The Terminology Used to Describe Tombs in the Nabataean Inscriptions and its Architectural Context

Mahdi Abdelaziz and Shaher Rababeh

This paper seeks to investigate the terms used to describe tombs in the Nabataean inscriptions. We seek to study their connotations and linguistic derivation on the one hand, and their historical and geographical distributions on the other. The paper will compare the different terms used for Nabataean tombs in an attempt to investigate the concepts which underlie these and the relationship between these terms and matters such as tombs size, style and architectural structure.

Keywords: Nabataean Inscriptions, Nabataean Tombs, Architectural Context, Petra, Hegra

Introduction

Archaeological surveys and excavations have revealed many Nabataean inscriptions with different themes and subjects. Nabataean inscriptions occur over a vast area. Their distribution includes not only Petra, the main political centre, but also other major areas of Nabataean power, such as Transjordan, the Negev, the Sinai Peninsula, southern Syria and northwestern Arabia.

Nabataean inscriptions mention many different tombs. Some of the inscriptions are engraved on tomb façades, while others are located inside the tombs, or carved on grave-stones (Nehmé 2003, 210). The present study will:

a. consider on the linguistic derivation of the various terms used in connection with burials;
b. describe the architectural contexts and types of burial with which the different terms are associated.

This will enable us to better understand the connotations of each term and its relationship to specific aspects of mortuary structures (for a summary of the terms discussed see Table 1).

Many Nabataean terms were used to describe tombs; kpr and the qbr are the most common names in the tomb inscriptions. In particular, the noun kpr was mentioned almost 50 times in Hegra alone. Other terms for Nabataean tombs also appear in inscriptions, but less frequently, such as the term mqbr or its feminine mqbrt. The term npš also occurs frequently, along with others such as gwh, sryh...etc., as demonstrated below.

Linguistic Analysis

'wn'

A singular masculine noun meaning ‘dwelling, lodging’, that is mentioned once in the current corpus of Nabataean inscriptions (CIS II 202). The name occurs in Jewish Aramaic and in Syriac. Healey (1993, 186) suggested that it is of Iranian origin.

'rn'

This is a singular masculine noun meaning ‘sarcophagus, small chest, ossuary’ (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 109–10). This is mentioned once in a Nabataean inscription engraved on a coffin from Hawran (CIS II 173). The noun appears in Phoenician as 'rn (Donner and Röllig 1962–1964, n°1), in Hebrew as 'rwn in its singular form, and as 'rwnwt in its plural form. The noun is also mentioned in Aramaic as 'rwn, and other evidence for this noun in Palmyrene and Hatran inscriptions were also found (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 109–10).

gwh'

A singular masculine noun which occurs many times in Nabataean. According to Healey, it refers to ‘niches for burial generally called loculi’ (Healey 1993,
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Frequency of appearance</th>
<th>Place of occurrence*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'wm'</td>
<td>dwelling, lodging</td>
<td>CIS II 202</td>
<td>Hegra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'m'</td>
<td>sarcophagus, small chest, ossuary</td>
<td>CIS II 173</td>
<td>Hawran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gwh'</td>
<td>niche for burial, buried room</td>
<td>CIS II 211, 215, 226; pl. gwhyn CIS II 350, pl. gwhy CIS II 213, Js 2</td>
<td>Petra, Hegra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nps'</td>
<td>grave, or generally funeral monument</td>
<td>CIS II 159, 169, 195, 191, 194, 352, 353, 465, ……</td>
<td>Petra, Hegra, Hawran, Sinai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kpr'</td>
<td>grave, tomb</td>
<td>CIS II 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 208, 209, 210, 212, 213, 214, 216, 217, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225; Js 5, 6, 22, 38</td>
<td>Hegra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sryh'</td>
<td>recess inside a tomb</td>
<td>CIS II 213, 350; RES 1432; pl. sryh; RES 1432</td>
<td>Petra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qbr'</td>
<td>tomb</td>
<td>CIS II 350, 184, 197, 206, 207, 121, 215; qbrw: J 17, 18; qbrw: RES Js 17; qbrt CIS II 224</td>
<td>Petra, Hegra, Hawran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mqbr'</td>
<td>tomb</td>
<td>CIS II 350, 209, 210, RES 805</td>
<td>Petra, Hegra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mbnqbr'</td>
<td>tomb</td>
<td>CIS II 169, RES 1090, 481, 2033</td>
<td>Petra, Hawran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bly mbryn</td>
<td>funeral chambers</td>
<td>CIS II 350</td>
<td>Petra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wgr'</td>
<td>cave in a mountain</td>
<td>CIS II 211, 205; J11, J12</td>
<td>Hegra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Following common practice we have assigned each inscription to one of four geographical regions, namely: the Petra region, Hegra, Hawran, Sinai.

82). The noun is attested in several Nabataean inscriptions, where it is found as a singular masculine noun gwh' (CIS II 211, 215, 226), as plural gwhy': 'lh try gwhy' (Jaussen and Savignac 1909, n° 2), and gwhyn (CIS II 350). Milik suggests the word gwh to mean ‘a grave of any size or shape excavated in the walls of a tomb chamber’ (Milik 1959, 558).

The noun is derived from the Akkadian kimahu (Kaufman 1974, 64), and it matches gwmh in Palmyrene (al-Dheeb 2000, 62), while Cantineau thinks that gwh' is the Arabic jawhu (Cantineau 1932, 77). We believe that the noun is of Akkadian origin and was transferred to Arabic through the Nabataeans.

nps'

A singular feminine noun frequently attested in Nabataean funerary inscriptions. This name holds different meanings and significances. It is translated as 'grave', or 'funeral monument' in some inscriptions and refers to 'soul, life, self, person and body' in others (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 746). Our main concern here is the contexts in which the name took the meaning 'grave'.

In Nabataean funerary inscriptions the noun nps holds two meanings. In many inscriptions it signifies the headstone, as in CIS II 162. In others, it indicates the whole grave as in CIS II 191. In addition to Nabataean, the name occurs with the same sense in Aramaic and in Palmyrene (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 763–64). In Arabic it means 'soul, self, body' (Ibn Manzur 2003 V. 8, 647).

kpr'

A singular masculine noun frequently attested in the Nabataean inscriptions. The noun kpr' means 'village' in all Semitic dialects except Nabataean, where it means 'grave', and it was also employed, with the same meaning in a Syriac inscription dated to 73 AD found near Sirri (Pognon 1907, 15). The noun kpr' is probably of Libyanite origin and its use may not have extended to the north of the Nabataean territory (Healey 1993, 69). In Arabic, al-kafer generally means 'covering something', and it can also mean 'the tomb' because it covers the descendant (Ibn Manzur 2003 V.7, 690–93). According to Hoftijzer and Jongeling (1995, 531), it coincides with the Greek κοπράκτος/κοπρών.

Sryh'

A singular masculine noun meaning 'tomb'. The noun is mentioned in the Nabatae funerary inscriptions in its singular (CIS II 350) and masculine (RES 1432) forms. It is the equivalent of the Arabic darīḥ, which indicates ‘the hole in the middle of the tomb’. It has been suggested that the naqbahār indicates the whole grave (Ibn Manzur 2003, V 484). This noun was attested only in Nabataean funerary inscriptions. We are not aware of any attestations in other Semitic inscriptions.

qbr'

A singular masculine noun derived from the verb qbr and meaning 'tomb'. It is mentioned in Nabataean inscriptions as a singular noun in the forms of qbr' (RES 2043; 2044) and qbrw (Jaussen and Savignac 1909 n° 17); it occurs also in the form of qbrt as plural
A singular noun derived from the verb qbr. It is mentioned in Nabataean in the singular form mqbr (RES 805) and in the plural form mqbrt (CIS II 350). In Arabic, maqbar means ‘the place of the grave’ (Ibn Manzur 2003 V. 7, 219).

A singular feminine noun derived from the verb qbr, which means ‘tomb’. It is mentioned in Nabataean inscriptions in the singular form mqbr (CIS II 181), and in the plural form mqbrt (CIS II 196). In addition to Nabataean, the noun is mentioned in Palmyrene inscriptions in its singular form mqbr and in its plural form mqbrn (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 678). It is the equivalent of the Arabic noun maqbara which means ‘place of graves’ or ‘grave’ (Ibn Manzur 2003 V. 7, 219).

It is a complex noun of two parts: bty is a plural noun meaning ‘houses’ or ‘chambers’; and mqbrn has a funerary meaning. Consequently, bty mqbrn means ‘funeral chambers’. The noun is mentioned only once in a funeral inscription from Petra, on the Turkmaniyah tomb (CIS II 350).

It is a singular masculine noun referring to ‘tomb’. The noun is mentioned in Nabataean and Aramaic inscriptions (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995, 296). In classical Arabic, wagăr means ‘a cave in a mountain’.

**Architectural Context**

We have previously discussed the linguistics and derivations of Nabataean tomb terminology. It is the aim now to study the context of this terminology by exploring the relationship of these nouns to their architectural context.

The name kpr’ is mentioned in Nabataean tomb inscriptions which are usually long and carved on the façades of large tombs. The name is mentioned more than thirty times (Cantineau 1932, 108). The noun kpr’ was used to signify the whole of the monument as an architectural complex even if it was accompanied or unaccompanied by other architectural structures, as is evident, for example, in CIS II 202: dhn kpr’ w’wn’ ‘this is the tomb and dwelling’; CIS II 199: dhn kpr’ wbss’ wkrk’ ‘this is the tomb and platform and enclosure…’.

To gain a better understanding of the meaning of kpr’, it is necessary to examine the architectural context of the tombs which bore this name. In this regard, we discover the following:

**First**: The name kpr’ is found on tomb façades distinguished, generally, by their large size. Notably, the name kpr’ is mentioned only in Nabataean inscriptions from Hegra and we are not aware of occurrences in other areas. It seems that the name kpr’ was not used to indicate certain types of tombs except for the size. It is found describing tombs with façades, engaged columns, stairs, and tombs with columns and decorations (Jaussen and Savignac 1902, B2) (see Fig. 1).

**Second**: The noun is also found on façades of large tombs which contain numerous graves and different architectural annexes such as dwellings, platforms, enclosures etc. An example is the inscription CIS II 210 which uses kpr’ without any mention of the architectural annexes, while the tomb contains a huge burial chamber with seven loculi (Jaussen and Savignac 1909, A5).

The name is also found in large but empty tombs, like the tomb of Kamkam from Hegra B19 (Jaussen and Savignac 1909, B19). The façade of this tomb holds (CIS II 198) one of the longest funerary inscriptions on a tomb designated as kpr’ found on Nabataean tomb façades.

In other inscriptions, the term kpr’ is accompanied by terms for the architectural annexes which were found in the tomb itself. An example of this is inscription CIS II 199 on the façade of Tomb A3 from Hegra (Fig. 2): dhn kpr’ wbss’ wkrk’ dy bd ḥwšbw ‘this is the tomb and the platform and enclosure which Ḥawšabu made….’

Undoubtedly, the noun kpr’ in Nabataean designates the tomb as a burial place, regardless of whether graves were actually present when the inscription was made. We suggest that the inscriptions named what was in the tomb at the time when they were written, otherwise the tomb took the term kpr’ only, without the annexes, which could easily have been added later.

Interestingly, sometimes we find two inscriptions for the same tomb, one being on the façade and the other inside the tomb. The one carved on the façade refers in general to the whole of the tomb, and it represents a type of proclamation of property, containing the owner’s name(s), the heirs, the protection clause, the penalty (malediction, fines), exemption from the penalty, the date and the
there is not a distinction between the tomb monument and the burial chamber.

It is noteworthy that the noun qbr’ signified the tomb, whether it was rock-cut, like the tombs of Hegra and Petra, or freestanding, like the tombs found in the Hawran (CIS II 184). The stylistic differences of the tombs are due to the geographical diversity among the regions of the Nabataean kingdom. Each region employed an architectural style that was suited to the materials available (Rababeh 2005, 224).

The term sryh’ occurs in four Nabataean inscriptions from Petra and Hegra (Hoftijser and Jongeling 1995, 975). This term was used to indicate a burial place or individual graves inside tombs named qbr’ or kpr’. We note, for example, this term in an inscription engraved on a tomb façade from Hegra (CIS II 213), and the inscription indicates clearly sryh’ as a part of the tomb. The Turkmaniyyah inscription from Petra (CIS II 350) represents another useful example. It designated the whole tomb by the term qbr’, while it used sryh’ for an architectural element inside the tomb. It includes a big sryh’ and a small sryh’ inside the tomb, with the following: qbr’ dnh wsr yh’ rb’ dy zb wsr yh’ z’sr’ dy gw’ mnh ‘This tomb and the large burial-chamber within it and the small burial chamber beyond it.’ Another Nabataean inscription uses the name sryh’ to designate an individual grave in the tomb (Cantineau 1932, 2). It is engraved on the top of a grave carved in the rock horizontally in the Bab el-Siq in Petra.

The noun gwh’ is used in a small number of Nabataean funeral inscriptions to designate a special burial place carved inside the tomb. gwh’ and sryh’ have, to some extent, the same indication, since both specify a certain part of the tomb. However, from an architectural point of view they are different; gwh’ refers to a burial-niche or grave dedicated to more than one person, while sryh’ refers to a single grave for only one person. The inscription CIS II 211 confirms this idea. It says: dnh gwh’ dy bdt w峻g h’ brt sb r sbrh hgw wgr’ dy lh wbnth ‘this is the burial-niche which Washuh daughter of Bagrat made for herself within the rock-tomb belonging to her and to her daughter’. Another example is CIS II 226: dnh gwh’ dy bdt hgrw lmym mw’ wwh ywh whlsmyt hly ‘this is the burial-niche which Hagaru made for Maslamu, her brother, and for Mahmiyyat, her aunt’. In these two examples gwh’ is mentioned in its singular form, while it is dedicated to two people. Additionally, the structure of the tombs as described by archaeologists (Jaussen and Savignac 1909, B10; B11) confirms our interpretation. gwh’ seems to be a small burial-place for more than one person in the tomb.

The noun wgr’, comparable with the Arabic wagar meaning ‘cave’, indicates in Nabataean texts ‘rock-cut tomb’. It is mentioned in a few texts from Hegra to designate the tomb as synonymous with qbr’ as in CIS II 205. It is probably used to designate the tomb as a rock-cut cave.

The name bty mbryn is mentioned in only one example from Petra (Fig. 4) (CIS II 350). It designates, as we understand from the architectural structure of the tomb, special burial-chambers in the tomb, while the nouns mbryt and mbryt’ designate individual graves. It seems that their use was uncommon in the Nabataean inscriptions.

**Terminology and geography**

Geographically, Nabataean funerary inscriptions appear in all parts of the Nabataean domain. The
architectural style of Nabataean tombs varied between regions, as did the terminology. The tombs are distinguished by their architectural style, which was affected by geological and landscape factors, and not the meaning of the noun. For example, the meaning of the noun *npsḥ* at Hegra and Petra was the same in the Hawran and the Sinai, but the distinction was in the geographical distribution of the tombs and their styles. *kprʾ* occurs at Hegra but not elsewhere. This distinction is due to the geographical style as noted above. The term *kprʾ* for example, designated a rock-cut tomb, a style more suited to Hegra and Petra than to Sinai or Hawran.

Thus, when the geographical distribution of the Nabataean tombs is examined, a degree of diversity in both tomb style and terminology is apparent. The tombs of Hegra are distinguished by their size and their style. A number of Hegra tombs have the designation *kprʾ* and *qbrʾ*. Hegra has various styles and types of tombs, where we note in the inscriptions the mention of *qbrʾ*, *kprʾ*, *ṣryḥʾ*, *gwhʾ* and *npsḥ*. Although there are more architectural styles in Petra than Hegra, in Petra there is a lack of tomb inscriptions. The lack of tomb inscriptions in Petra is probably because such inscriptions were written to protect the tombs from violation. The tomb inscriptions contain protection clauses, but since Petra was the centre of religious and civil authorities, incidents of violation were perhaps less frequent. In addition to this, Petra has natural protection from the surrounding mountains. We did not identify any protection clauses in the funerary inscriptions from Petra.

The funerary inscriptions from the Hawran region are distinguished by the frequency of the mention of *npsḥ*. A few inscriptions have the noun *qbrʾ* and indicate a freestanding tomb, but not rock-cut as in Petra and Hegra. The funerary inscriptions from the Sinai only contain the noun *npsḥ*. Several funerary inscriptions from other Nabataean regions mention the name *npsḥ*. Examples are found at al-Ula and Madaba.

Historically, Nabataean tomb terminology is still in use even after the collapse of the Nabataean political power in AD 105/106. It is difficult to pursue the historical development of the terms for Nabataean tombs precisely. By studying the dated
Nabataean inscriptions, we can place the inscriptions between the year 9 of Aretas III and the year AD 267 (the year 162 of the Epharchy). For the non-dated tomb inscriptions, we depend on the style of the script to provide an approximate date.

Conclusion

We conclude that the Nabataeans used various names for their tombs and burial installations, and that the range of terms was related to the size and the architectural style of the tombs. Choice of tomb styles were themselves related to the geology and environment of the different regions within the Nabataean polity; some tombs were rock-cut, others freestanding and a number of graves were dug into the ground. Tombs and graves were both collective and individual, and the historical development of tomb architecture appears to have had no observable influence on the terminology.

Acknowledgements

The authors are deeply appreciative to Prof. J. Healey, Dr J. McKenzie, Dr L. Nehmé and L. Wadeson for freely giving much welcome advice and criticism.

Bibliography

Répertoire de l’épigraphie sémitique, Published by the committee of Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.

Arabic References