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SENSING THE DEAD: MORTUARY RITUAL AND TOMB VISITATION AT NABATAEAN PETRA

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Abstract – The visual prominence of mortuary structures within the Nabataean capital city of Petra clearly indicates that the deceased maintained a constant presence amongst the living. However, current systematic archaeological exploration of these mortuary features documents a more intimate view of the interaction between the living and the dead. Since 1998, the Petra North Ridge Project has sought to record the mortuary practices and gather data on health and diet of non-elite residents of 1st cent. AD Petra. Artifactual, taphonomic, and osteological data indicate that engagement of the city’s inhabitants with the dead occurred through the senses of smell, touch, taste, and sight. Nabataean visits to their familial tombs included ritual feasting and reorganization of the mortuary space, accompanied by the scents of incense, perfumed oils, and quicklime. In addition, mourners left behind material goods that served to illuminate, bedazzle, and entertain the dead. Through this repeated exchange of sensory stimulation, the Nabataeans established and preserved a dynamic relationship with their deceased ancestors.

Keywords – Mortuary rituals, tombs, Petra, Nabataeans


Mots-clés – Rituels funéraires, tombes, Pétra, Nabatéens
The Nabataeans at Petra, Jordan clearly utilized mortuary contexts as a form of display during the 1st cent. BC and 1st cent. AD. This city’s famous façade tombs line approaches to the city and prominently surround the city center. However, these intricately carved “houses of the dead” (ḥyt ‘ɪlm’) only provide one example of the diverse mortuary records of the city’s Nabataean residents. Underground tombs also honeycomb the hills directly to the south, north, and east of the city center. These rock-cut chamber tombs represent a different segment of society than the façade tombs, which are usually linked to members of the Nabataean royal family and high-level administrators, Roman provincial officials, and other important personages. Overall, Petra’s funerary features remain some of the least understood elements of Nabataean sacred space. Some of the earliest excavations at the site focused on tombs 1, but these explorations have only supplied limited snapshots of Nabataean mortuary practices. Almost no publications of the contents of these tombs exist beyond preliminary reports that contain minimal information on the artifacts and almost no discussion of the human skeletal remains. The Petra North Ridge Project seeks to deeply explore complex mortuary deposits on a micro level to illuminate cycles of mortuary behavior and how different members of a community expressed their social identity within a larger political and cultural context. Here, I focus on how the material evidence within the shaft chamber tombs is used to construct an intimate view of how Nabataean social groups expressed identity through multisensory interaction between themselves and their dead.

The Petra North Ridge Tomb Excavations

The tomb excavation component of the Petra North Ridge Project (fig. 1) began in 1998, when two tombs were encountered during clearing of the Ridge Church by the American Center of Oriental Research.

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1. HORSFIELD & HORSFIELD 1938; MURRAY & ELLIS 1940.
Tomb 1 and Tomb 2 provided an enticing glimpse of the information that these urban 1st cent. AD tombs still contained. The 2012, 2014, and 2016 excavations of the Petra North Ridge, co-directed by Megan A. Perry and S. Thomas Parker, focused on eight tombs, recovering numerous articulated and commingled skeletal remains along with intentional and accidental mortuary artifacts. All tombs have similar construction, consisting of a tomb shaft cut into the bedrock averaging 2.5 x 0.95 m wide and 2.9 m deep that opens into a rectilinear chamber with a surface area ranging from 7.3 to 40 m² (fig. 2). Three of the tombs explored (B.8, B.9, and F.2) remained unfinished and were never used for human burials. The other five tombs (B.4, B.5, B.6, B.7, and F.1) contain varied features for interment of the corpse, such as rectangular niches cut into the wall, rectangular shafts cut into the floor, or troughs/basins cut into the side or floor. A majority of the skeletal remains within the tombs were commingled, and only a few articulated skeletons were discovered within wall niches, at the bottoms of rectangular shafts, or on top of or intermingled with commingled deposits. Other bodies were found partially articulated, with only the torso or legs in anatomical position and the rest of the remains presumably scattered amongst the commingled deposits within the same layer. The mixture of articulated and commingled bodies within the five tombs implies that postmortem disturbances of human and/or natural origin occurred as humans interred newly deceased individuals within the tombs, as humans looted the tombs for valuables after they went out of use; and/or as natural forces such as fluvial intrusion displaced remains from their original primary or secondary disposition.

In addition, these tombs contained a number of artifacts related to mortuary behaviors. Only two objects appeared to be associated with specific individuals: a 1st cent. AD unguentarium (Object #533) found near burial B.4:22, a partially articulated burial located on the floor of B.4, and a 1st cent. AD lamp (Object #373) found amongst partially articulated remains from a niche in B.4. All other artifacts were found amongst the commingled remains or within later layers of the tomb fill. Taphonomic and stratigraphic analysis have suggested that the artifacts intermingled with the human skeletal remains were part of the larger mortuary agenda, and thus while it is impossible to tie particular artifacts to particular individuals, as an assemblage they can inform the nature of interaction between the living and the dead.

**Interacting with the Dead at Petra**

Most activities in the mortuary spaces at Petra reify the communal social identity of the deceased and the mourners and the fluidity between the worlds of the living and the dead. Nabataeans’ visits to their familial tombs included ritual feasting and reorganization of the mortuary space, accompanied by

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the scents of incense and perfumed oils, and some smells masked by quicklime. In addition, mourners left behind material goods that served to illuminate, bedazzle, and entertain the dead. In most cases, the dead also underwent transformation within the tomb from an individual physical entity to part of a commingled, communal ancestral assemblage, symbolizing their incorporation into the ancestral unit.

**Communal burial and social identity**

The extended family served as the core social group of mortuary space in Nabataea. Inscriptions from tombs within Petra and Medâʿin Saleh indicate they either included members of a specific lineage, or identified themselves as such 4, although in some cases the tombs may be subdivided by unrelated individuals 5. The mortuary spaces on the North Ridge served to reify these kin ties through communal interment of family members and commingling their skeletal remains into a “nested accumulation of ancestors” 6. To create these commingled assemblages, family members engaged in interring, touching, and reorganizing the dead within the mortuary space. Placing the dead within the tombs occasionally involved removing previous, now-decomposed bodies from the burial receptacles (niches, troughs, or shaft graves) for the placement of new individuals. The bones from these earlier interments were deposited within receptacles containing the remains of other ancestors, such as a floor shaft grave B.5:28, which contained the tightly-packed, commingled remains of 28 individuals, and floor shaft grave F.1:16, which also contained dense commingled deposits. Similar “ossuaries” have been found in tombs at Medâʿ in Saleh 7.

The importance of inclusion within the ancestral tomb may also be indicated by deposits of commingled bones collected elsewhere and brought for final rest within the tomb. The clearest case on the North Ridge consists of tightly-packed commingled deposits within two superimposed layers (B.5:15 and B.5:19) placed on the floor of tomb B.5. The stratigraphic integrity of these layers and the presence of two partially complete skeletons overlying these strata (B.5:15 skeleton #1 and B.5:9 skeleton #1), as seen in fig. 3, indicate that the commingled assemblage was created while the tomb was in use, not through environmental factors or tomb looting. In addition, the dearth of smaller skeletal elements often missing in secondary depositions, such as hand and foot phalanges 8, in this assemblage supports its secondary nature.

Communal burial likely emphasizes the importance of the kin group over individual identities within Petra 9. However, particular ancestors may have had significant social importance that strongly influenced identity at Petra. The presence of an apical ancestor in Nabataean façade tombs has been suggested through spatial layout of tomb features at Petra 10 and epigraphic evidence from Medâʿ in Saleh that identifies tomb owners being buried in prominent locations within the chamber 11. In general, the burials within larger façade tombs remained undisturbed and in their primary, articulated state. This, plus the presence of inscriptions identifying the person interred within a tomb feature, implies that individual identity retains importance after death for these primarily elite individuals. In the case of the shaft chamber tombs, these important family members may have been accorded postmortem treatment that retained their individuality through leaving their corpse intact as opposed to including it within a commingled group.

Thus, it is possible that communal, familial identities centered on an important ancestor who would be interred left undisturbed, such as the niche burials in B.4 and B.5, and perhaps the floor shaft grave in B.5. The status of the primary burials in the bottom of the floor shaft graves in B.6, and B.7 is less

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clear, however. There is no evidence within these tombs of mortuary-related commingled deposits; in contrast, the only commingling seems to result from tomb robbing, and the individuals reflected in the commingled samples could have originally been left as primary articulated burials as part of the mortuary process.

Finally, the retention of some primary intact burials within the tombs could simply reflect mortuary cycles left incomplete due to the loss of mourners tending to the tomb or political factors prohibiting or inhibiting access to the tombs in this sector of the city. The tombs go out of use in the late 1st/early 2nd cent. AD based on artifactual evidence. Only B.4 contains artifactual evidence within the tomb chamber postdating this period, with Byzantine sherds and lamp fragments in the corner where a “window” opening was located. This late 1st/early 2nd cent. date coincides with the Roman annexation of the Nabataean kingdom and construction of a northern city wall by the Nabataeans or Romans around this point. The construction of this wall puts the southern slope of the North Ridge, the location of these tombs, within the city. The latter years of the cemetery also coincides with intensification of domestic settlements in the same sector of the ridge. The Romans, with their strict rules surrounding the location of graves and any activities related to body preparation outside of the city, could have implemented prohibitions against burial or tomb upkeep after the annexation, leaving some individuals in one stage of mortuary treatment.

**Building group identity through mortuary ritual**

The collective experiences surrounding mortuary behaviors serve to solidify group relationship and identity. At Petra, these rituals were repeated with each new decedent within the same kin-related space.

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In addition to evidence of tomb preparation as noted above, the bodies included in the ancestral tomb were interred with evidence of the family’s efforts of corpse preparation. Textiles likely were used to wrap the body, evidence of which was found within the more arid environment in the contemporary Medāʾin Saleh tombs. One example of the Medāʾin Saleh textiles contained traces of residue from a plant of the Canarium species, suggesting the bodies had been perfumed before burial. On the North Ridge, mourners ornamented the dead with bone hair pins (possibly also used as koḥl sticks), bronze and copper bracelets and rings, some containing semi-precious stones such as amethysts and carnelian, a gold nose-ring, and a golden brooch or pendant that contained a polished and shaped agate. These visual elements of identity and adornment possibly served as a recognizable remembrance of the dead, long after their familiar faces had rotted away. The prepared bodies then often were placed into wooden coffins constructed of Mediterranean cypress (Cupressus sempervirens), fragments of which were recovered within most of the floor shaft graves in the North Ridge tombs. In some cases, these tombs were decorated with copper alloy studs which have been found in association with the coffin slabs.

Interior tomb activities would have been facilitated through the use of oil lamps, many of which were found within the tomb deposits. The lamps also served to stimulate another sense within the tomb than sight, that is, the sense of smell. Numerous complete and fragmented unguentaria were found in the tomb, some placed with the deceased and others scattered amongst the comingled bones. These ceramic vials were used to transport and store aromatic oils and perfumes, for which Petra served as the primary manufacturing and redistribution center. The vials could be placed on top of a lamp to heat the oils, producing stronger aromatic essences.

The placement of offerings also accompanied the interment of the deceased. The tombs contained numerous fragments of hand-shaped and cast-molded ceramic figurines, the function of which remains unclear. The vast majority of these objects are zoomorphic, predominately horses and camels, some of which display ornate riding tack, and in the case of the camels, military equipment. A few of these had holes through the muzzle for attachment of fiber or leather “reigns”, which may suggest they were used as pull toys. Many other gaming items were left in the tombs as well, including dice and numerous worked astragali.

Although a complete inventory of the ceramics from tombs B.4, B.5, B.6, B.7, and F.1 is ongoing, earlier excavation of Tombs 1 and 2 farther west on the North Ridge revealed literally thousands of pieces of delicate Nabataean fine painted ware — cups, bowls, dishes, and other receptacles for eating, drinking, and providing offerings. In addition, the better organic preservation at Medāʾ in Saleh has revealed desiccated fruits used as food offerings to the deceased. Tomb visitors also had the chance to leave libations within carved spherical receptacles outside of some tombs, examples of which were found next to the shaft of Tomb 2 and the partially excavated Tomb B.6 on the North Ridge. Liquid libations could have come in the form of wine, sesame or olive oil, water, perfumed oils, or even sacrificial blood. Chemical residue analyses of libation receptacles near Umm al Biyarah identified residue of vegetal oils and dairy products, and Sachet notes that some of the vegetal matter could have come from resins from incense or myrrh.

The collective preparation and interment of the dead occurring in a familial space likely reified kinship ties between participants. This identity would have been strengthened again and again through continued revisitation to this same space throughout a family member’s lifetime, and celebrated as they joined the communal burial space after death.

17. See Tuttle 2009 for a discussion of the coroplastic objects from Tombs 1 and 2.
Creating community solidarity through feasting

Living members of a lineage engaged in most mortuary activities, however funerary feasting probably included a larger social circle linked not only via ancestry but also occupation or cult. Petraeans identified with strongly cohesive groups (marzēḥā), loosely related kin who were organized around particular trades, worship of a particular deity, or veneration of a notable ancestor 22. Marzēḥā engaged together in ritual feasting 23, which likely included feasts in honor of the dead 24. Often these ritual

activities took place in “dining halls” found associated with the monumental façade tombs, and temples or other sacred contexts, large spaces surrounded on two (biclinium), or more often, three (triclinium) sides by stone-carved benches for the participants 25.

The tombs on the North Ridge have no associated built dining halls as do the larger façade tombs surrounding the city 26. The families associated with these tombs may have engaged in ritual feasting and other cultic activities at other triclinia within the city and its environs, but there is no reason to believe they did not hold funerary feasts in the area surrounding their byt ‘lm’. Stonemasons had created a prepared, flattened area surrounding all of the tombs excavated by the PNRP measuring on average 10 x 12 m. Possible examples of similar open air dining halls and “kitchens” for preparing the feasts have been found amongst the Nabataean tombs at the site of Mampsis in the Negev 27. Other evidence for funerary feasting in the North Ridge tombs comes in the form of ceramic and faunal evidence. These food items and ceramic objects could have been involved in either the feasting activities or the leaving of offerings, however, the importance of ritual feasting in Nabataean society would imply both activities occurred within the mortuary space and their material detritus deposited in the tombs.

**Conclusions**

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence indicates the living regularly visited the homes of the dead during their period of active use for commemorative feasts, for offering libations, and for interring both primary and secondary burials. The nexus of these activities, the familial tomb, would have provided constant reaffirmation of lineal and ancestral identities. Archaeological evidence points to behaviors such as lighting perfume oils, leaving behind the remains of funerary feasts and food offerings for the dead, and perhaps even playing games 28. In addition, human activity in the tomb often resulted in the purposive creation of commingled assemblages. This likely signifies a lack of concern over maintaining individual corporeality at some point after death, unlike the retained individual identities in the façade tombs. However, not all burials within a tomb ended up in commingled deposits, and some individuals have been left undisturbed in burial receptacles within the tomb.

The end of the 1st cent. AD and beginning of the 2nd cent. AD signaled a change in the relationship between the Nabataean living and the dead. The northern, and presumably southern part of the city center was demarcated by the construction of a city wall, and it was at this point that residents ceased burying their deceased within the urban confines. In fact, there is little clear evidence of where post-1st cent. AD burials were interred, although some tombs outside of the city show use after this period 29. The reasons for this shift are unclear, but it happens to coincide with Roman annexation of the Nabataean Kingdom in AD 106. Roman law had clear stipulations surrounding treatment of dead, tradespeople associated with mortuary activities, and location of tombs 30. Did the long arm of the law reach from the Nabataean’s new capital of Rome to Petra, prohibiting burials within the city and its pomerium? Evidence from other sites, such as Khirbet edh-Dharih, suggests that Nabataean religious and mortuary rituals continued relatively unchanged after the annexation 31. Many Nabataean traditions, such as the use of incense and perfumed oils in ritual contexts, communal burial, and commemorative funerary feasts were mirrored in Roman mortuary rituals and likely were maintained. What is less clear is whether or not Roman notions of the polluting corpse regulated commemoration to its more intangible form, restricting the Nabataean’s intimate, tangible experiences with their dead.

26. Tombs F.1 and F.2, excavated outside of the northern city wall in 2016, are also located near rock-cut caves that could have served as triclinia. However, they remain unexcavated and their function unconfirmed.
29. E.g. Sachet 2009.