

# The World of the Nabataeans

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# **Nabataean Cultural Continuity into the Byzantine Period**

**Konstantinos D. Politis**

## **Introduction**

The conventional view of historians of the Roman Near East has been that the Nabataean culture had died out by the second century A.D. However, recent archaeological discoveries have indicated that an indigenous Semitic people with a distinct 'Nabataean' identity persisted well into the Christian-Byzantine period in the southern Levant. The question remains therefore, how truly 'Nabataean' had their character remained?

By the time of the Roman conquest in the second century A.D. the Nabataeans were a cultural entity possessing their own Aramaic dialect and associated script, distinct religious pantheon, characteristic art style, architectural forms and a territory centred at Petra and Medai'n Salih.

It may be that the Romans planned to neutralise Nabataea by establishing a new capital of Arabia, encompassing most the Nabataean territory, at Bostra in the Hauran. Alternatively, the Nabataeans themselves may have decided by in the late 1st century A.D. to move northwards in order to remain competitive on the trades routes. In either case, the result of this northern relocation was to bring the Nabataean centre much closer to the Roman powerbase in Syria.

The succeeding Byzantine administration further fragmented the Nabataeans by dividing them into two separate provinces of Palestine. To a great extent these efforts succeeded, but the underlying response was that many of the indigenous Nabataean Arab people overcame these pressures and together with their physical survival managed to retain many of their cultural traits and customs. The objective of this paper is to highlight these by reviewing pertinent historical sources and presenting some of the latest archaeological discoveries in support of the mounting evidence for a Nabataean cultural continuity into the early Byzantine period.

## **Language and Inscriptions**

Literature and epigraphy are often the best indicators for an ethnic group. Therefore, investigating the most recently found Nabataean inscriptions is crucial in determining the survival of the Nabataeans. Unfortunately, relatively few Nabataean inscriptions of the early Byzantine period have been found, and none at Petra.

A rock-cut tomb at the Qasr al-Bint in Meda'in Salih has a Nabataean inscription (JSNab 17) dated to A.D. 267 which indicates a continuous use of this important necropolis together with the Nabataean language into the later Roman period (Nehme 2005: 171–172). Furthermore, according to Nehme, another Naba-

taean inscription now stored in Jeddah, refers to a man with the title ‘chief of Hegra’ and is dated to A.D. 356. This may help to explain why early Byzantine-period (4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) pottery sherds were also found at Meda’in Salih (see below) and substantiates the debate in favour of Nabataean cultural continuity.

Another late Nabataean inscription is an inked graffito on the wall plaster of a building at Oboda dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. which invoked the Nabataean gods Oboda and Dushara (Erickson-Gini and Israel 2003: 11, fig. 30). This not only demonstrates the persistent use of the Nabataean language and script, but also a continued veneration of their original pagan religion, through Oboda who remained well-known in the late Roman period.

The survival of the Nabataean language and people is evident in Greek inscriptions of the Byzantine-Christian period which contain Nabataean personal and place names in Hellenised forms.

Amongst other significant literary discoveries there are three important collections of inscribed artefacts clearly demonstrating that whilst Greek persisted as the *lingua franca* of the Second and Third Byzantine provinces of Palestine (formerly part of the Roman Province of Arabia), Nabataean-Aramaic personal names remained predominant.

Avraham Negev’s study regarding the usage of personal names in the Nabataean realm provides us with an invaluable insight into the survival of the Nabataeans. Although there was a marked decline from 81.8% in pre-Christian times, Nabataean names were still represented in the population. Information deriving primarily from the Nessana papyri shows that from A.D. 350 to 650 the usage was 6.9% local and 18.1 common Nabataean names (Negev 1991: 206), and from A.D. 650 to 750 there were 5.9% local and 7.8% common Nabataean names (Negev 1991: 207). Although some scholars agree that the Nabataean language was in use until the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., this raises the question – what happened to it after this date? Negev concludes that “despite the five or six centuries which had elapsed since the middle Nabatean period, the original Nabatean ethnic element was still prominent” (Negev 1991: 3).

During the earlier part of the twentieth century, several inscribed and dated funerary stelae were collected from the cemetery of Zoara in the Ghor es-Safi (on the south-eastern shore of the Dead Sea). Subsequent excavations of the adjacent Sanctuary of Lot at Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata in the late 1980s and 1990s, and recent investigations in the Ghor es-Safi, have additionally provided over 400 early Byzantine-period inscriptions. These have shown that a vibrant early Christian community existed in this region from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. (Politis 2005a: 6). Although most of these inscriptions were written in Greek, roughly half of the personal names contained within them were of Nabataean origin, though in Hellenised forms (Politis 2003: 366). These include, Alesos, Alfalas, Ameros, Arethas, Asemos, Avavi, Avavios, Avdalgis, Avdomanis, Avdoulas, Avdoys, Avoybathi, Avvivas, Azizios, Dusarios [Fig. 1], Keamos, Malehathis, Mosalemas, Nesarios, Netiros, Obodas, Ouardos, Pavivlos, Sadallas, Savas, Selamanos, Siltha and Themallas.

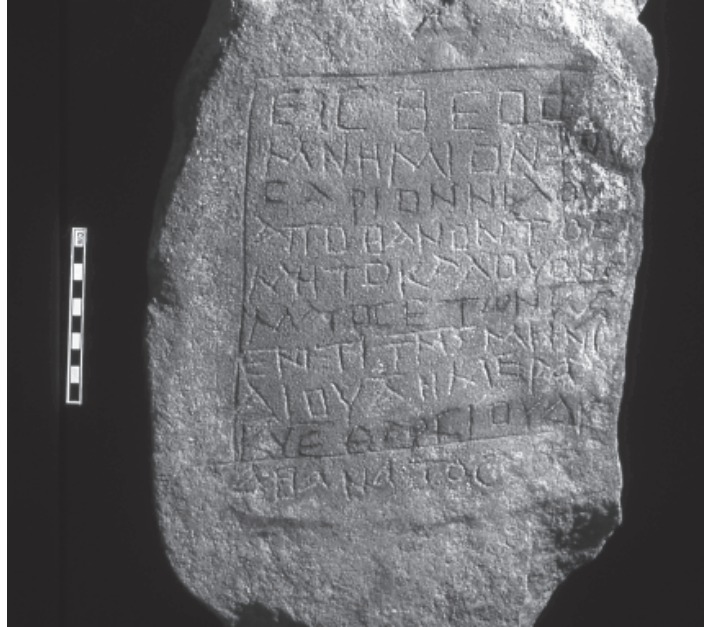


Fig. 1. Tombstone inscribed with the Hellenised version of Dushara (Z-48), Ghor es-Safi (photo: T. Springett)

In 1993 a cache of 152 charred papyri scrolls were found in a room adjacent to a large triple-apsed basilica church in the centre of Petra. All of these scrolls were written in Greek (excepting one line in Latin), and their dates range from A.D. 537 to 593 (Frosen and Fiema 2002:19). The documents were primarily contracts and land deeds pertaining to the Petra region (one specifically mentions Petra). [Fig. 2]



Fig. 2. The word *Petra* in Greek on a papyrus from the Church of the Virgin, Petra

However, another of these papyri refers to the seat of a bishop and specifically to a 'Theodoros son of Obodianos, archdeacon of the Church of the Virgin Mary' (presumably the church mentioned above where the scrolls were found). The name Obodianos is a Hellenised adaptation of the notable Nabataean name *Oboda*. Alternatively, the Nabataean name *Dusarios* is retained in preference to its Greek

form, *Dionysos*, the use of which might have been expected during the later Roman and Byzantine periods when Greek was the *lingua franca*.

Whilst enduring use of Nabataean personal names should not be surprising in its capital city of Petra, the fact that these Nabataean names persisted for almost 500 years beyond the fall of the Nabataean kingdom is culturally very significant. Obviously, there must have remained a strong ethnic consciousness despite the earlier Roman hegemony and later Byzantine-Christian cultural influence.

However the survival of Nabataean place-names, such as Zadakothon and Berosaba, mentioned in the Petra papyri, is less surprising than personal names because place-names tend to survive despite the varying ethnic influence of usurping populations. This may also imply a continued occupation of these important urban centres by Nabataeans well into the Byzantine period as artefacts with Nabataean affinities have been recovered from these sites. All this archaeological evidence demonstrates that there remained a Nabataean ethnic tradition in Petra and its environs until the late 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. leading to the conclusion that these people had not been entirely assimilated even though they adopted the Greek language and later the Christian faith.

### Religion

The cult of the most important Nabataean god Dushara seems to have persisted into the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. at Bostra with the athletic and artistic festival of *Actia Dusaria* (Graf 2007: 184). Also, as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Epiphanius of Salamis claims that the people of Petra sang hymns in Nabataean to 'Chamu' (the virgin) and her child named 'Dusares'. Graf interprets this title as 'only begotten of the lord'. This not only confirms the survival of the Nabataean language but is also evidence of an amalgamation of their indigenous pagan religion with the now-dominant Christian faith. This is further proof that the Nabataean population had not disappeared but were merely undergoing a cultural transition.

There is also numismatic evidence for the cult of Dushara in the late Roman period, with some coins depicting *betyls* (Graf 2006:184).

Excavations at the cemetery of Khirbet Qazone revealed burials of a Nabataean community on the south-eastern shore of the Dead Sea (Politis 2005b: 149–151) which is identified as Mahoza in the Babatha archive. Exceptionally well-preserved textiles, wood and leather has greatly assisted in visualising the apparel of ordinary Nabataean men, women and children of the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries A.D. (Politis and Granger-Taylor 2003: 108). Stones with engraved *betyl* and *nefesh* signs recovered from the site also testify to a continuity of the Nabataean religion. [Fig. 3] Furthermore, 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. pottery sherds of drinking bowls, fine cups and imported filter jugs found strewn around the graves allude to the Nabataean custom of funerary meals. [Fig. 4]

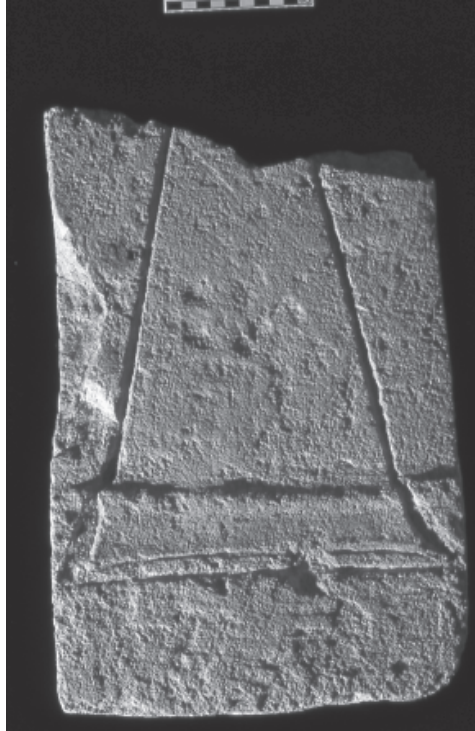


Fig. 3. *Betyl* stone (KQ 2) from Khirbet Qazone (photo: T. Springett)

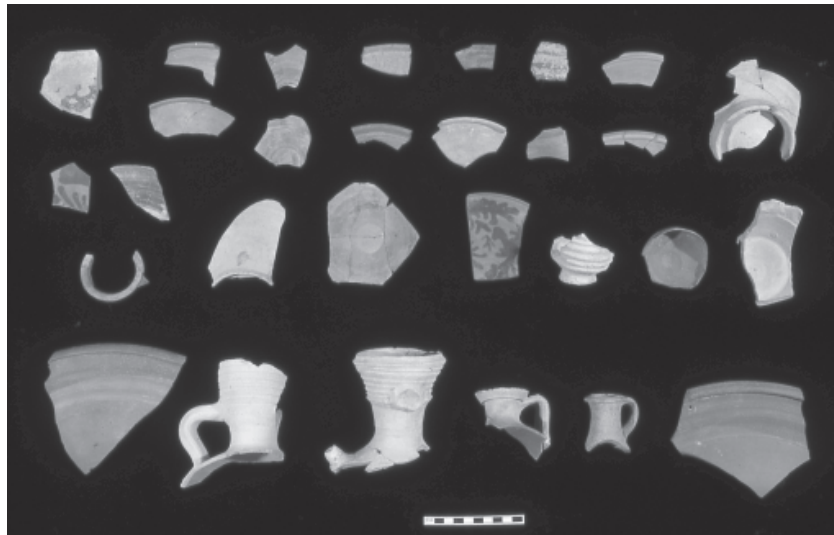


Fig. 4. Nabataean pottery sherds from Khirbet Qazone (photo: T. Springett)



In the northern extension of the Khirbet Qazone cemetery, three tombstones were recovered in association with 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. pottery (Politis et al 2005: 327–337). These stones were decorated with crudely engraved crosses contained in a square [Fig. 5], the earliest known such finds. Another tombstone (KQ 37) similarly dated, is decorated with a roughly-etched palm branch design flanked by the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega*, which are typical early Christian symbols. [Fig. 6] Considering the immediate proximity, of these burials to those of the 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century, it is likely that these also belonged to the same Nabataean community that had, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, converted to Christianity. DNA studies currently being conducted on the human remains from Khirbet Qazone and other Nabataean sites may shed more light on this, possible, religious transition of these particular people.



Fig. 5. Cross engraved on tombstone from Khirbet Qazone (photo: T. Springett)



Fig. 6. Palm branch flanked by *alpha* and *omega* on tombstone (KQ 37) from Khirbet Qazone (photo: T. Springett)

During excavations at Wadi Farasa in Petra, stone tablets inscribed in Greek from the early Byzantine period (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) together with tombstones engraved with crosses and palm branches have been discovered (Schmid 2002: 273, figs. 33, 34). Although of a finer workmanship, these closely parallel decorated stones found at Khirbet Qazone and Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata [Fig. 7], and may also indicate that Petraeans were converting to Christianity during this period.

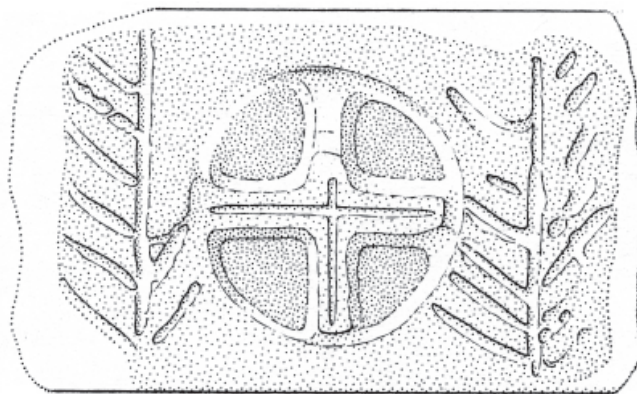


Fig. 7. Cross engraved on stone (DAA 29, 1445) from Deir ‘Ain ‘Abata (by J. M. Farrant)

A unique Christian tombstone found at Mampshit in the Negev, depicts a *betyl* design (Negev 1988: 88, fig. 6.64). This is the latest evidence of such a characteristically Nabataean sacred symbol which also demonstrates an attempt to integrate a pagan Nabataean symbol into the new religion's iconography.

There is a colourful account of the Nabataean conversion to Christianity in the story of the zealous monk Bar Sauma, famous for never sitting or lying down. In A.D. 423 he arrived at Petra with forty monks with the intention of destroying that city's pagan temples and Jewish synagogues. To prevent this, the inhabitants closed the city gates against them. In response, Bar Sauma threatened to attack the city and burn it down if they did not let him enter. Petra was then suffering from a four-year drought, but coincidentally when Bar Sauma arrived it began to rain heavily and the flood waters washed away the city walls. The pagan priests were amazed by this seemingly miraculous inundation which they interpreted as a divine intervention and promptly converted to Christianity. Intriguingly, there are no references to pagans being present in Petra after that date.

The Christianisation of the Nabataeans can be seen in Petra by the conversion of the 'Urn' tomb into a church in A.D. 446. Niches were carved into the eastern wall of the tomb in order to create apses, and the western end was extended by adding a series of subterranean arches. The growth of Christianity in Petra is also evident by the construction of new churches. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century a large basilica church with a sizeable adult baptistery was built and dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Immediately to the north-east of this structure the smaller 'Blue chapel' and the 'Ridge church' were also erected. A large monastery was founded and dedicated to Aaron's tomb on the heights of Jebel Haroun (biblical Mt Hor) just south-west of Petra, as mentioned in the burnt papyri from the basilica church. These building projects not only attest to the conversion of the indigenous Nabataean population to the new religion, but also to their physical survival.

A similar situation is mirrored at Nabataean sites and towns in the Negev and elsewhere.

There is some evidence that suggests an enduring influence of Nabataean religious practices on later creeds. For instance, it can be postulated that Nabataean 'high places' not only continued to be used for religious purposes during the early Christian-Byzantine period, but also that they may have become the inspiration for the raised chancel or *bema* in church architecture. A similar Nabataean origin can be claimed for the omphalos-shaped chancel post tops in early Byzantine-period churches.

The aniconic representation of gods by the Nabataeans seems to have had an influence on early Byzantine-Christian dogma with the iconoclastic movement of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. This is particularly apparent in Judaism and Islam which still retain similar prohibitions relating to the realistic representations of human or animal forms.

Although these religious traits may not be exclusively 'Nabataean', they do show that their Arabian-based influence continued well into the Christian societies of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.

### Art and Architecture

Excavations of the ancient Zurrabah pottery kilns near Petra revealed that Nabataean pottery proto-types were being made from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. (Amr 1991: 321). [Fig. 8] Excavations at ez-Zantur inside Petra unearthed Nabataean pottery from late 4<sup>th</sup> contexts (Schmid 1996: 240–241). More recently, excavations at Humeima, Wadi Mousa, Mada'in Salih and Deir 'Ain 'Abata have also brought to light the continuous production of pottery in the Nabataean tradition during the 5<sup>th</sup> and into the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. (Politis et al 2007).



Fig. 8. Nabataean painted bowl dated to that 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Petra Museum)

Architectural elements have been found at several early Byzantine churches in *Palestinae Tertia* which share close affinities to classical Nabataean styles (Patrich 1988: 105, ill. 152). At Elusa in the Negev (Negev 1986: 128, fig. 66) and at Deir 'Ain 'Abata characteristically Nabataean 'dogtooth' designs together with Christian crosses are found on capitals and lintels. [Figs. 9, 10] Nabataean 'horned' capitals also continued to be carved in the Byzantine period. [Fig. 11]



Fig. 9. Elusa capital no. 4005 (Negev 1986, fig. 66)

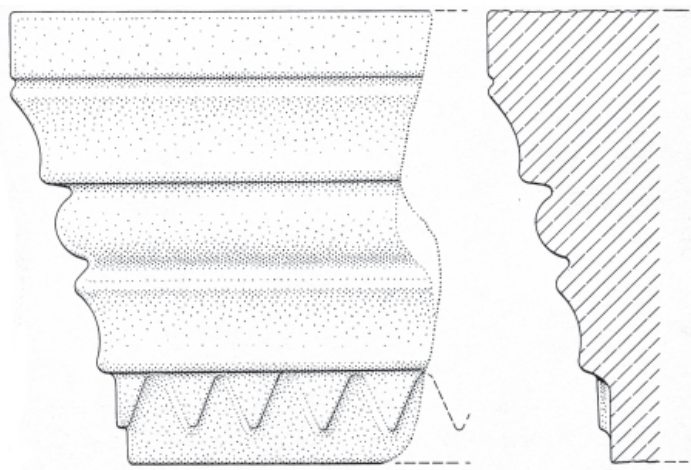


Fig. 10. Architectural stone from Deir 'Ain 'Abata (by J. M. Farrant)



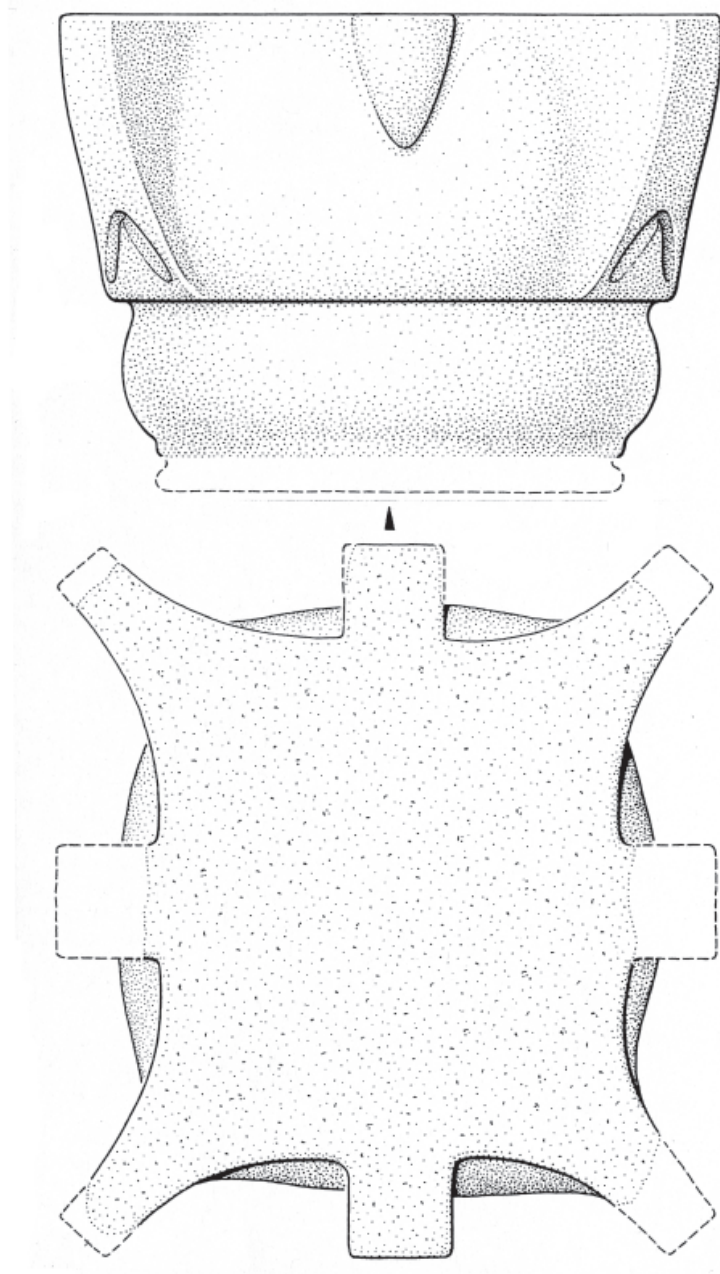


Fig. 11. 'Horned' capital (DAA 23 1555) from Deir 'Ain 'Abata (by J. M. Farrant)

Seventh century A.D. mosaic pavements have been uncovered in the churches of St Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abata and Moses on Mt Nebo, Siyaga which exhibit floral patterns reminiscent of painted decoration on Nabataean fine-ware pottery. The mosaic at Deir 'Ain 'Abata is inscribed and dated to A.D. 691, well into the Umayyad period. [Fig. 12] It is intriguing to consider this as the result of an earlier Nabataean artistic influence.



Fig. 12. Mosaic pavement in nave of church of St Lot, Deir 'Ain 'Abata (photo: T. Springett)

### Conclusion

Recent archaeological surveys and excavations at Petra, the Negev, Meda'in Saleh and the Dead Sea region have shed more light on the twilight of the Nabataeans. They have revealed some compelling evidence for 'Nabataean' cultural continuity beyond the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. which has been the generally accepted date for its termination. As evidenced here, these include religious practices, funerary customs, language, inscriptions, art, architecture and apparel.

It is now becoming apparent from the archaeological record that some 'Nabataean' traditions persisted well beyond the second century A.D. These, together with the literary testimony, combine to make a compelling argument for a Nabataean cultural continuity into the early Byzantine period. Perhaps the most conclusive evidence for this is from the continuous occupation of Nabataean sites into the early Byzantine period, indicating that the subordinated Nabataean people did not just

disappear but had the tenacity to adapt to their new circumstances and thus were able to continue to express many of their remarkable cultural values. Appropriately, many modern Jordanian Arabs are proud to identify with the Nabataeans as being their ancient ancestors.

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