

HEGRA THE LOST CITY

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ABSTRACT

Hegra: Kayıp Şehir

This article examines the city of Hegra, located in present-day Saudi Arabia, and delves into the study of its inhabitants. The investigation is conducted through existing articles and their compilations. The aim of this research is to explore this ancient site, which has recently opened its doors to tourists. Hegra is an ancient desert region in Saudi Arabia that has now been transformed into a tourist destination. Many explorers have visited this area, but the first person to set foot in this abandoned city after years was the British explorer Charles Montagu Doughty. The history of this region dates back to the Nabatean era. The people were farmers and livestock breeders who became wealthy through the construction of caravanserais and trade, especially in spices and incense. They chose Hegra as their second capital after Petra to control the trade routes. The Nabatean language is a combination of ancient Arabic and Semitic. Some consider this city cursed due to the inscriptions and curses written on the tombs, although in addition to the tombs, there are also places for worship and water wells, demonstrating the people's ability to store water. Their expertise in water conservation and unparalleled construction evident as they carved homes and water wells out of stones. The remaining artifacts are a complete testament to their capabilities. The existing evidence suggests the integration of this city into the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Hegra, Saudi Arabia, Nabataean, Inscriptions, Tombs

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Introduction

While the exact beginnings of the Nabataean civilization remain largely unknown, some historians trace them back to the descendants of Semitic. The Nabataeans initially inhabited fertile lands in the region between Mecca and Medina. According to certain accounts, they dwelled along the shores of the Red Sea (Figure 1). The term Nabataean is believed to derive from a term denoting a summer flood that dries up. It seems their name originated from this phenomenon. This tribe engaged in herding, hunting, and the cultivation of wheat and cotton. They made use of rivers and wells for agriculture, and were skilled in fishing and pearl extraction (Azarnush, 1972, p. 33-42). They also built stone temples for their idols (Tabatabai, 2010, p. 32). Although they may seem enigmatic to us today, the Nabataeans were early trailblazers in the fields of architecture and hydraulics, ingeniously utilizing the harsh desert landscape to their advantage. They cleverly gathered rainwater cascading from the rugged mountains, storing it in subterranean cisterns for future use. Additionally, they constructed organic water conduits around their tombs to shield their exteriors from erosion, ensuring their remarkable preservation for millennia since their original construction (Lauren, 2020). They would adjust their homes according to the changing seasons. In the summer and spring, they engaged in herding and farming in large valleys, while in the winter and autumn, they resided in rock houses. Their ability to control conditions in their favor is very remarkable. They have transformed the arid desert life to their advantage, succeeding in busi-

ness and accumulating a considerable amount of wealth as a result. Their position in the tribe played a significant role in their wealth.

The discovery of three ships indicates the Nabataeans' connection with neighboring tribes and cities. In addition, caravanserais were constructed in this region, indicating the development of their trade-driven livelihood (Azarnush, 1972, p. 41-42). The Nabataean people became wealthy and successful by finding water in the deserts and storing it. At the same time, all trade routes from the south to Hegra were controlled by the Nabataeans. They charged merchants for resting places and water consumption. However, in the year 106 AD, the Nabatean Empire merged with the Roman Empire, and the sea routes of the Red Sea became more popular than the land routes. As a result, cities that were no longer economic centers gradually declined and eventually became deserted (Lauren, 2020). In the final days of the Nabatean monarchy, Rabbel II negotiated an agreement with the Romans. The terms stipulated that if the Romans refrained from attacking during his lifetime, they would be permitted to assume control after his demise. Following Rabbel II's death in 106 CE, the Romans asserted their claim over the Nabatean Kingdom and they changed name of the first Nabatean city (petra) to Arabia Petra.¹² The conclusion of the kingdom is a topic open to discussion, According to tradition, Rabbel II is considered the last Nabataean king, with no literary sources providing information about him. Following his demise, his kingdom, stretching from Bosra in the north to Hegra in the south, became incorporated into the Roman Empire. It underwent a transformation into the new Provincia Arabia (Cimadomo,

Figure 1: Location of Hegra
<https://www.arabnews.com/Alula>, Date of access: 16.12.2021



2019, p. 2). In 106 CE, Roman Emperor Trajan incorporated the Nabataean kingdom, including the Al-'Ula oasis, into the Roman province of Arabia. Graffiti in Greek and Latin provide evidence of the presence of soldiers from III Cyrenaica and a unit of Gaetulian dromedary cavalry. These soldiers stationed in this desert outpost seemed to hold reverence for the Libyan deity Ammon, also it is conceivable that survivors from the defeated war against Rome (66-70 CE) chose to depart from the Roman Empire and establish themselves in the towns of the Al-'Ula oasis. The era of Roman rule did not bring prosperity to Hegra; instead, the town experienced a period of decline. (Lendering, 2020). Regarding the transfer of Petra as the first Nabataean city and Hegra as their second major city to the Romans, there are no entirely clear sources. However, based on evidence from the later years, it appears that Romans were residing in these cities during their prosperity. It seems that this transfer occurred without any warfare or dispute, suggesting that the last king, based on a certain agreement, handed over the rule to the Romans. Although there is evidence of Roman-Nabataean cooperation prior to these transfers, there is no completely reliable information on how these cities joined the Romans.

1- Hegra

Charles Montagu Doughty, a 19th-century British explorer, was the first to document Nabataean structures in the Sinai desert (Figure 2). He uncovered Nabataean inscriptions in rock carvings that dated back 2,000 years, thanks to his presence along ancient trade routes. In 1877, near the Hijaz Mountains, Doughty stumbled upon a lost city adorned with intricately carved tombs and monuments (Gornall, 2020). This city, discovered by Doughty, served as the Nabataean people's second capital after Petra, owing to its strategic position in controlling northwestern Saudi Arabia (Ruhangiz, 2004, p. 178).

The most famous explorers:

- Charles Montagu Doughty discovered 130 inscriptions in the region during a trip in 1877.
- Charles Hubert discovered 146 inscriptions in the region on his first trip in 1877, and he went with Julius Euting on his second trip. Hubert found 825 inscriptions, and Euting found 800 inscriptions.
- Jussaen and Savingnac identified 671 Nabataean inscriptions in 1910.



Figure 2: Charles Montagu Doughty
<https://www.arabnews.com/Alula>, Date of access: 16.12.2021

- In 1936, Philby, one of the most important scientists in the field, discovered hundreds of different inscriptions on his journey.
 - Harding discovered 542 Nabataean inscriptions in 1947.
 - In 1936, Philby went to the region again and found 1200 new inscriptions. A year later, he and Ryckmans toured the entire Central Saudi Arabia and found nine thousand new artifacts.
 - In 1936, Philby found 300 new inscriptions on his third voyage.
- In addition, dozens of Nabataean artifacts have been discovered in other places, which provide much information about the Nabataeans (Azarnush, 1972, p. 38).
- In 1951, Philby discovered an inscription in both the Nabataean and Greek languages at the Temple. These inscriptions indicate that the Nabataeans constructed stone temples. Furthermore, these writings document the connection between the Nabataean people and the Greeks, as well as their relationship with Rome, as the temple was dedicated to the Roman Emperor (Ruhangiz, 2004, p. 176). Characterized as fiercely independent according to accounts from the Greco-Roman era, the Nabataeans saw their integration into the Roman Empire under the rule of Emperor Trajan in 106 CE. The distinctive

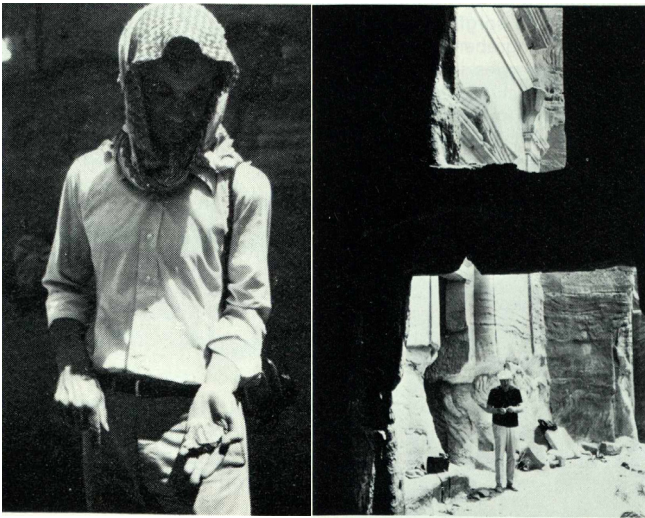


Figure 3: Dr. Lindner in Hegra (Linder, 1973, p. 6)

elements of Nabataean culture, notably their finely crafted painted ceramics, became assimilated into the broader Greco-Roman cultural milieu. Transitioning to Christianity in the Later Roman Era, the Nabataeans are recognized as one of the exceptionally talented societies of the ancient world.¹³ The Nabataean language is similar to the Semitic¹ and South Arabian languages. For this reason, the texts were easily readable. Historians interpret the resemblance to Lihyanite inscriptions as evidence that the Nabataeans borrowed their language from the Lihyanites (Azarnush, 1972, p. 53). Additionally, Lindner found a red inscription in Tomb 813, on which there were writings in the Nabataean language about the last king of the Nabataeans (Linder, 1973, p. 6).

In contrast to Petra's monuments, those in Hegra frequently bear inscriptions that include the names of the deceased. These inscriptions are predominantly in Nabataean, though some are in Aramaic² (Lending, 2020) (Figure 4). The Nabataean script represents one of the final stages in the development of the Arabic language. About 50 inscriptions discovered in some caves date back to the Nabataean period. From these inscriptions, information about names, activities, laws, and Nabataean deities can be obtained (Woodfield, 2019). Moreover, the discovered inscriptions contain limited data about the spiritual life, travels, and romantic struggles of the Nabataean (Azarnush, 1972, p. 45).

1- relating to or denoting a family of languages that includes Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic and certain ancient languages such as Phoenician and Akkadian, constituting the main subgroup of the Afro-Asiatic family.
2- It is a Semitic language originating in the middle Euphrates.



Figure 4: Inscriptions from Hegra
<https://www.livius.org/articles/place/dedan/hegra/>, Date of access:16.12.2021

1-2 Tombs

Out of the 112 tombs that have been discovered, ninety-four are impressive rock tombs, comparable to those found in Petra. The grandest among them can reach heights exceeding twenty-two meters. Additionally, there are designated worship chambers (Lending, 2020). The artistic symbols of the Nabataeans in Hegra include soaring eagles, magnificent phoenixes, winged lions, intricate inscriptions, and more (Woodfield, 2019) (Figure 5). The symbols used in the tombs are the same symbols employed in the art of the Middle East. The combination of animals with each other and with symbols aims to create a transcendent and spiritual sense. Influenced by classical Greek and Roman architecture, many tombs feature columns with capitals supporting either a triangular pediment above the doorway or a wide entablature spanning the tomb's facade. At the top, a Nabataean 'crown' comprising two sets of five stairs awaits, symbolizing the ascent to heaven. Winged creatures like sphinxes, eagles, and griffins, significant in Greek, Roman,



Figure 5: Symbols of Nabataean <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1293/>, Date of access: 17.12.2021

Egyptian, and Persian cultures, loom protectively over the tomb entrances. Some tombs are adorned with Medusa-like masks, where snakes form their hair (Lauren, 2020) (Figure 6). In Eastern art, tombs often hold significant importance in facilitating the journey of the soul to the otherworldly realm.

The construction of tombs pays meticulous attention to this aspect, and the higher the status of the deceased, the more amenities are provided in the tomb for the comfort of the departed soul. Intimidating inscriptions, which are common at Hegra, are etched on the facades, warning those who attempt to secretly occupy the tomb about the penalties.



“May the lord of the world curse upon anyone who disturb this tomb or open it,” proclaims part of the inscription on Tomb 41, “...and further curse upon whoever may change the scripts on top of the tomb.” (Lauren, 2020).



Figure 6: Five stairs’ crown <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1293/>, Date of access: 17.12.2021

Hegra’s tallest tomb, standing at approximately 22 meters, is the monolithic Tomb of Lihyan Son of Kuza, also known as Qasr al-Farid, meaning ‘Lonely Castle’ in English due to its remote location compared to other tombs (Figure 7). Tomb 46, an abandoned structure, vividly demonstrates the Nabataeans’ top-down construction approach, with only the stepped ‘crown’ visible above the natural cliffside. Both of these tombs bear brief inscriptions, indicating their association with specific families (Lauren, 2020). Qasr al-Farid had a relatively simple facade. The entrance of the tomb was formed by a central door with a decorated head. Inside the tomb, there are recesses in the walls which served as burial places for the deceased (Woodfield, 2019). Certain tombs at Hegra serve as the eternal resting places for esteemed officers and their families. The inscriptions indicate that they carried their adopt-



Figure 7: Qasr al-Farid <https://www.smithsonianmag.com>, Date of access:15.12.2021

ed Roman military titles of prefect and centurion into the afterlife. These inscriptions also highlight Hegra’s significance as a commercial hub on the empire’s southern borders and provide insights into the diverse makeup of Nabataean society (Lauren, 2020). In addition to the tombs, there is also a large collection of wells in this area, with most of them carved into the rocks (Unesco).

1-3 Coins

The first evidence of the Nabataeans in Hegra was found in the form of coins (Charloux, 2018: 48)



Figure 8: Coin of Hegra <https://www.livius.org/articles/place/dedan/hegra/>, Date of access:16.12.2021

(Figure 8). Additionally, bronze nails were found, indicating the use of wooden coffins (Linder, 1973, p. 6). Coins dating back to the second century BCE featuring a likeness of Athena imply that Hegra may have achieved a degree of autonomy. On the other hand, it is also possible that Hegra served as the mint for the rulers of Lihyan (Lendering, 2020).

Conclusions

While the exact origins of the Nabatean dynasty remain uncertain, existing evidence suggests that the Nabataeans likely descended from a Semitic lineage. The inscriptions found on their tombs, written in the Nabatean language, have roots in the Semitic language, facilitating their interpretation. Their lineage can be traced to present-day Arabs and the country of Saudi Arabia. Their remarkable knowledge and ability to utilize resources for comfortable living and agriculture in the arid deserts of Arabia set them apart. They were not only capable traders but also implemented a unique water stor-

age system and caravanserais along trade routes, contributing to their success.

The second major city of the Nabateans is called Hegra and one notable aspect of the city of Hegra is its tombs. So far, 131 large tombs have been discovered, with 94 of them adorned with inscriptions or symbols. The tombs vary in height, with the tallest reaching 22 meters and the smallest standing at approximately 3 meters. Many tomb facades are embellished with inscriptions, while others feature symbolic animals and staircases reaching toward the sky.

The Nabateans established themselves as a distinctive civilization and political entity in the ancient world, focusing on a governed trading network that yielded substantial wealth and influence globally. However, the history of their city, Hegra, can be divided into two periods: the first marked a prosperous era of overland trade with caravanserais. In the second period, the city came under Roman governance, although it is not entirely clear how this transfer of control occurred. Based on available evidence, it appears that, through agreements between the Nabateans and Romans, the city was handed over to the Romans. Signs of Roman residence in Hegra are evident, including an inscription that references this matter. During this period, maritime trade reached its peak, contributing to the decline in Hegra's prosperity and wealth, ultimately leading to a decrease in the city's population.

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