The Invocation of Dushara at Diasporic Nodes as Evidence of a Nabataean Trade Network Religion and Maritime Mobility in the Ancient World

Abstract

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Here are two camels, which were offered by Zaidu and Abdelge to the god Dushara who heeded them. In the 20th year of King Aretas, king of the Nabataeans, who loves his people.

This inscription appears in a Nabataean sanctuary in modern-day Pozzuoli, Italy honoring the Nabataean high god, Dushara, and King Aretas IV (r. 9/8 BCE - 39/40 CE). The discovery of this sacred space, along with the multiple altars, dedications, and inscriptions within, revolutionized our understanding of Nabataean history. Almost immediately, modern perceptions of Nabataeans changed from sedentary trade intermediaries settled within the borders of their own kingdom in modern-day Jordan to traversers of the Mediterranean in active pursuit of wealth and opportunity. In the intervening years, more evidence, such as inscriptions in Delos and Miletos, has continued to build a complicated pattern of Nabataean maritime mobility stretching across the Mediterranean. One unifying factor in this evidence, however, is the invocation of Dushara as the protector of these far flung travelers. Explanations for the coordination of Dushara and the expansion of Nabataean interests into the Western Mediterranean have only begun to incorporate cross-cultural migration and network theory.

In this paper, I argue that the Nabataeans migrated westward in the Mediterranean and southward further into Arabia. They facilitated this movement by establishing diasporic nodes in order to anchor a trade network stretching from Italy to Yemen. Their ethnic identification as Nabataean bound them together as a unique group even as they settled into distant lands. As part of this identification, they used Dushara as a touchstone for the Nabataean pantheon, unique even in the region of northern Arabia. But the question remains, why Dushara? The Nabataeans had other gods - gods which protected traders, merchants, and sailors. I argue that the answer to this question has less to do with the maritime nature of their mobility and more to do with the assimilative properties of a male high god. Once on a Greek island or in a Roman port, Dushara could be amalgamated with Zeus or Jupiter in order to initiate and maintain cross-cultural relationships, while also preserving a unique Nabataean identity.

In addition, Dushara was closely linked with the Nabataean monarchy, in particular the powerful leadership of the king. As such, I theorize that the use of Dushara signals coordinated state involvement with these merchants. Nabataeans may have pursued economic opportunity under the sponsorship of the Nabataean monarchs, and through it, Dushara himself. Like the Phoenician states and Egyptian Ptolemies before them, the centralized state system of Nabataea was capable of organizing and sponsoring trading expeditions within an expansive network. The purpose of such sponsorship was to ensure that luxury goods at the center of Nabataean economics, frankincense and myrrh in particular, were effectively brought into the kingdom from Southern Arabia and then distributed to the consumptive world of the Mediterranean. Economic stability was thus assured for nearly two centuries before Nabataea was finally annexed by Rome in 106 CE.