

wandered into ancient Edom (southern Jordan, southern Israel, and north-western Arabia), subdued in some way the Edomites, and then became semi-settled. By 310 B.C. their capital city, Petra ("Rock" in Greek), was considered worthy of looting by two of Alexander the Great's generals.

The Nabataeans remained a nation of traders, but instead of doing all the travelling themselves, they built a network of rest-stops for camel-trains (caravanserai) and became even richer by charging for rest-stop comforts and no doubt selling souvenirs and assorted trade goods. They even built ships and traded (and pirated) up and down the Red Sea, a route for ships coming from all points east laden with expensive luxury items. Regular Nabataean trade routes extended as far as Puteoli, Italy (near Pompeii), Rhodes, Damascus, Egypt and various points on the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and South Arabian coast.

Besides ferrying a wide variety of goods from these places (silk, ivory, gems, animals, spices), the Nabataeans controlled all or substantial parts of certain desirable commodities. Perhaps the most important was bitumen, a natural asphalt which was produced in the Dead Sea. Great chunks of it would rise rock-like out of the middle of the sea and workers would row out and chop pieces off. One ancient writer, Diodorus Siculus, said there was a twenty-day warning prior to the appearance of the bitumen: the region would be permeated with a terrible smell, and all the gold, silver and bronze would become colourless. Bitumen was used in metal smelting for colour, but it is unlikely to have had such a great effect as Diodorus claimed. Bitumen's principal value was as a fixative or binder for many types of aromatics used in embalming bodies. It was used as a waterproofing for coffins, and death-masks, small amulets and scarabs were carved from it. Its non-funereal use was principally as a "glue" for all types of inlay, wood furniture, and ivory.

The regional trade in salt, a mundane, but highly necessary commodity, was controlled by the Nabataeans. They also produced balsam (from a plant), which was used in medicine, and they produced and traded copper and incense, the last extremely important in religious ceremony. These local products -- bitumen, salt, balsam, copper and incense -- gave a steady, controllable source of income if trade from further afield fell off.

One other very important natural commodity developed to excellent advantage by the Nabataeans was water. Its availability at the many caravanserais made these "rest-stops" desirable for travellers and lucrative for the Nabataeans, who jealously guarded their water supplies. A typical Nabataean cistern was pyramidal in shape, dug many feet below the surface, with the wider part of the "pyramid" at

**Peoples of the Roman Empire:
The Nabataeans**

by L.L. Neuru

The Nabataeans inhabited a region of the eastern Roman Empire which included parts of the modern countries of Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The beginning and end of the Nabataeans as an identifiable people and nation are a bit mysterious. The Nabataeans are sometimes traced back as far as 1500-1400 B.C., sometimes identified as descendants of the Biblical Ishmael or as a people mentioned in Assyrian sources. Their territory was annexed by the emperor Trajan in A.D. 106 and made part of the province of Arabia. Precisely why Trajan did this, and why he did it in A.D. 106, is unclear: there were no uprisings or wars with the Nabataeans at that time.

The Nabataeans seem most likely to have sprung from a branch of the Arabian nomadic group which was widespread over the southern Near East. The Nabataeans were camel-drivers and traders (a sometimes polite term for pirates and highway-robbers) who

the bottom. A single, nearly invisible filling hole at surface level, in the narrow, pointed top of the pyramid-shaped cistern, enabled the Nabataeans to keep secret their water sources.

The region inhabited by the Nabataeans is arid; rainfall amounts to approximately four inches per year. Consequently, it was (and still is today) necessary to retain absolutely every drop of rainfall. The hillsides were cut to make channels to direct the flow of the runoff, and those hills without natural stone to cut were laced with cobble-lined channels instead. Thus the rain would be directed along its natural downhill path into waiting cisterns. Hillsides were also terraced and dammed, to slow the runoff so that it could be more precisely directed into the channels rather than flooding over them.

Terracing and damming also directed water into hillside planted fields, which gave them a thorough but non-labour-intensive irrigating when it did rain. Nowhere was this method of terracing more effective and ingenious than in the great wadi systems which rage with flash floods during the infrequent rainfalls. The wadi are canyons which course like "dry rivers" through the arid Nabataean region.

They are spectacular in size, shape and often colour of rock, and have for centuries carried off vast quantities of water as well as a good deal of eroded soil as silt. Dammed and terraced, the silt was directed, along with the water, into a series of artificial fields which were then planted with crops or shrubbery to further slow the erosion and runoffs.

This elaborate management of water allowed the ancient Nabataean farmer to produce not only the "dry" crops such as wheat, barley and olive, but also pomegranate and other fruits, and to maintain vineyards. The terrace-and-dam method of farming was known to have been so successful that Nabataean methods are employed by modern Israeli farmers in the Negev desert (southern Israel, a part of ancient Nabataea).

The Nabataeans' engineering abilities so amply demonstrated in their water conservation system were also evident in other areas. They were expert potters, producing vessels which were beautifully decorated with painted naturalistic motifs such as the palm leaf, pomegranate, grape leaves and fruit, often over a fine lattice-work background. One common form was a footless bowl, basically a half-sphere, which is one of the most difficult shapes to manufacture on a potter's wheel. The pottery was generally thin and fine as eggshell, and the best examples are equal to porcelain.

The Nabataean engineers also produced a city which is unique in the Mediterranean world: Petra, which they literally carved out of the living sandstone. The buildings are complete with columns, staircases, niches with statues in them, carved of one piece from the face of sheer rock. The colour of the city is spectacular, dark ochre-red sandstone with bands of grey and various yellows running through the darker stone. The changing light of the sun alters the colour of the rock-hewn buildings, and has given Petra the epithet "rose-red city". The Nabataeans were also good builders of stone- and block-constructed houses; many of these are still standing in abandoned cities and towns throughout Nabataea, although Petra is still the most magnificent.