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BOOK REVIEW

The Nabataean Temple at Khirbet et-Tannur. Vols. 1, 2

The Nabataean Temple at Khirbet et-Tannur. Vol. 1, *Architecture and Religion*, by Judith S. McKenzie, Joseph A. Greene, Andres T. Reyes, Catherine S. Alexander, Deirdre G. Barrett, Brian Gilmour, John F. Healey, Margaret O'Hea, Nadine Schibille, Stephan G. Schmid, Wilma Wetterstrom, and Sarah Witcher Kansa (AASOR 67, Manar al-Athar Monograph 1). Pp. xxviii + 340, figs. 446, diagrams 5, maps 5. American School of Oriental Research, Boston 2013. \$89.95. ISBN 978-0-89757-035-0 (cloth).

The Nabataean Temple at Khirbet et-Tannur. Vol. 2, *Cultic Offerings, Vessels, and Other Specialist Reports*, by Judith S. McKenzie, Joseph A. Greene, Andres T. Reyes, Catherine S. Alexander, Deirdre G. Barrett, Brian Gilmour, John F. Healey, Margaret O'Hea, Nadine Schibille, Stephan G. Schmid, Wilma Wetterstrom, and Sarah Witcher Kansa (AASOR 68, Manar al-Athar Monograph 2). Pp. xx + 329, figs. 148, tables 18, maps 2. American School of Oriental Research, Boston 2013. \$89.95. ISBN 978-0-89757-036-7 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Duane W. Roller](#)

The site of Khirbet et-Tannur ("Ruins of the Oven") lies immediately southeast of the Dead Sea and 70 km north of Petra on an isolated peak, a promontory between the Wadi al-Hasa (the biblical Zered) and its major southern affluent, the Wadi al-Laban. It is on the King's Highway, the major north-south route east of the Dead Sea; the Via Nova Traiana passed 4 km to the east. Khirbet et-Tannur was a Nabataean temple complex, an outlier of the village of Khirbet edh-Dharih, which lies at a spring 7 km south. The lack of a permanent water source at Tannur meant that it was not a location of habitation but rather a place of pilgrimage at the Nabataean temple whose ruins make up the site. It consists of a forecourt with a rectangular temple to the rear and various rooms on the north and south, all together in a single integrated complex. The earliest occupation was from the second century B.C.E. (although Edomite settlements in the region are from as much as five centuries earlier), and the flourishing period was probably in the first and second centuries C.E. There was a major destruction in the fourth century, and, except for occasional visitors, there was no further occupation; there is no evidence of Christian structures.

The site remained unknown until the 1930s and was excavated by Nelson Glueck, director of the Jerusalem School, in 1937. Initial publication was in a number of preliminary summaries, but the final report, a portion of the volume *Deities and Dolphins: The Story of the Nabataeans* (London), did not appear until 1965. This long delay, in part generated by World War II and the regional conflict thereafter, meant that the work contained many inaccuracies and omissions, with much of the material from the site not discussed. This led to the re-analysis in the first decade of the 21st century of both Khirbet et-Tannur itself and Glueck's excavation, the subject of the present report.

This handsome and lavishly illustrated two-volume set is the most thorough analysis of Khirbet et-Tannur ever published, and it will certainly be the final word on the site for many years to come. Created by a team of nearly 20 authors and specialists, it is a complete examination of all material from the site, beginning with the records and artifacts from Glueck's excavations. The records are mostly in the Semitic Museum at Harvard University, as are many of the artifacts, others of which are in Amman and Cincinnati. Under the able supervision of McKenzie, the documents were reexamined and many of the artifacts published for the first time.

The largest part of the publication, most of volume 1, is devoted to the architecture. An introduction describes Glueck's excavations and publication, and the analysis is particularly interesting because of its many historic photographs and plans. This is followed by an intense and thorough examination of the

complex, also with many illustrations and plans.

Following the discussion of the architecture there is an examination of the sculpture, which is the most familiar material culture from Khirbet et-Tannur (1:178–230). The various cult statues are illustrative about Nabataean religion, but the authors are candid that their interpretation remains vague. Representations of various divinities are apparent, including the divine couple (whose local names are not known). Particularly interesting is a statue of Tyche with a zodiac ring (1: figs. 357, 358): an intriguing note by eminent historian of astronomy Owen Gingerich explores the contacts between himself and Glueck and an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to date the ring through its symbols (1:228).

Since Khirbet et-Tannur was a religious center, there is a long discussion of cultic practices (1:231–68). Any discussion of Nabataean religion remains problematic because of the lack of texts—one is reminded of issues regarding prehistoric North American cultures—and interpretation must rely on the architecture and other elements seen as cultic, as well as sacrificial remnants (zoological and botanical material [1:235–40]), including animal bones and food items. Khirbet et-Tannur was unusually rich in such items, and they are carefully discussed and displayed. There is also a detailed consideration, for comparative purposes, of other Nabataean cultic sites in the region, including Petra. An interesting appendix (1:264–66) looks at the survival of Nabataean cult places today, such as Jebel Haroun, near Petra, which is still revered as the burial place of Aaron.

The last chapter of the first volume is about iconoclasm at the site (1:269–90). That this occurred is obvious, given the vandalized state of many of the heads of the sculptures. The date for this damage cannot be determined beyond a *terminus post quem* of the fourth century C.E., when the complex was destroyed. Suggestions for the perpetrators have included Christian or Islamic iconoclasts or modern vandals, but exact chronological details are not forthcoming. By making a regional examination of iconoclasm, including several other sites as well as Petra, McKenzie has provided an insightful study of the entire issue. As a final part of volume 1 there is an architectural glossary—always useful—with many line drawings, which are especially valuable in showing the numerous types of capitals.

Volume 2 is in two parts. The first (chs. 6–8) is a fascinating account of the examination of Glueck's records and nonarchitectural finds, including both his notebooks and a vast amount of material remains other than sculpture. This is an amazing archive of a pre-war excavation, including not only the notebooks but also registration and pottery lists, photographs, nearly 6,000 sherds, and a variety of material culture. One faces the existential issue of connecting these records to the site itself, since inevitably the final shape of the ruins could not be known until the end of the excavations. Another problem is the relationship between the artifacts and the temple complex: archaeology in the 1930s was quite different from that practiced today, to say the least, and much less was known about Nabataean culture. The present report includes a publication of an edited version of Glueck's notebook and registration list (2:19–45). Journals from early excavations are perhaps less valuable as archaeological records than as cultural phenomena, but they are important nonetheless, here serving not only as a window into events in the region at the time that it was called the Emirate of Transjordan under the British Mandate but also as an insight into the vicissitudes of early field projects. The registry lists provide the discovery dates of all the sculpture so familiar today.

The remainder of the volume is devoted to several reports by various specialists. First, by Healey, is an account of the Nabataean inscriptions, combining the original drawings (always the most valuable medium) with new photographs. There are only four, dating from the late first century B.C.E. and all dedicatory. Of particular interest is that they reveal a local variant to the more standard Nabataean script used at Petra. This report is followed by one on the altars, by Reyes and McKenzie, including both the main Altar Platform and a number of smaller incense altars. More than a dozen of these are known, in limestone or sandstone, ranging throughout the entire period of occupation and becoming more elaborate, with Graeco-Roman style decoration, in the later periods.

In his excavation, Glueck found hundreds of animal bones, which were analyzed and catalogued by Whitcher Kansa. Not all could be identified, due to their small size and burning, but most, not unexpectedly, are from sheep and goat. What could be learned about species, particular body parts, and age demonstrates that the animals were used for ritual purposes not subsistence.

Unusual for his era, Glueck saved a few plant remains. There are only six examples, which were analyzed by Wetterstrom. Four are cereal grains, presumably what was left of burnt offerings. Despite the limited nature of the evidence, it is valuable for understanding the ritual processes of the site. In addition, a few metal objects were found, including door hinges and some nails (there was an ironworking industry a few kilometers away). Perhaps more interesting are the four surviving coins discovered at the site (2:135–37): two Seleucid and two Nabataean issues, one of the former from Antioch.

A thorough examination of the glass was performed by O'Hea (2:145–57). Much of it is too fragmentary for detailed analysis, but those fragments that can be dated are from the third into the fourth century C.E. and seem to demonstrate that glassware was used only during the last period of occupation. Most were thought to represent vessels used in ritual dining. The place of origin, as determined through chemical analysis by Schibille and Degryse (1:159–72), was either Egypt or the Levantine coast, as might be expected.

Other finds from the 1937 season include a large number of lamps and lamp fragments (discussed by Barrett) and thousands of pottery sherds (examined by Schmid, Alexander, and McKenzie). The lamps range from the second into the sixth century C.E., well beyond the primary occupation of the site. The pottery is mostly from the second through fourth centuries C.E., but the corpus includes Nabataean painted ware from as early as the late second century B.C.E., perhaps a surprise. Most of the sherds are from vessels used in the ritual operation of the complex.

Rarely has this reviewer seen so useful and attractive an excavation report. This is all the more impressive because of the vicissitudes of attempting to integrate the evidence for an excavation of 80 years ago, performed under the strictures of that era and whose records and material culture are widely dispersed, with the present state of the site—an immense task admirably performed by the principal investigator and her colleagues. The hundreds of plans and illustrations, both contemporary and historic and many in color, enhance the report. The narrative is clear, concise, and informative, and the catalogues are useful but not intrusive. This is a model publication about a little-known yet essential part of the ancient world, revealing a site whose interpretation has languished for half a century.

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