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Qaşr al-Bint Temple “Sanctuary of the Nabataeans”

Qaşr al-Bint Temple is one of the best-preserved freestanding structures in Petra beside it is the main temple of the ancient city. The Nabataeans built this Temple at about the same time as the famous Al-Khazneh (Treasury) was built, in the second half of the reign of King Aretas IV (ruled 9 BC–40 AD). I can surely say that this Temple is an outstanding and unique example of the fusion of Greco-Roman and Eastern elements in Nabataean architecture, which motivates scholars to study and write about it. The Nabataean’s architecture, culture and religion still fascinate every scholar whenever they discover something new about them. Unfortunately, the Nabataeans did not leave many inscriptions that reveal all details of their life, but they left the most amazing archeological remains that will always be impressive and provide the motivation to learn and dig more to reveal more about their mysteries. In this paper, I will write in general about the Nabataeans origin, their settlement and location and their temples. Then I will write in detail about Qaşr al-Bint Temple which I will focus on in my paper, regarding its location, most important features and function.

Keywords: Petra, Qaşr al-Bint Temple, Jordan, the Nabataeans, Dushara, Petra, Qaşr al-Bint chronologic

Introduction

The Nabataean Kingdom was and still a mystery for many centuries. Unfortunately, it is difficult to trace back when exactly this powerful political entity put itself on the map between the fourth century BC and 106 AD, but some scholars date them back to the era under Trajan between 168 BC and 106 AD. The name Nabataean came from the root “Na-ba-ṭu” (نابطن), which means “distinguished man”; furthermore, their name was written in their

inscriptions as “*nbṭw/nabaṭu*”, but Dan Gibson says that the origin of the name is the Nabatu, meaning people who draw water.¹

The Origin of the Nabataeans

Originally the Nabataeans were nomads dwelling in the *Negev Desert* and some scholars believe that they emerged from the Aramaean Kingdom that was in Babylonia.² They are also mentioned in the Assyrian Annals of the prominent King *Tiglath-Pileser III* (745–729 BC),³ but this theory faced many objections. Lipinski, for example, due to his studies of the *Tiglath-Pileser III's* Summaries, believed that they should be identified as the entity that reigned under the rule of Ashurbanipal.⁴ He also noticed that there was no mention of Nabatu, but in another case, while studying Sennacherib's Inscriptions, there was a mention of the tribe.⁵ “The Ancient Records of Tiglath-Pileser III list, among the rebels, the *Hagaranu* (perhaps the descendants of Hagar, the mother of Ishmael), the *Nabatu* (perhaps the Nabataeans were descendants of Nebayoth, the son of Ishmael) and the tribe of Qedar. The Qedarites are mentioned in Genesis 25:13 as descendants of a son of Ishmael named Qedar”.⁶

Settlement and Location

From their early stages as nomadic tribes to their settled society (before the fifth century BC), the Nabataeans formed a significant culture and political entity that proved itself among great empires such as the Seleucid Empire, the Jewish Kingdom, South Arabian Kingdoms, and later on the Roman Empire. They chose one of the most strategic and safest places in the area. They chose

¹ GIBSON (2004: 9).

² WENNING (2015: 26).

³ SÁNCHEZ (2015: 25); GIBSON (2004: 9).

⁴ GIBSON (2004: 25).

⁵ SÁNCHEZ (2015: 25).

⁶ GIBSON (2004: 9).

it wisely, depending on their significant knowledge of the Arabian Desert, because they needed a place where they could be protected, at the same time, in the middle of the trading route, not too far from the water sources and not too isolated from the other kingdoms. Also, it was easily reachable for those who seek peace, knowledge, business and a dive cultural and knowledge exchange, but, at the same time, well protected. Therefore, they chose the city of *Rekem* or *Rekmu*, what is now known as Petra or The Rock City.⁷ They built their amazing capital city Petra in southern Jordan about 80 kilometers southeast of the Dead Sea in modern Jordan (30°19'N, 35°25'E).⁸ They used the mountain ridge that lines up from the eastern border of Wadi Arabah, which is the borders between Palestine and Transjordan, to the north of modern Saudi Arabia. They even expanded their Kingdom to the north close to Syria and to the west to reach the Oasis at Duma almost to the Nile Delta. With this expansion, they covered around 700 square kilometers.⁹

Before the Nabataeans, the city of Petra was nothing but a barren cannon. It is believed that, most probably, it was a graveyard for their dead.¹⁰ This place was never occupied by the Edomites as their capital city was Bushra, which is located in what is called present-day Tafila in the southern part of Jordan. But this does not revoke the idea that the Nabataeans were not living close to it and maybe within the Edomite's settlements, as some Nabataeans started their occupation of a mountain that was known as Selah.¹¹ Moving to the great new city and building those enormous or, in better words, engraving buildings did not mean that they completely abandoned their nomadic life¹² and their previous way of living. They kept having the tents settled and ready to have them in different places, in case they needed refuge for the women, children and elders, as well as they did not leave the cattle-raising behind them, so they needed those during their search for food and water.

⁷ More information will be provided on the Nabataeans' cities later on in this section of the chapter.

⁸ ERICKSON-GINI (2015: 309).

⁹ ALPASS (2013: 1–2); WENNING (2015: 394–409).

¹⁰ GIBSON (2004: 10–11).

¹¹ LEMCHE (2008: 154).

¹² HEALEY (2001: 27).

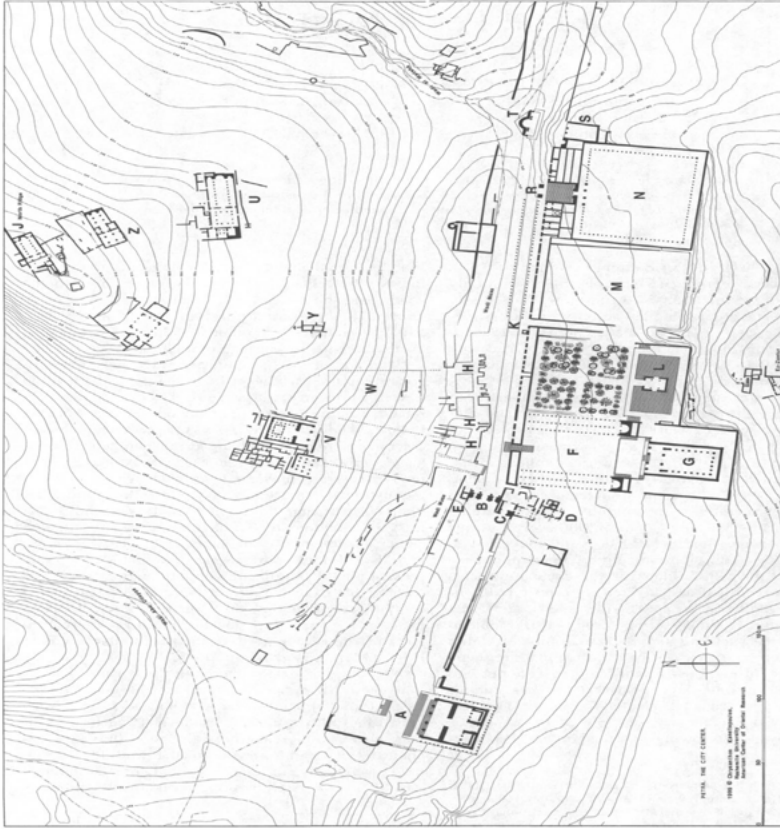


Figure 1: Map of the city of Petra, A: Temple of Dushara (Qasr Al-Bit); B: Temenos Gate; C: South Tower; D: Baths College of Priests, or Palatial Residence; E: North Tower; F: Lower Temenos of the Great Temple Complex; G: Great Temple and it's Upper Temenos; H: Bridges; J: Ridge Church; K: Colonnaded Street; L: Pool Complex (Lower Market); M: Middle Market; N: Upper Market (Arora); P: Bazantina Tower; R: Trajanic Arch; S: South Nymphaeon; T: North Nymphaeon; U: The Petra Church; V: Temple of Winged Lions or Temple of Al-'Uzza (Gymnasium); W: Royal Palace, Y: Area A; Z: Blue Chapel¹⁴

The Nabataean Temples¹³

The four Nabataean temples of ancient Petra, Qasr Rabbah, Khirbet edh-Dharikh, Khirbet et-Tannur and Qasr al-Bint, are free-standing and all of them were built between the second half of the first century BC and the first quarter of the 1st century AD. Each temple competes with the Khazneh, the

¹³ For more information see: RAYMOND (2008: 54–76).

¹⁴ KANELLOPOULOS and AKASHEH (2001: 6).

rock-cut structure known as the "Treasury," in terms of size and style.¹⁵ The temples in the Nabataean capital constituted the largest and most ornate Nabataean religious constructions.¹⁶ Despite their similar exteriors (in antis' façades and Corinthian-Doric orders), locations (all structures are positioned within a 200 m radius) and dates (about 50 BC to 25 AD), each temple in Petra was a construction project with its unique issues.¹⁷ According to Healey,¹⁸ all the temples share in common:

The feature of an elevated platform in the cella of the temple reached by steps. Sometimes the temple is divided into three sections, of which the cella is the most enclosed (Qasr al-Bint, Dharih). The raised platforms sometimes show evidence of arrangements for steles or statues, while dividing walls, which are often plastered and painted, sometimes support engaged columns and contain niches which might also have contained steles or statues.¹⁹

Qasr el-Bint – The Palace of Pharaoh's Daughter

This great Temple was a focal point of the Nabataean society and was ornamented with some of the most remarkable art and architecture available at the time, with usage reaching back to the first century BC.²⁰ It is one of the three main temples in Petra, it is also known as the temple of Dushara. Petra is renowned across the globe for its stunning rock-cut façade for a long time ago.²¹

The most spectacular stone building in Petra, Qasr al-Bint, was erected between the second century BC and first century AD during the late Nabate-

¹⁵ HEALEY (2001: 74).

¹⁶ WHITING (2022: 194).

¹⁷ HEALEY (2001: 74).

¹⁸ HEALEY (2001: 74).

¹⁹ HEALEY (2001: 74).

²⁰ RENEL, et. al (2012: 39–42).

²¹ RENEL, et. al (2012: 39–42).

an period.²² It is also known as the Temple of Dushares,²³ the protector deity of the Nabataea as well as having the biggest portico (tetrastyle in antis, plan dimensions 32 x 32m)²⁴ standing on a massive and raised platform. Tetra

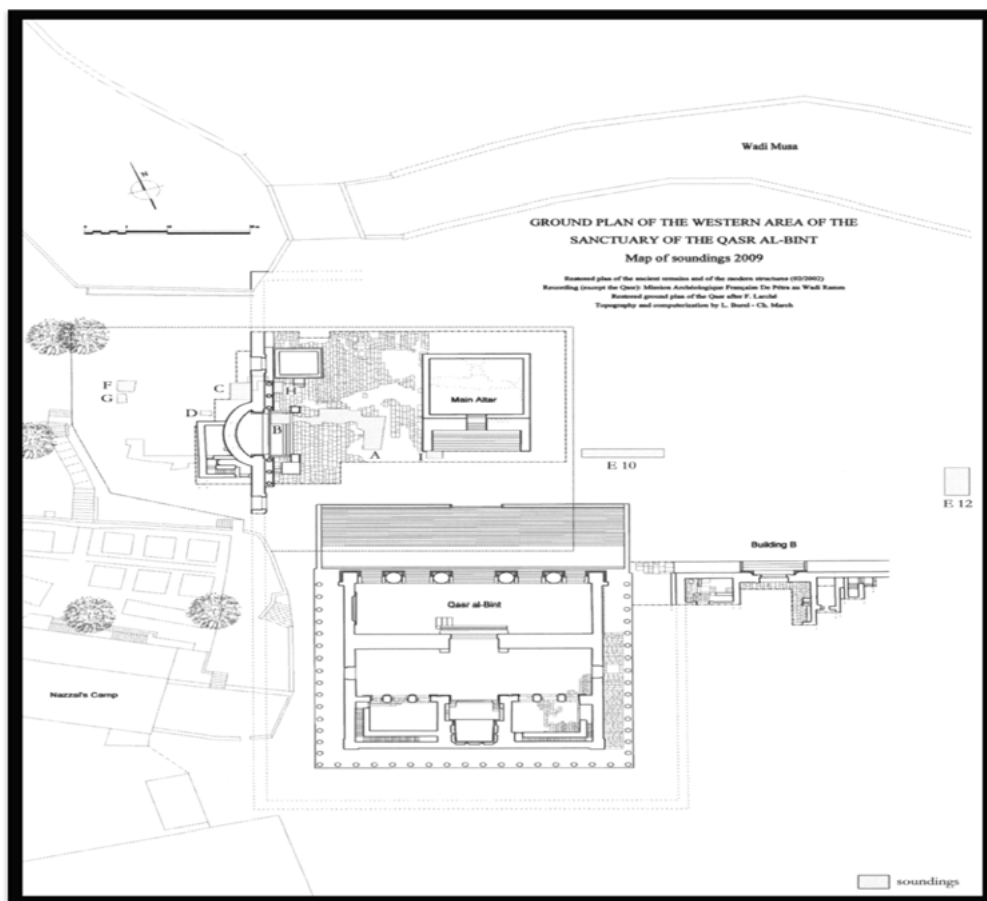


Figure 2: A general map of the soundings in the early levels at the Qasr al-Bint, Petra.²⁵

²² RENEL, et. al (2012: 39–42).

²³ Dushara was a supreme god, whose name means the lord of the mountain Al-Shara, which is a chain of mountains that encircle Mada'n Saleh and Petra, located on the rim of what is now known as Wadi Araba, Dushara was one of the day gods, and it is believed that he was the son of the goddesses Allāt, he was a daytime (the sun god) god, in contrast to Al-Qaum god, who was a night-time god, and his job was to protect people's souls while sleeping and be their protector during their journey in the heaven realms, back to Dushara was represented by a square block, and he was also one of the features of the Nabataean coinage (HEALEY, 2001: 83).

²⁴ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1358).

²⁵ RENEL, et. al (2012: 40).

style in *antis pronaos* with Corinthian columns, Doric frieze and pediment, all set behind a massive altar, are the Temple's only classical façade and the interior structure, obviously, was inspired from the Egyptian and the traditional Nabataean antecedents. Although the language was flawlessly and purposefully Hellenistic, as, in many Nabataean monuments, the function and geographical considerations were eastern.²⁶

The four separate stonewalls that made up Qasr al-primary Bint's structural components were a component of an ancient and defunct diaphragm. A visual inspection reveals that these walls are severely fractured and weakly attached at the corners; therefore, it is anticipated that each wall functions structurally independently.²⁷ The facade is covered in structural fissures and the mortar holding the stones together is seen as being flimsy and loose. The main wall's architecture is depicted in a drawing along with its measurements. It is 29 meters long, 5.5 meters wide at the entrance, 16.4 meters high with an effective construction height of 11.95 meters and an average stone-wall thickness of 2.60 meters. (The actual resistant wall height is the effective structural height.) The western wall's slight fissures and deteriorated mortar weaken the bonding effects. The western wall length is approximately 33 meters and its effective construction height is 11.33 meters and the wall thickness ranges from 1.5 to 2.0 meters.²⁸ The southern wall's large fractures can be seen all over it, which indicates that it has been subject to significant shaking and vibration. Using the original sandstone and wooden laces inserted between the stones, the eastern portion of this wall was repaired in 1962; however, significant deterioration of the laces contributed to the wall's dismantling and the expansion of the cracks. This wall's thickness ranges from 1.2 to 2.0 meters, and its span is 32 meters and the effective construction height is 12.9 meters.²⁹

The northern wall is an enormous span equivalent to those of the most important Ionic temples in Asia Minor. The center interaxial column spac-

²⁶ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1358).

²⁷ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1359).

²⁸ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1359).

²⁹ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1360).

ing and the architrave's matching length was 8 meters. It is important to note that, in this context, the larger center interaxial column space equates to the additional lengths of 4 triglyphs and 4 metopes and the remaining intercolumniations (axial distances 5,72 and 4,75 meters) correspond to such components in the frieze. Every other Doric metope had two rosettes that are alternated with metopes holding relief busts. Rich, painted relief, ornamentation and foreign materials (marble³⁰ for the staircase) were used in Qasr al-Bint together with unusually wide spans and bulky components that were closely fitted together.³¹

This massive tetrastyle-in-antis Temple with an almost square layout (27.90 x 27.62 meters) and 23 meters high rests on a pedestal. The large vestibule was accessible from the long stairway that faced north and was divided by a platform that took up the whole width of the podium. A portico placed on the platform and leaning against the Temple halfway up encircled it on the other three sides. From the spacious entryway, a huge doorway built in the thick wall 5 opened onto a spacious cella.³² Narrow stairs that appeared to be used to operate a concealed mechanism for covertly opening the doors ran along the length of the upper section of this wall, descending from the attic level to both ends of the lintel of the doorway. The whole width of the large cell was taken up by a tripartite adyton that was placed at the back. It was made up of a central aedicule with a platform that was 1.4 meters above floor level, surrounded by two-story lateral rooms.³³

On top of the E and W walls, which protected the attic level, were parapet walls that concealed its sides (Wright assumed a flat terrace roof). The pinkish native sandstone³⁴ ashlar, which were used to construct the temple,

³⁰ It should be emphasized that local stone, not foreign marble, was used to construct the "white marble" floor and the 80 cm high plinth veneer sheeting of the bottom section of the interior walls (personal communication; like in the case of the adjacent province of Judaea-Palaestina, the import of marble on a large scale did not commence here before the provincial period).

³¹ BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1360).

³² BANI-HANI and BARAKAT (2006: 1360).

³³ RENEL and FOURNET (2019: 53).

³⁴ Qasr al-Bint was constructed out of Cambrian sandstone, just like the other Petra monuments, from a lithographic perspective. This sedimentary rock has tiny grains (0.25 mm in

were primarily coated in stucco. Timber beams were used to strengthen seismic stability, except in the roof and ceilings.

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This enormous building was not built overnight. It needed months of hard work, material, labor and, most importantly, intelligence to construct such a magnificent building. It was built to glorify the god Dushara and, in other resources, it was built for the goddess Al-Uzza who was the protector of the city of Petra. The amazing evolution that the Nabataeans did by moving from their nomadic lifestyle to this magnificent Kingdom challenged one of the most powerful entities in the Ancient Near East. Despite the damage that happened due to the earthquakes that occurred in the area and the weather factors, the Nabataean buildings in Petra and in other Nabataean cities are still standing to witness this fabulous civilization.

The Function of Qasr al-Bint Temple

The Temple of Qasr al-Bint was built by the cult of Dushara, one of the supreme gods in the Nabataean community.³⁵ Dushara was a supreme god whose name means the lord of the mountain Al-Shara, which is a chain of mountains that encircle Mada'n Saleh and Petra and located on the rim of what is now known as Wadi Araba. Dushara was one of the day gods and it is believed that he was the son of the goddesses Allāt. He was a daytime (the sun god) god in contrast to Al-Qaum god, who was a night-time god and

size) and a moderately porous structure (10–20 percent of the volume is made up of pores). The nearly mono-crystalline quartz-only granular skeleton was cemented with a mixture of the microcrystalline carbonate, clayey materials, iron compounds, and secondary siliceous cement. The top layer (the worn crust) shows a considerable rise in salts, calcite, and ferric compounds, according to mineralogical analysis.

³⁵ PLEKHOV (2022: 9).

his job was to protect people's souls while sleeping and be their protector during their journey in the heaven realms. Dushara was represented by a square block and he was also one of the features of the Nabataean coinage.³⁶

Conclusion

The Nabataean civilization is one of the most impressive civilizations in the Southern Levant. They started their life as nomads and tribes dwelling in the desert and then they changed their lifestyle completely to the opposite and settled down, chose a strategic location and gained their knowledge in the desert to establish a successful trade which gave them a massive fortune and resulted to build their Kingdom with its capital city Petra. Petra was full of temples and other buildings and Figure 3 shows the distribution of Nabataean extra-mural cultic and funerary sites in southern Jordan and the Negev outside Petra. These buildings and their decorations are excellent case studies for religious appropriation because they show how cultures have interacted and how Greek, Near Eastern, and local art and religion have influenced the architecture and art.

The range and size of the rock-cut installations and buildings discovered next to several façade tombs in Petra suggest that the majority of the funeral rituals were performed outside the burial chambers. Most of the participants in this ceremonial action congregated on the platform or courtyard directly in front of the façade or in nearby triclinia. Gatherings, libations, offerings, and feasting appear to have been among the types of activities that occurred, whether at funerals or other events. According to the existence of cisterns, reservoirs and basins throughout the complexes, water appears to have been essential to many of these activities. The placement of the tomb's inside and outside portions suggest that the ceremony was centered on the graves within the chamber.

³⁶ GIBSON (2003: 174).

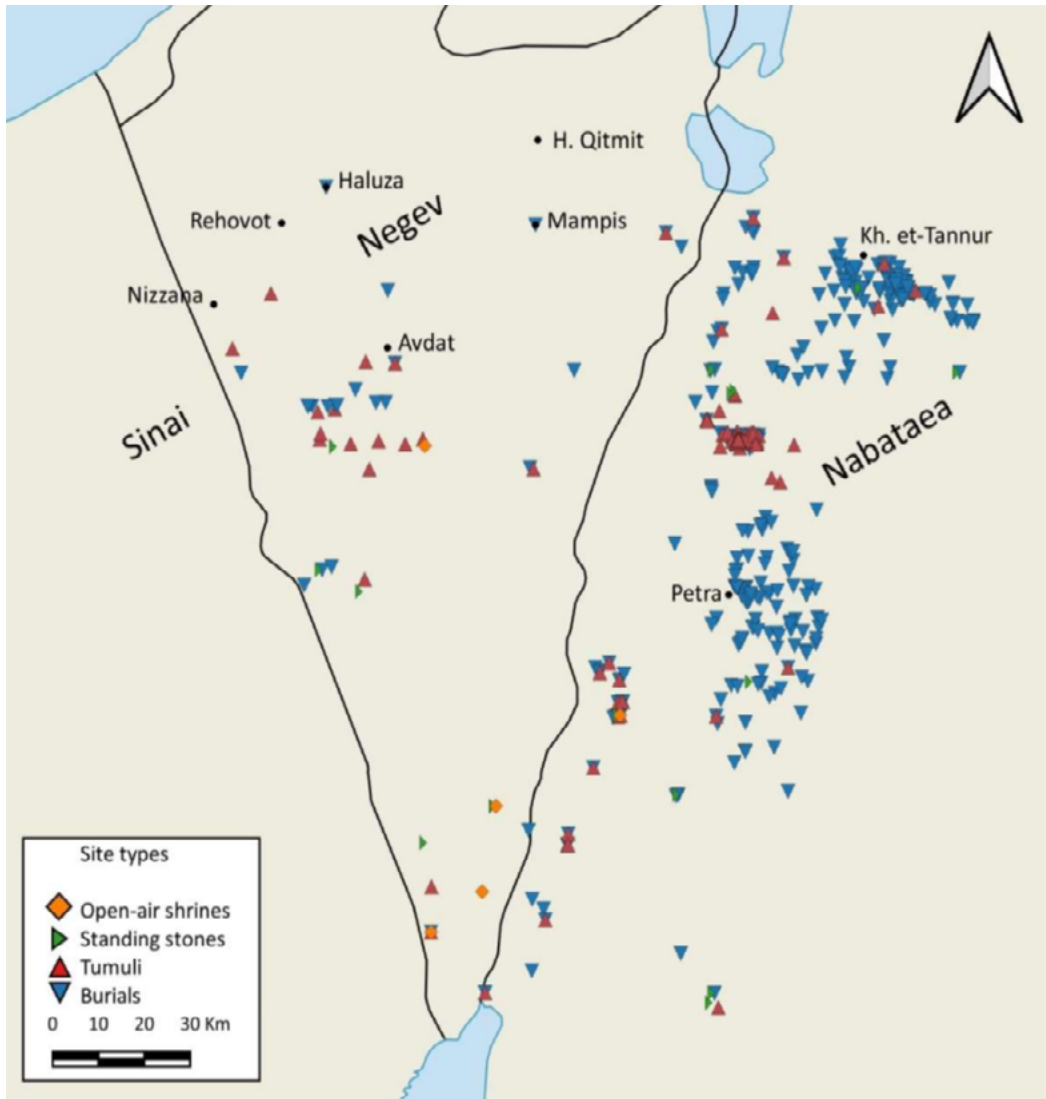


Figure 3: Distribution of Nabataean extra-mural cultic and funerary sites in Southern Jordan and the Negev outside Petra³⁷

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³⁷ TEBES (2020: 336).

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