



Nabataean Practices for Tombs Protection

Mahdi Alzoubi, Hussein Al Qudrah

Queen Rania Institute of Tourism and Heritage, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan

Received: 28/12/2014

Accepted: 27/03/2

Corresponding author: Mahdi Alzoubi (mahdi@hu.edu.jo)

ABSTRACT

This research aims at shedding light on the Nabataean practices for tombs dated from the early first century B.C. until the beginning of the second century C.E.. The research studies the different archaeological evidences that contain indications concerning the Nabataean habits pertinent to tombs and dead body protection. The author analyzes the different symbols engraved on the tomb facades seeking to reach a better understanding for the function of these symbols in protecting tombs from any violation. Moreover, the paper examines the protection clauses existing in the Nabataean funeral inscriptions and the role played by religious and civil authorities in this regard.

KEYWORDS: *Nabateans, funeral practices, Nabataean tombs, tombs protection, Funeral Inscriptions, tombs symbols.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nabataean sculptures, symbols and inscriptions engraved in and out of their tombs are of great importance for the study of Nabataean beliefs and practices concerning the question of tomb and dead body protection.

Nabataean tombs, mainly from Hegra and Petra, dated from the early first century B.C.- until the beginning of the second century C.E., reveal a good deal of information regarding Nabataean concerns assumed to their dead and tomb protection from being disturbed.

Many mythological animals, plants and religious symbols are present in and out the main Nabataean tombs. Such items reflect, to some extent, the Nabataean funeral beliefs and practices. Besides, Nabataean inscriptions engraved in the tombs facades contain clauses calling for dead and tomb protection; penalties, mainly curses and fines, are imposed against anyone who infringe or disturb the tomb. Moreover, some inscriptions consider the tomb as a sacred place, thus, nobody has the right to miss with it according to the order of the gods.

All in all, this research explores the different practices and beliefs concerning the Nabataean traditions in protecting and guarding their dead and tombs

2. NABATEAN BURIAL PRACTICES

Actually, due to limited literary sources, little is known about Nabataean burial practices. The only documentary information on Nabataean burial practices date back to the first century B.C, where Strabo (*Geography* XVI.4:24) reports "The Nabataeans have the same regard for the dead as for dung, as Heraclitus says:

Dead bodies are more fit to be cast out than dung; and therefore they bury even their kings beside dung heaps".

For most researchers, this report seems to be a description of a Nabataean ritual funeral practice; exposing the body after which the relatively clean disarticulated remains are gathered and buried in an enclosed tomb. Moreover, this practice of ritualized treatment and reburial of a dead corpse was known in Neolithic and Hellenistic Near Eastern mortuary funeral practice (Megan, 2002: 265).

Nabataeans consider the tomb as the eternal home (*byt^clm'*); this concept appears in a Nabataean inscription on an Epitaph at Museum Haaretz in Tel Aviv said to come from Petra: [*d*]nh byt *clm'* dy whb'l[*hy*] (Negev 1971: 50-52).

Archaeological excavations reveal interesting evidences concerning the Nabataean funeral practices and cadaver protection. Fragments of treated leather, fine white cloth, wool and linen textiles were found in some tombs from Petr. Leather used to cover the capstones in order to block decomposing bacteria and other organisms from accessing the corpse. The wool and linen textiles wrapped the dead body before place it in the eternal house (al-Slameen and Falahat 2009 ,92).

A wide variety of archaeological personal objects found in Nabatean tombs include jewellery items, painted and unpainted ceramics, wares, storage jars, small glass vessels for make-up, perfumes or oils bottles, strap handled pitchers and dipper jug lets, bowls with flaring body walls and a vertical rim and typical round bottomed cooking pots, ware items, eggshell-thin bowls, vertical-rim serving dishes, painted cups, double-handled chalice (Megan, 2002: 266). Terracotta figurines, also found in Nabataean tombs, are placed either beside the deceased or in niches inside the tomb. Nabateans believed that these figurines are able to protect the dead body and played role in an after-life (el-Khouri, 2002).

Placing the aforementioned items in the tombs indicates that Nabateans seem to have an advanced view about the here-after. Unfortunately, we have no clear vision about this believe (see: Hammond, 1973, 103; Healey, 1993, 39).

A religious banquet seems to be a Nabataean ritual cultic practice related to the dead. Some examples of this ceremonial practice appeared in Petra and in Hegra tombs aiming to keep the memory of dead alive. Annual ritual meals were held in specifically crafted huge banquet halls next to the most important tombs, which were called *tricliniums* (Tarrier, 1995, 165-82).

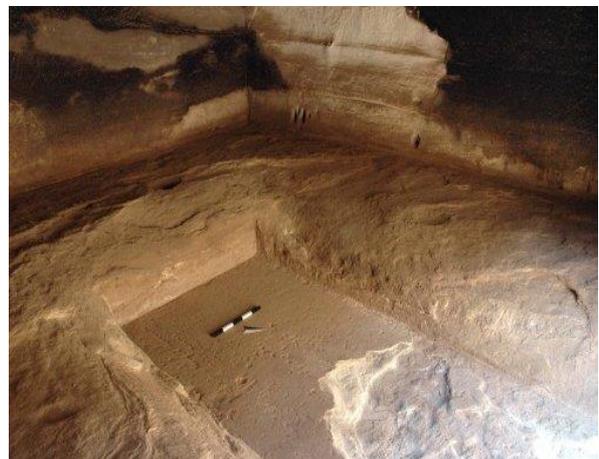


Fig 1: Rock-cut *triclinium* form Petra -Wadi Farasa East, (photo: S. G. Schmid)

Petra for example had over 3,000 tombs, close to 100 of those tombs had their own *tricliniums*. They were used in death cults and therefore found at the numerous banquet halls or *tricliniums* close to major tombs. These death rituals played an important role in the Nabataean culture indicating the Nabateans' beliefs in the life after death. This could be judged based on the enormous and spacious tombs Nabateans built (<http://nabataea.net/burial.html>).

Nabataeans were traders; they used to travel a lot outside their cities. A few evidences are available concerning what would have happened to them if they had died while they were in a distant county. Some archaeologists believe that the Nabataeans practiced bone collection and buried the bones rather than their concern in burying the whole body. This practice of burial was used by the Persians and also by some Jewish groups (<http://nabataea.net/burial.html>).

3. THE CARVED SYMBOLS

A variety of symbols are carved in the tombs facades; grotesque masks, snakes, falcons, sphinxes, medusa reliefs, rosette and sun disks are the most significant symbols. The presence of such symbols, in addition to their decorative function, seems to have a protection role of the tombs and its assets.

Many religious symbols were found in several Nabataean tombs from Petra and Hegra (al Masri et al., 2010: 230). The presence of such symbols signifies the sacred place and its need for protection. Among the most remarkable Nabataean symbols are the following:

• Snake

It symbolizes the soul of the dead, and it may also be presented as guardian for the sacred places. Snake sculptures were found in several Nabataean tombs (al-Masri et al., 2010)

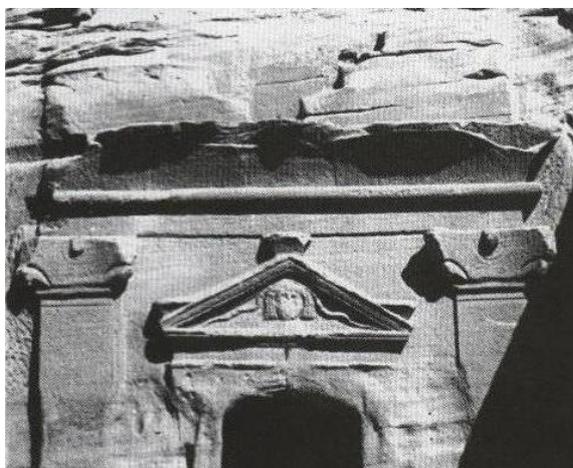


Fig. 2: McKenzie 1990, Pl 16 C.

• Lion

It has, in the funerary context, some special significance; it may be a tomb guardian, as courageous creatures, and it may also symbolize courage or death as a destructive creature (Glenys, 1978: 203-224; Seirng, 1988). Strong (1915, 192-194) suggests that the lion represented the element of fire which purified the soul, while Toynbee suggests that Lion is a symbol of ravening power of death and man's victory over it (Toynbee, 1973: 65)

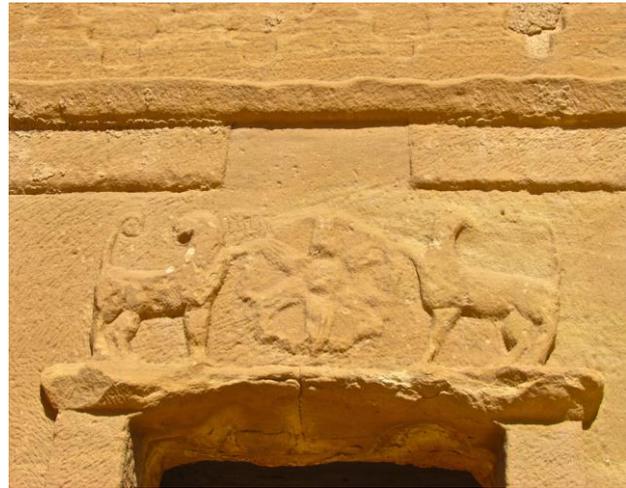


Fig.3: McKenzie 1990, Pl 12 d.

• Falcon

Allusion to apotheosis symbolizing the passage of the soul to the celestial regions where it becomes divine. Falcons had a special position in the Nabataean culture; they were regarded as the only animals not bound to earth by god. They could fly high up to reach god and seen as connecting people with the deity. Therefore falcons represented on tomb facades as guardians of the death toward any intruder



Fig. 3: : McKenzie 1990, Pl 10 C.

• Rosette

it symbolizes immortality and eternal life and the Holy Spirit which radiates in all directions (Novakova, 2014: 226). The Rosette in relief were found in many tomb facades from Petra and Hegra (McKenzie, 1990, plats. 2d, 7d, 9d)



Fig. 4: McKenzie, 1990, Pl. 7d

• Medusa

It is a powerful creature that had a face of a woman with snakes instead of hair (see: Fig. 2). Originally, she comes from the Greek mythology, and her name is derived from the Greek verb *μέδω* meaning "to guard or protect". The Medusa was found in two tomb facades at Petra (Patrich, 1990: 120; McKenzie, 2005: Pl.235, Pl.151) and in other tomb facades from Hegra (Jaussen and Savignac, 1909: B7, B11). Her presence in the tombs is, as her name indicates, for protection and guarding purposes.

• Sphinx

This symbol appears only in one Nabataean tomb facade from Hegra (Glueck, 1966: 242, Pl. 8a). Sphinxes had been used to decorate funerary monuments; they are often said to be apotropaic or to act as guardians (Glenys, 1978: 247).



Fig. 5: McKenzie 1990 Pl. 2D.

• Sun-disc

In addition to its religious indications, its existence in the tombs symbolizes life after death (Glenys 1978: 288). Sun disc appears in some tomb facade from Hegra (see: McKenzie, 1990: Pl.160)

• Grotesque masks

It is sculpted in relief in one tomb facade and in various niches at Hegra as an expression of immortality. According to Glueck (1966: 242), masks serve the belief that the wearer becomes united with the god through his everlasting life



Fig.6: McKenzie 1990, Pl 14 A.

4. NABATAEAN FUNERAL INSCRIPTIONS

Archaeological works reveal different types of Nabataean burial, these can be grouped as follow (see: Megan, 2002:266):

- Large monumental tombs with decorative facades
- Burial in communal shaft tombs
- Single graves "*nefes*"
- and rarely sarcophagi

Many Nabataean burials contain inscriptions; Nabataean funeral inscriptions, in addition to their main role in proclaiming tomb ownership, are considered as legal foundation texts aim at protecting tombs from being disturbed; they contain significant religious and social information regarding Nabataean beliefs and practices of tomb protection (Lidzbarski, 1898: 130–140).

The most remarkable funerary inscriptions were found mainly in tombs facades at Hegra and few at Petra, al-Ula and Madaba. The geography and the history of Hegra Region explain the presence of such types of funeral monuments and inscriptions (Alzoubi, 2005).

Tomb protection is the major motive of funeral inscriptions; they contain some protection clauses em-

phasizing the legal exercise in case of selling or purchasing, rent, pledge, and donation, inheritance, in addition to the possession proclamation of the tomb as an individual or familial property.

The juridical or religious protection of the tomb is confirmed by the clauses which include the penalties against the contravening. The protection clause is guaranteed by the administrative or religious authority; by the king himself or by one of his representatives- for the first one- and by the divinities for the second.

Tombs inscriptions are commonly composed of seven main elements varied from one inscription to another. We may find some or all of these elements together in the same inscription. In addition, their order may change from one inscription to another. These elements are: the proclamation of the tomb ownership, the inheritances or individuals whom have right in the tombs, the protection clause, the penalty (curse, fines), the exception, the date and the sculptor's name (see: Alzoubi,2012).

Funeral inscriptions on grave stones are wide spread over the regions of Hawran, Sinai and the suburbs of Petra and Hegra. The funeral inscriptions in these sites are brief and simple; inscriptions have almost the deceased's name (i.e.: CIS II 162) and rarely the date (CIS II 184).

3.1 The Protection Clauses in the Funeral Inscriptions

As we mentioned above, Nabataeans gave a great importance to their tombs and dead bodies. A funerary inscription on tomb facades contains special clauses regarding this issue. The principal motivations of the protection clause are:

- To keep the tomb in lineage property; this is confirmed by the interdiction to burying any stranger, to the family, in the tomb, i.e.: CIS II 219 :*wl' ršy 'nwš 'dy dy yqbr bh,*"and no stranger has the right to be buried in it".

- Protection of the tomb inscription against any change or any violation which might happen since it is considered as a legal entitlement, i.e.: CIS II 210: *wl' ršy 'nwš lmkth bkpr' dnh tqp klh wl' lmqbr bh 'nwš rḥq lhn 'šdq'šdq,* "And no one has the right to write on this tomb any deed of entitlement or to bury in it any non-relative other than hereditary title".

- Protection of the dead corps

i.e. CIS II 211: *mn dy ytpth yth 'w ynpq yth mn gwh' hw l'lm' p'yty lmr'n' ḥrtt mlk nbṭw rḥm 'mh sl<y>n 'lph rty,* "Whoever opens it for himself or removes

her from this burial-niche forever shall be liable to our lord Haritat , king of the Nabataeans, lover of his people, in the sum of a thousand Haritate seal's".

- To protect the inscription itself, i.e.: CIS II 206: *wl' yktb bqbr' dnh ktb klh 'd 'lm* "And not to write for this tomb any document forever".

The protection clauses are aiming at protecting tombs against any violation or wrong doings. Such acts cause divinity penalties; penalties could be:

Fines

These fines are fixed in the inscriptions; they varied from inscription to another. Fines are also owed for different gods, i.e.: CIS II 199: *wmn dy y'bd k'yr mh dy 'l' ktyb p'yty cmh ldwšr 'lh' bḥrm' dy 'l' ldmṯ mgmr sl'yn 'lp ḥrty,* "And whoever does other than what is written above shall be liable to the god Dushara regarding the inviolability referred to above, for the full price of a thousand Haretite sela's".

The exact amount of fine is determined precisely. Probably, the amount of fine has relation with the price or the cost of the tomb. However, we have no idea about the estimation of the tomb price or real cost. Besides, this clause provides us with an indication concerning the fine amount mentioned in the other inscriptions. We think that all the fines declared in the penalty clause have in some manner relation with the tomb price. The fine probably equals the price of the tomb once, double threefold or more. This argument can be confirmed by the inscription CIS II 198: where the one who misuses the tomb has to pay the "šmdyn" fivefold:

wmn dy l' y'bd kdy 'l' ktyb p'yty 'mh ldwšr' whblw wmnwtw šmdyn 5

The term *šmdyn* possibly designates a fixed amount; known by all, and has to be paid in certain circumstances. Jaussen and Savignac (1909) compared this term with the Arabic *muadda*, which is still used until now by the Bedouins in the region. Healy (1993) thinks that *šmd* is some kind of monetary unit, probably a large unit.

Curses

Some protection clauses contain fine penalties against anybody who disturbs the tomb or interrupt it. Curses penalty has been noted in eight tomb inscriptions, three of these inscriptions contain only curses as a penalty, (ex. CIS II 198, 271 and RES 1102) and the other five inscriptions contain both fines and curses (ex. CIS II 224, 206, 211).

i.e.: CIS II 198:

wyl'n dwšr' wmwṭbh w'lt mn 'mnd wmnwtw wqyšh mn yzbn kpr' dnh 'w mn yzbn 'w yrhn 'w yntn yth 'w ynpq mnh gt 'w šlw, "And may Dushara and his

throne and Allat of 'Amnad and Manotu and her Qaysha curse anyone who sells this tomb or who buys it or gives it in pledge or makes a gift of it or removes from it body or limb".

5. SANCTITY OF THE TOMB

Nabataeans tomb structure, symbols and inscriptions confirm that they had great respect for their dead. Inscriptions insisted on the concept of sanctity of the tomb and its content. Religious and civic authorities guarantee the tomb protection against any violation which could happen to it. curses, fines and other punishments are valid against anyone who disturbs the tomb improperly (see above).

Dushara, Monoto and Hobalu seem to be the major gods responsible of tomb protection. In JS 12 (Jaussen and Savignac 1909) it has been noted that a god designated as *prš lyly' mn ymm'* "who separates night from day" is responsible of the tomb protection:

pyl'n prš lyly' mn ymm' mn dy ynpq ythm l'lm, "And may who separates night from day curse whoever removes them forever."

Healey thinks that it is presumably, though not explicitly, Dushara. al-Theeb insists that the title *prš lyly' mn ymm'* is one of Dushar's title's (al-Theeb 1998:187).

In CIS 211 we note an exceptional clause of protection:

wl'n dwsr' 'lh mr'n' w'lhy' klhm mn dy ynpq wšwh d' mn gwh' d<n>h l'lm wšhd bdnh lcnt dwsr' w'lhy' klhm, "And may Dushara, "And may she god of our lord, and all the gods curse whoever removes this *wšwh* from this burial-niche for ever. And may the curse of Dushara and all the gods witness to this"

The remarkable part of this clause is concerning the witness of the Dushara's curse on the tomb protection. Actually, Jaussen and Savignac read *šhr* instead of *šhd* and translated it as "control" (Jaussen and Savignac, 1909, n.11), while Healey (1993, n. 11) and al-Theeb (1998 n. 200) read *šhd* and translated it as "witness". Cognates have been noted in Palmyrene texts CIS II 3919/3, 3932/6 indicating that gods "bearing witness", so it is an additional peculiarity here that is curse of god which bears witness (Healey 1993, 135).

Actually, the concept of sanctity of the tomb may refer to the Nabataeans believe of the after-life; this

was a basic notion in Semitic traditions (Healey, 1993: 38). For Nabataeans, tombs were regarded as eternal home "*byt'lm*" (see above), they believe that dead enjoyed immortality (Healey, 1984, 245-54). Thus, some inscriptions consider the tomb as a sacred place (*ħrm*), consequently, all violations against the tomb are considered as a culpability against divinities.

i.e. CIS II 206

wqbr' dnh ħrm khlyqt ħrm' dy mħrm rm ldwsr' bnbṭw wšlmw, "This tomb is sacred place according to the custom of the places consecrated of Dushara among the Nabataean and Salamians".

- CIS II 197:

kpr' wktbh dnh ħrm klyqt ħrm nbṭw wšlmw l'lm 'lmyn, "the tomb and this inscription are sacred places according the custom of the sacred places of Dushara among the Nabataean and Salamians for ever and ever"

6. CONCLUSION

Despite the lake of the literary sources concerning the Nabataean funeral practices and believes, Nabataean archaeological remains and epigraphical material help us to conclude a remarkable information regarding the Nabataean habits in tombs and dead bodies protection. The Nabataean rock-cut tombs survive at Petra, Hegra and Maghayir Shu' aib have many common features; these tomb show a noteworthy influences coming from Assyria, the Greco-Roman world, Egypt and Persia have (al-Salameen 2011, 61)

Similar to other contemporary neighbouring civilizations, namely the Greco-Romans, Nabataeans used many carved symbols on the tomb facades. These symbols have, in addition to their decoration functions, religious and protection roles. The analytical study of such symbols in comparison with their original culture from which Nabataean borrowed reveal much more about Nabatean funeral believes and customs. Nabataeans paid a huge concern for tombs and death; they regard the tomb as the home of eternity. Thus, they insisted on the concept of sanctity of the tomb's property, and they considered it as a sacred place (*ħrm*) like those dedicated to the gods. Nabataean tomb inscriptions, mainly from Hegra and Petra show a particular concern with protecting the burials; calling down curses from the gods and fines payable to the religious or/and civic authorities upon anyone who disturbs the dead.

REFERENCES

- Glensys M. D. (1978) *Fashion in the graves a study of the motifs used to decorate the grave altars, ash chests and sarcophagi made in Rome in the early Empire (to the mid second century A.D.)*, Ph.D. theses, Institute of Archaeology, University of London.
- Potter W. and D. B. Whitehouse (eds) 1978, *Papers in Italian Archaeology I (part i)*, BAR Supplementary Series 41, 203-20.
- Glueck, N., (1966) *Deities and Dolphins. The Story of the Nabataeans*, (London 1966)
- Hammond, Ph. C., (1973) *The Nabataeans: Their History, Culture and Archaeology*. Gothenburg
- Healey, J (1984) The Immortality of the King: Ugarit and the Psalms. *Orientalia*, Vol. 53, 245 - 254.
- Healey, J. (1993) *The Nabataean Tomb Inscriptions of Mada'in Salih*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horas J., (1966), (English translation) Strabo: The Geography of Strabo, Vol. VII. William Heinemann Ltd, London. Trans. H. L. Jones and J. R. S. Sterrett, from Latin.
- Jaussen, A. and Savignac, R. (1909) *Mission archéologique en Arabie*, vol. I, E. Leroux Paris.
- el-Khouiri, L. S., (2002) The Nabataean Terracotta Figurines, BAR Int. Ser. 1034 Oxford
- Lidzbarski M., (1998) *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik, nebst ausgewählten Inschriften*, Band I- II, Weimar
- Al Masri E., et al. (2010) Funerary Nabataean beliefs through their Inscriptions and Sculptures (in Arabic) *Annals of the Faculty of Arts*. Ain Shams University. Vol. 38, 225-242.
- McKenzie J., (1990) *The Architecture of Petra*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Megan A. (2002) "Life and Death in Nabataea: The North Ridge Tombs and Nabataean Burial Practices". *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 56, 4, 265- 271.
- Negev A (1971) A Nabatean Epitaph from Trans-Jordan, *Israel Exploration Journal* 21, 50-64
- Novakova L., (2014) Common themes in funerary art: contribution to the Hellenistic tomb decoration in southwest coast in Asia Minor. In Maria Novotna, et al (Ed.), *ANODOS: Studies of the Ancient World 2011*, Trnavska Univerzita v Trnave, Filozoficka fakulta, 223-235.
- Patrich J., (1990) *The Formation of Nabatean Art- Prohibition of Graven Image Among the Nabataeans*, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem.
- al-Salameen Z. (2011) "The Nabataeans and Asia minor". *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 55-78
- al-Salameen Z, and Falahat H. (2009) "Burials from Wadi Mudayfa'at and Wadi Abu Khasharif, Southern Jordan - Results of a Survey and Salvage Excavations", *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 85-108
- Seringe Ph. M. (1988) *Les symboles dans l'art, dans les religions et dans la vie de tous les jours*, Editions Hélios, France.
- Strong, E. S. (1915) *Apotheosis and after life : three lectures on certain phases of art and religion in the Roman Empire*. Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Harvard Divinity School London.
- Tarrier, D. (1995) Banquets rituels en Palmyrène et en Nabatène, *ARAM Periodical*, 7, 165-82.
- al-Theeb S. (1998) *Hegra Nabatean Inscriptions* (in Arabic), Riyadh, King Fahad National Library, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- Toynbee J. M. C. (1973) *Animals in Roman Life and Art*. Cornell University Press, USA.
- Alzoubi (Abdelaziz) M., (2005) Notes on the Nabataean Legal System. *Dirasat*, Human and Social Sciences, Vol. 32, No. 1, 198-199.
- Alzoubi (Abdelaziz) M., (2012) *Les formules Juridiques dans les inscriptions Nabatéennes*. Paf: Saarbrücken CIS: Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum, (1907) Pars II, Fasc.1. Sectio Secunda, Nabataean Inscriptions.
- <http://nabataea.net/burial.html>