nabataean inscription at Petra and probably the oldest dated betyl of Dushara.¹⁵ At present the carved

¹⁴Two betyls seem to show unusual features. Betyl no. 539c in the Wadi al-Mataha (Dalman 1908: 73, 301, figs. 244, 247) has two large, drilled eyes and three smaller holes shaped as a triangle which are drilled close to the base. Dalman suggests the triangle may indicate the *pudendum muliebre*, although the top of the triangle points upward. Nevertheless, scholars suggest that Allat and Al-^cUzza are represented. After careful study in 1995, it seemed to us that these drillings were secondary (Merklein and Wenning 1998a: 77 no. 4). A betyl in the Sidd al-Ma^c-ajin is said to be crowned with a crescent moon (Dalman 1908: 310 no. 595, fig. 259a), but the remainder of the “crescent moon” is an accidental result of erosion.

¹⁵Probably there are two undated monuments where a betyl is related to Dushara. Inscription *CIS* II 443 mentions “Dushara, the god from Madras” in a triclinium, which has niche D. 89b (Dalman 1908: no. 89b) with a betyl at the rear. An unpublished eye betyl (mentioned above) is said to be accompanied by

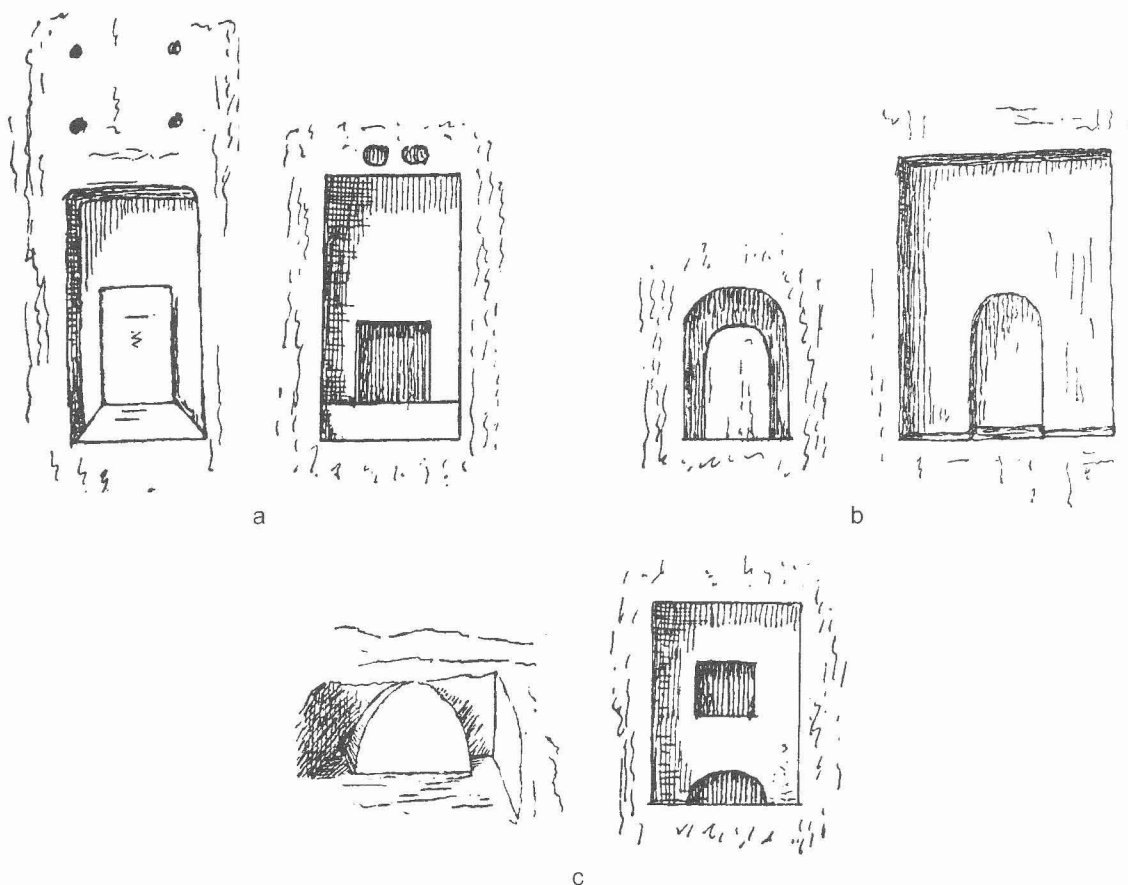


Fig. 4. Types of Nabataean betyls: (a) rectangular raised in relief (Dalman 1908: no. 77a), recessed (Dalman 1908: no. 653b); (b) rounded top raised in relief (Dalman 1908: no. 642), recessed (Dalman 1908: no. 337); (c) semicircular raised in relief (Dalman 1908: no. 324), recessed below a square recess (Dalman 1908: no. 598).

aedicula and, next to it, an engraved rectangular betyl are the oldest dated symbols related to Dushara, and not the hemispherical recess itself.¹⁶ We

a Dushara inscription. This cannot be proved at the moment. Finally, Johnson et al. (1999: 253, fig. 4) published a votive niche with a betyl, claiming a faint inscription above the betyl, possibly reading "Dushara." We checked the niche this summer and could not see such an inscription. Possibly the researchers saw traces of the mason's work of smoothing the back, along with some erosion, leading them to assume the presence of an inscription.

¹⁶After we visited the place several times and gained more knowledge about Nabataean betyls, Merklein changed some of his interpretation and planned to revise this article for our final publication. Merklein abandoned the idea of a relationship with Gaia. He no longer classified the hemispherical recess as a "Rundbogenidol," denying its connection with the omphalos. It still remains possible that this recess depicted a betyl, but we cannot exclude the possibility that the recess may be secondary, because the room was used by the Bedouins to live in and give sheep and goat shelter; installations seem to have been built against the wall with the niche. Not until the many other hemispherical recesses are studied can we draw any conclusions.

cannot assume that the centrally positioned aedicula was added much later than 96 B.C.

Grooves in the floor in many niches lead us to believe that portable betyls were used. We can assume that these betyls may have been kept in tents or houses as tutelary deities of the family and were put in the niches for special occasions. Some other, larger monuments have holes or slots in the top to insert betyls, including the cultic platform of the Qasr adh-Dharih (Nehmé and Villeneuve 1999: fig. 77) and three bases from Puteoli with a few betyls in situ (Tran Tam Tinh 1972: 144–46 nos. S. 3–5, pls. 48–49). Only recently have a few plain betyls sculpted in the round been recognized and published,¹⁷ but strangely enough we have a group of

¹⁷During a visit to Khirbat adh-Dahrih in 1997, H. Merklein noticed a worked stone in Area V 1, which he thought to be a betyl with a socket. This betyl is now exhibited as such in the Museum of Jordanian Heritage at Irbid. M. S. Joukowsky (2001: 5

15 eye betyls sculpted in round, mostly stelae (Merklein and Wenning 1998a).¹⁸ At least three stelae were set up as freestanding votives in temples.

Betyls are found in groups of two, three, four, six, and ten in various combinations. Betyls appear of the same size, of different sizes, in different arrangements, set above each other, or set into each other; one betyl can be raised in relief, the other shaped as a negative space; a rectangular slab can be paired with an eye betyl—and these are the most common combinations. The interpretation of these groups is far from being solved (Dalman 1908: 72–74; Roche 1985: 101–19). Each group of betyls must be interpreted in its own context. Niches with two betyls are often attributed to Dushara and Al-ʿUzza, the most venerated male and female deities at Petra. But the only monument in which they are attested as part of a group is in niche no. 20 from Wadi Ramm under the aspect of Al-ʿUzza and the “Lord of the House” (see above). And here the betyl of Al-ʿUzza is larger than the one representing the “Lord of the House.” This indicates a hypotactic relationship. Merklein explained this to me (personal communication) as a representation of Al-ʿUzza as the mother of Dushara (see above), the dynastic god, as an expression of the fact that the dynasty was flourishing under her protection. A similar representation is found in the Siq, where an aedicula with two betyls is cut into a large fallen rock (Zayadine 1979: 194, 197, fig. 5, pl. 94.1). Many other explanations for two betyls seem possible—e.g., the betyl of the high god beside the minor tutelary deity of the person or family. We need a better understanding of the amazingly wide variety of betyl combinations.

Three variants can be distinguished in the combination of betyls and anthropomorphic figures: (1) figures used instead of betyls in separate votive niches (Dalman 1908: no. 144; the Isis in the Wadi Waqit [Lindner, ed., 1989: 287–88, fig. 3]); (2) figures represented instead of betyls in a row of votive niches with betyls (Dalman 1908: no. 149 with a Syrian goddess; the Isis at the Wadi as-Siyagh [Merklein and Wenning 1998b: 169–73, pls. 7, 8A]); and (3) figures that are combined with a betyl

in the same monument (the “medallion and block relief” near the Great High Place [Hammond 1968], where we propose that the bust and the betyl are the same male deity; and the eagle monument [Lindner 1997]).

A typological approach is of limited help in the search for the identification of the deities and the interpretation of the monuments. We should neither separate the betyl from its niche nor the niche from its place and surroundings. Further, we have to find a meaning for the function of each niche. What is needed, therefore, is research on all available data and an interpretation of these data using a structuralist approach.

THE NEPHESH

The “*nepesh*” is not a betyl but a standing stone (Dalman 1908: 77–78, “*Spitzpfeiler*”; Starcky 1966: cols. 951–56; Roche 1985: 223–30). This type is brought into our discussion because of its association with the betyl. The Semitic word “*npš*” means “life, person.” It denotes a dead person and is used in this sense for a memorial marker. The term is attested also in various Nabataean inscriptions (Starcky 1965). The Nabataean *nepesh* is shaped like an obeliskoid pilaster or a pointed cone, often with a blossom/pinecone or a stylized crown at the top. Most of the *nepeshes* are set upon a base, where the name of the dead person is given. The *nepeshes* are in bas-relief, roughly carved or engraved into rock-faces. They can be outside (*Br.* 1904: nos. 3, 67) and even inside tombs (*Br.* 1904: nos. 34, 264, 320, 825). Some are engraved near votive niches; only a few are shown inside a niche (Dalman 1908: nos. 42f, 800), but sometimes the outlines resemble the shape of a niche. Many *nepeshes* are found unconnected with tombs, especially along the paths to the city (cf. Dalman 1908: 221–25) or at other prominent rock-faces such as those in the Siq.¹⁹ Often various *nepeshes* are grouped together, perhaps to draw attention. Three *nepeshes* carved into a high, smoothed wall in a quarry (Dalman 1908: 245 nos. 401b, c, e) probably commemorate masons who suffered fatal accidents. Freestanding *nepeshes* like the one near tomb *Br.* no. 813 (Zayadine 1986: 229, fig. 22) are rare. The so-called Obelisk-Tomb has four *nepeshes* in its façade (McKenzie 1990: 156–57, pl. 122). The large cuboid so-called

and unnumbered fig. in right column) has just published two plain betyls found in the so-called Great Temple. B. Kolb (personal communication, September 2001) has kindly informed me about two betyls found in the az-Zantur excavations.

¹⁸Added to our 1998 list are the new fragments from Jabal al-Khubtha, Jabal Maʿiz, and az-Zantur. No. 17 should be deleted from the 1998 list, because it probably is not an eye betyl according to the new photograph sent to me by P. C. Hammond.

¹⁹One is close to the Al-Khazna; others are found on the rock around the niches D. 189–90 (Dalman 1908: nos. 189–90).

block tombs at the beginning of the Bab as-Siq and at two other places at Petra represent another type of *nephesh* (Dalman 1908: 105–6, fig. 26).

NICHES

There are hundreds of votive niches at Petra, but they have not attracted scholars in the same way as the betyls except for a discussion by Roche (Dalman 1908: 85; Roche 1985: 293–302).²⁰ Niches are cut into the rock as simple or framed recesses and are characterized by an upright rectangular outline. Besides the rectangular shape, we also find simple arched or gabled recesses. In some cases the recess itself represents the betyl as a negative space. An even more simple type is created when the niche is cut into a sloping rock. The recess is hewn at a right angle (*Felsausschnitt*), so that the niche is deeper only at the base.

The frames of the niches show great variety.²¹ Normally the frame is raised in relief. However, in some cases frames were added in materials such as stucco. The simplest frame is shaped by strips all around, indicating beams or battens. Usually the lower strip is missing, and the base of the niche is used as its lower boundary. Most frames are shaped by pilasters. In a few cases, we can also find engaged columns, pillars, and/or standards with the crescent moon instead of the capital. In two petroglyphs the betyl is framed by palms depicting a sanctuary. Besides the simple aedicula of pilasters with an architrave, many elaborated aedicula types occur, where the stone mason has imitated local architecture (temples and rock-cut façades of tombs). The architrave may show a frieze, a cornice, figural busts decorating the epistyle, and a second storey added with dwarf pilasters. We may find a pediment, triangular or arched, directly above the architrave or above additional elements. The pediment may have lateral acroterion bases or a central acroterion base. Rarely we do find figurative acroteria. In some cases there may be a protecting superstructure above the niche, often inserted into a broad groove. Like the tomb façades, we find Classical orders mixed in

²⁰A separate group of votive niches includes the few large niches where statues may have been placed (Dalman 1908: 84); cf. the so-called chapel of the god Obodat (Wenning 1997: 187–90, fig. 4). Contrary to Dalman, D. 22, 28 (Dalman 1908: nos. 22, 28) are not votive niches.

²¹For the architectural terminology in the description of the niches, cf. the glossary in McKenzie 1990: 181–95.

the niche designs (fig. 5), and often a variety of types are combined (fig. 6).

Also to be considered, beyond the shape of the niche and its framing, is the interior of the niche (rear, ceiling, and base). Small holes in the walls indicate that votive gifts or veils could once have been fixed here. In some cases, outside the niche we find a double hole with a bridge (called a “sand-glass”) on which to tie gifts. In various niches, a small groove or a larger hollow in the floor close to the rear indicates that a portable betyl had once been inserted. There may be a small cuphole for libations or other offerings (incense) beside the betyl. In other cases, the floor of the niche is enlarged toward the front of the rock as a place to deposit offerings. Other installations below and in front of the niche can include a bench, a predella, a pedestal, a platform, steps, and even stairs (Dalman 1908: 85–86). We also find holes and channels carved in front of the niches. Many of these elements are important for our understanding of ritual practices.

All the details of betyls, niches, framings, and installations demonstrate that the Nabataean votive niche is complex and not as simple as it may appear at first glance. The more elaborated niche emphasizes the importance of the venerated deity and also may reflect the status of the donor. But the various combinations are not simply accidental decoration. All the elements and details need to be researched and analyzed in order to understand which detail or combination of elements indicates a specific function or points to an individual deity or a certain divine aspect.²²

THE MŌTAB

The Aramaic word *mytb/mwtb* is related to the Semitic root *ytb, wtb*, respectively, which means “to sit.” The *mōtab* is “the seat/throne” of the deity. It can be attributed to a deity as a symbol of status. Possibly we have two Nabataean illustrations of a divine throne. A large “throne” is shaped in a votive niche at the base of the Jabal al-Khubtha (Dalman 1908: no. 694, fig. 281), and another very large “throne” is found in a rock-cut cave at as-Sela³ (Lindner, ed. 1989: 275, 277–78, fig. 5). Many betyls “sit” upon some sort of support, which is often called a *mōtab* (Starcky 1966: col. 1010; Roche 1985: 217–

²²In none of the niches have we the impression that the betyl represents the worshipper or pictures the dead ancestors.



Fig. 5. Petra, the gorge from Al-Madras to the Siq: Arched niche (Dalman 1908: no. 66; unpublished). Heavy pilasters with bases and capitals carry a simple arch. The rock is cut away from the aedicula. At the niche base, a hollow is visible toward the rear to insert a betyl. Photo: H. Merklein.

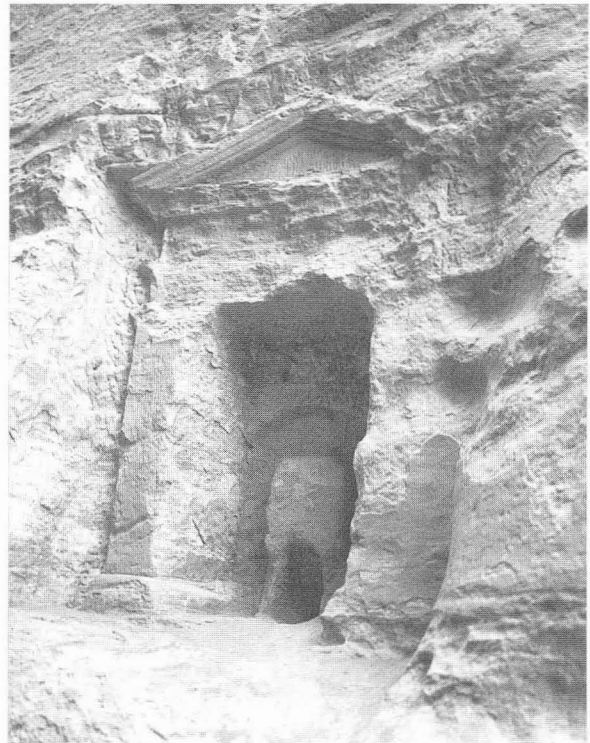


Fig. 6. Petra, Sidd al-Ma^cajin: Aedicula niche. Pilasters with bases and capitals support an architrave, a frieze, and a triangular pediment with acroterion bases. Inside the deep niche stands a high rectangular betyl. The rear of the niche is divided by an arched recess, framing the betyl. In the body of the rectangular betyl is a recess, where a high betyl with rounded top is carved. In the hollow at the base, another betyl could be inserted. Photo: R. Wenning.

20; Patrich 1990: 58–59, 91–92; Healey 1993: 34, 156–58; Nehmé 1999: 67–70), but the *Souda* does not describe the base of the cultic betyl as a *mōtab*.

The *mōtab* is mentioned in two Nabataean inscriptions. The famous inscription of the At-Turkmaniyya Tomb at Petra reads in lines 3 and 4: . . . *dwšr² ʔlh mr²n² wmw²tbh ḥryš² w²lhy² klhm / . . . dwšr² wmw²tbh w²lhy² klhm . . .*, “Dushara, the god of our lord, and his sacred *mōtab* and all the gods . . . Dushara and his *mōtab* and all the gods” (CIS II 350; Healey 1993: 238–42). A tomb inscription from Hegra (CIS II 198, dated 1 B.C./A.D.) also mentions *dwšr² wmw²tbh*, “Dushara and his *mōtab*,” beside Allat of ^cAmnad and Manotu and her *qyš*. Dushara and his *mōtab* and all (local) gods became the protectors of the tomb and of the legal regulations concerning the burials.

Mostly the *mōtab* is interpreted as an integral part of the divine representation of Dushara, as an attri-

bute or as a distinct object as part of his veneration. “Dushara and his *mōtab*” is compared to “Allat and her *wgr*” (see above) and “Manotu and her *qyš*.” Because these two objects are even more unclear, they do little to help explain the *mōtab*. It has been suggested that the *mōtab* was worshipped (Nehmé 1999: 68–70).²³ The *mōtab* was related to the temple (Dalman 1908: 53) and to the betyl itself (Dussaud 1955: 41). In these cases, the “seat” is assumed to represent the dwelling and presence of the deity.

So far only Dushara is connected with the *mōtab*. One explanation of the name of Dushara explains “Shara” as a fertile wilderness suitable for a sacred area (*ḥimā²*) (Wellhausen 1897: 51). Thus Dushara would be the god from this *ḥimā²*. If this does not refer to a larger area like the Shara mountains, but to

²³An indication might be the theophoric name ^cAbd²al-mitab, who was a priest (Nehmé 1999).



Fig. 7. Great High Place: Mōtab.

a particular cultic place at Petra, then *mōtab* may identify this cultic place (cf. Allat and her *wgr*). The cultic platform at the Great High Place (fig. 7) (Dalman 1908: 166: “*Gottesthron*”), in the Qasr al-Bint, the Temple of the Winged Lions, the Ad-Dayr, or in the Qasr adh-Dhariḥ demonstrate that these platforms are not altars, but carried cultic image(s), and may be a kind of sacred area (*ḥimāʿ*). The broad rectangular platform is much larger than the *betyl* and can be entered by lateral steps to carry out ritual activities at the *betyl*. Different installations allowed the *betyl* to be hidden by veils, and their lifting performed the epiphany of the deity. The platform is often cut freestanding, which allowed it to be encircled by priests or worshippers (cf. the *ṭawāf*). The platform is the only distinctive monument associated with the veneration of the *betyl*; it perhaps reflects the *mōtab*.

PLACES OF NICHES

The interpretation of the *betyls* also involves the question of where the niches were placed. The votive niches at Petra are cut into the rock-faces of steep cliffs, sloping and dome-shaped rocks, fallen rocks, and into the walls of quarries. They are also found in the walls of rock-cut cellae, triclinia (Dal-

man 1908: 84–92), and tomb façades.²⁴ They belong either to places of assembly of worshippers or to funeral complexes (*mrzh*). Niches are found along the paths to sanctuaries and high places on the top of the mountains, as in the case of those associated with the Great High Place, Jabal an-Numayr, the Ad-Dayr plateau, and the Jabal al-Khubtha. These are more public and prominent places which are accessible by broad rock-cut stairways. But niches can also be found in more remote and private places, such as the most sacred Al-Madras, where “*Heiligtümer*” are grouped together.²⁵

²⁴Outside Petra a greater number of niches is found at Hegra/Madaʿin Salih (Jaussen and Savignac 1909: 405–41; Wenning 1996); there are a small number at ʿAyn ash-Shellaleh in Wadi Ramm (Savignac 1934). I have noticed nine other sites with single or a few niches (Wenning 1987: site nos. A 2; M 65; N 12; O 3?, 5?, 12?, X 69, 129; Y 9; the niches from site nos. 62 and 65 belong to Petra). Forming a group with its own unique significance are the standing stones in the ʿUvdah Valley (Avner 1984; Patrich 1990: 64–66; Avner in press). Here more than 2,000 unhewn stones are found belonging to about 120 tent camps. Many stones are grouped together. In one case about 50 stones line a path. Another related group, where Arabian and Syrian traditions meet, are the Hawranite *naiskoi* (Arnaud 1986).

²⁵For votive niches in rock-cut dwellings, cf. Nehmé 1994. At present, Dalman’s catalog (1908; 1912) is the best guide for niches.

Most niches are at a visible height, and they are sometimes turned toward the visitor, entering or leaving the city. In many places the niches are accessible for direct ritual practices, but others are cut in inaccessible locations high in the cliff-faces. Niches occur either as separate votives or as several in a row.²⁶ The Siq is not only the main entrance to Petra, but it is also a *via sacra* with its own sanctity because of its high cliffs and narrow gorge. Even more narrow is the Sidd al-Maʿajin, but it was the imposing winter rains rushing through this gorge like a mountain torrent that made it one of the most venerated places of Petra (Roche 1989).²⁷ Wherever water is present, the gods are praised. One such place where water pours dramatically down from the rock heights is in the Siq. On both sides of a short rift at one of the angles of the Siq, two dromedaries with their attendants in high relief are depicted (Nehmé and Villeneuve 1999: fig. 74). Two niches with betyls to the right of the rift support the assumption that this was a place of veneration. At three places we find *Tropfwände*: at the Qattar ad-Dayr, in the Wadi al-Farasa West (Dalman 1908: 204–5), and in the Siq opposite the fallen rock with the aedicula.²⁸ Because of the fallen rock and the water, this place became sacred. Another fallen rock in the Shuʿb Qais has niches as well, but the inscription in front of that rock is related to a water conduit on the opposite side of the gorge (Milik and Starcky 1975: 126–29, pl. 47).

In a few cases we have narrative monuments that indicate how the betyl served in a functional context. In a remote area of the Dayr plateau, the rock-face beside a cella is decorated with the relief of two men with dromedaries in an offering scene (cf. the relief in the Siq).²⁹ The center of this much-eroded relief is a niche with a betyl on a pedestal (rather than two altars) (Dalman 1908: 274–75 no. 464, fig. 218; Maurer and Maurer 1980: fig. 72). Dalman pub-

lished a relief, from a burial chamber, of a bridled horse or mule carrying a betyl (1908: 109–10 no. 47d; Maurer and Maurer 1980: fig. 15). This relief (fig. 8) provides a strong argument for families or clans in processions with a betyl.³⁰

When quarrying stone, Nabataean masons left the rocks, some more than 20 m in height, with well-smoothed, straight or concave walls. Many such places can be found at Petra. There are two explanations for this anomaly. The first is that this treatment of the rock could have been done to prevent erosion; the second is the metaphysical concept that the rock was understood as owned by Dushara. To cut the rock probably obliged the mason to give some sign of compensation and respect for the god. Such evidence is supported by various betyls and horned altars engraved into these smoothed walls by the masons (cf. Dalman 1908: 244–45). The two monumental obeliskoid pillars of about 7 m high in the quarry near the Great High Place (Dalman 1908: 180–83 nos. 200–201, figs. 96–98; Starcky 1966: col. 1009; Roche 1985: 230–32) look like *nepsheshes* without a pedestal, but probably are neither *nepsheshes* nor betyls. They may have been left standing in the quarry in respect and reverence for Dushara, a kind of monumental group of standing stones, while all rock around was cut away.

CONCLUSION

The main information about Nabataean betyls comes from the literary and epigraphical sources as well as the monuments themselves. The best classification of betyls is by typology as well as by the niches themselves and their surroundings. All these elements create a constellation which may be readable, although we are still left with many open questions. The survey of votive niches at Petra has expanded the corpus of these monuments, but has also taught us more about the complexity of their shapes and functions. Hopefully, the survey will continue and be finished in the next few years.³¹

²⁶In the dome-shaped rock in the sanctuary of the Bab as-Siq, 18 niches are cut in a row, and in the rock in the Al-Madras sanctuary, there are 16 niches. The greatest number of niches in one locality can be found in the Siq (80), and the Sidd al-Maʿajin (*Nischenklamm*) (108 niches); these were hewn out over a longer period and even in the period of the Provincia Arabia.

²⁷Cf. the Wadi Waqit on the way to Jabal Harun (Lindner, ed., 1989: 286–92).

²⁸Documented during our 1995 survey.

²⁹In my opinion there is no reason to suggest the sacrifice of the camels.

³⁰The funerary context and the snake relief beside it are to be considered as well, and may indicate a different interpretation (cf. Dalman 1912: 24–25; Zayadine 1983: 187).

³¹A first volume of documentation of the niches in the eastern parts of Petra is in preparation, as well as the full documentation of the eye betyls.



Fig. 8. Petra, Bab as-Siq: Relief of a horse or mule carrying a betyl, found in a small burial cave. Photo: H. Merklein.

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