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# Introduction

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## 1 Introduction

The history of the Nabataeans is clearly linked to the history of the Ancient Near East. According to Greek and Roman sources, as well as the epigraphic and archaeological evidence, Nabataeans frequently interacted with Greeks, Romans and Jews. Since the Nabataeans were a nomadic tribal society, there exists no real Nabataean literature. They presumably had an oral tradition that can no longer be reconstructed today.<sup>1</sup>

The Nabataeans constituted an ethnic group in which most literates (a small minority, who nonetheless occupied a dominant social, economic, and political position) used Greek as the language of communication in formal contexts. Aramaic, instead, was considered as an informal and vernacular language dating to a later period.

The Nabataeans were probably bilingual, as witness the inscriptions written in Greek and Nabataean collected in the present volume. Since the times of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550-330 BCE), during which the royal chancellery continued with the deeply-entrenched employment of Aramaic in local and provincial administration, there was an expansion of multilingualism and a spread of varieties of Aramaic, Greek and other languages, such as Hebrew and

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<sup>1</sup> Wenning 2007, 25.

Arabic idioms, which became evident during the subsequent Greco-Roman period and until the 6th-7th century CE.<sup>2</sup>

When Alexander the Great had conquered the lands of the Near Eastern civilizations and the local dynasties were established by his successors, the Hellenization of this geographical area had a strong impact causing wars and social instability, especially in Syria.<sup>3</sup> The real degree of the influence of the Greek language and culture is still debated, and varied from region to region.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, after the Greek and Roman conquest of the Near East, including Arabia, Augustus established a period of relative peacefulness, which is best known as *Pax Romana*. During this period (from 27 BCE to 180 CE) the Roman Empire reached its peak land mass area and the Roman trade in the Mediterranean Sea increased;<sup>5</sup> the immediate consequence was the emergence of several new city-states (such as Petra and Palmyra) that adopted Hellenistic customs.<sup>6</sup>

It would not be appropriate here to enter into a detailed history of the Nabataeans.<sup>7</sup> We need only note that, from the social and cultural point of view, the Nabataeans were a nomadic Bedouin tribe that roamed the Arabian desert and moved with their herds to wherever

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**2** The rise of Islam and the consecutive wars of conquest of the Muslim armies transformed the hegemony and the society in the Near East. Islam achieved a rapid success without facing strong resistance, as demonstrated by the defeat of Heraclius in 636 at the battle of Yarmuk (Bowersock 1990, 71). This was probably because the Hellenization of the Near East was or had become, to some extent, superficial. In addition, Greek had ceased to be relevant as an epigraphic medium by the end of the 8th century, but it was still used occasionally, alongside Syriac, for Christian rituals within the new dominant Islamic culture in which Arabic took over as the prevailing language (cf. Di Segni 2009).

**3** There is not a word for *Hellenization* in classical or Byzantine Greek language and the notion of *Hellenism* identifies the language and the culture: “in which peoples of the most diverse kind could participate. [...] Hellenism [...] represented language, thought, mythology, and images that constituted an extraordinarily flexible medium of both cultural and religious expression” (Bowersock 1990, 7). Apart from the Greek language, the First Book of the Maccabees offers us a historical account of events. Cf. 1Macc 1,1-9. It is usually accepted that the first usage of the term *hellenismos* is found in the Second Book of the Maccabees in which it is narrated that under Antiochus’ rule a gymnasium was built in Jerusalem and young men were obliged to wear *foreign* clothes: ἦν δ’οὕτως ἀκμή τις Ἑλληνισμοῦ καὶ πρόσβασις ἀλλοφυλισμοῦ διὰ τὴν τοῦ ἄσεβου (2Macc 4,13).

**4** Cf. Bowersock 1990.

**5** For an economic overview see Hopkins 1980. In general, see Goldsworthy 2016.

**6** The Hellenistic influence also affected the Semitic custom of the inhabitants to erect statues and carve honorific inscriptions in public using their local variety of Aramaic or reproducing the text in Greek in order to exhibit their degree of literacy and economic power. So, for instance, in Palestine by the 4th century BCE the shift from Hebrew (which became the holy language) to Aramaic and the spread of Greek had triggered a complex linguistic development in which Aramaic presumably came to dominate (cf. Gzella 2015, 226 fn. 709, who quotes Poirier 2007).

**7** For a historical overview, we may refer to several modern works, such as Starcky 1955; Bowersock 1983; Lindner 1997; Wenning 1987; 2007.

they could find pasture and water. Although the precise origin of the Nabataeans remains uncertain<sup>8</sup> (they were probably an Arab people who inhabited northern Arabia and the southern Levant), we may assert that the Nabataean kingdom, which remained independent from the 4th century BCE until it was annexed by the Roman Empire in 106 CE, emerged as a key player in the region during their period of prosperity. There are substantial doubts about the identification of the Nabataeans with other peoples referred to in the Assyrian<sup>9</sup> and Biblical<sup>10</sup> sources. The most common theory, according to which the Nabataeans were an Arab group, is today supported by three pieces of historical and linguistic evidence. Firstly, when Greek writers mentioned these people they usually refer to them as “Arabs”.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, there is the presence of Arabic personal names in the Na-

**8** Milik (1982, 261-5) suggests that the Nabataeans were inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, their native land, taking into account as proof the obscure phrase (which is found in several Aramaic texts from Palmyra, Petra and Mada'in Saleh): “the God of *š'bw*”; the latter is identified as the god of the “Luck of the Nabataeans”. According to Milik, *Ša'bū*, which is placed in the Persian Gulf, is the native land of the Nabataeans before they moved to the west, toward Syria and Transjordan. E.A. Knauf argues (1986, 74-86) that the Nabataeans originated from the ancient Arab tribal confederation of the Qedarite and the evidence to corroborate this assumption is that the god *Dūšarā* was identified with the indigenous deity *Qōs*, who is the national god of the Edomites (see the bilingual from Bosra no. 20); *contra* D.F. Graf (1990, 45-75) who asserts that the Nabataeans came from Mesopotamia. For an illustrative summary of the debates on Nabataeans' origins, with related bibliography, cf. Parr 2003, 27-35 and *Quellen*, 15-19.

**9** Cf. e.g. the annals of Tiglath-pileser III (745-729) in which the *Nabatu*, among the 36 Aramaic tribes against Babylon, is found (Luckenbill 1926-27, 283 and especially Tadmor, Yamada 2011, nos. 4.5; 40.5; 47. 6; 51.6; 52.6).

**10** In Gen 25:13 and in 1Chr 1, 29 the term *nēbāyōt* is found, but according to Starcky (1966, 900-3) there is a linguistic incompatibility between the forms *nbyt* and *nbtw* (the latter is the form used by the Nabataeans to call themselves). In fact, it entails the passage of /t/ into /t/ and the loss of /y/. Conversely, Broome (1973, 1-16) supposes that the biblical *nēbāyōt* are actually the Nabataeans; this assumption is supported by the fact that in Semitic the shift of /t/ into /t/ is possible (cf. Abu Taleb 1984, 3-11) and the root *\*nby*, of obscure origin, does not appear to be recorded in the *corpus* of the pre-Islamic inscriptions, while the root *\*nbt* is common in Akkadian and North-West Semitic. The suffix /-ot/, in *nbyt*, as a plural feminine represents another linguistic problem (Graf 1990, 67-8). See also Coogan, Metzger 2004, s.v. “Nabateans”, 248.

**11** Among them Diod. Sic. 19.94.1: τὴν χώραν τῶν Ἀράβων τῶν καλουμένων Ναβαταίων. According to some scholars, the Nabataeans quoted by Diodorus were not Arabs. For Retsö (2003, 364-91 and 623-6), the term ‘Arab’ mainly refers to a social status rather than an ethnic one; he also interprets the original reading as *nomādes* rather than *Nabataíoi* on the basis of two manuscripts from chapter 19 of Diodorus: *Parisinus graecus* 1665 (dating back to the 10th century CE) and *Laurentianus* 70.12 (dating back to the late 15th century CE). In the latter manuscript the Nabataeans are not mentioned (Retsö 2003, 283-8 and 1999, 115-16). Cf. also Fisher 1906, 146, no. 1. In another passage, Diodorus mentions the “Arabs who bear the name of Nabataeans”: Ἀραβες οὐς ὀνομάζουσι Ναβαταίους (2.48.1). The reliability of Diodorus' narration is supported by the fact that the fundamental source, for the writing of books 18-20, is Hieronymus of Cardia, who was a friend of Antigonus and an eyewitness of the events during the expedition against Petra (Diod. Sic. 19.44.3).

Nabataean inscriptions. Finally, we might consider the frequent usage of Arabic elements, such as particles, verbs, words and whole sentences, in Nabataean.<sup>12</sup>

## 2 Nabataean Aramaic and Greek

### 2.1 The Variety of Nabataean Aramaic

Nabataean is an epigraphic language, one of several varieties of Aramaic, belonging to Middle Aramaic (300 BCE–first centuries CE),<sup>13</sup> that was presumably spoken from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd–4th century CE. As K. Beyer suggests: “Nabataean stands nearer to Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic than does Hasmonaean”;<sup>14</sup> in fact, various archaic morphosyntactic features distinguish Nabataean from the other Middle Aramaic varieties, such as Palmyrene and Hatraean.<sup>15</sup> Although Nabataean is considered an offshoot of Achaemenid Aramaic: “there is thus no sharp linguistic distinction between the Achaemenid standard idiom on the one hand and its evolving heritage in the local varieties of Aramaic of the Greco-Roman period on the other”.<sup>16</sup>

Nabataean was employed as *lingua franca* to ease the communication among the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and as an international language to facilitate trade and business in the Near East. According to M. Morgenstern (1999, 135) Nabataean Aramaic is formed of three main elements: 1) a *sub-stratum* constituted by an Aramaic literary tradition going back to the Achaemenid Persian era (5th–4th century BCE); 2) an inner-development of the language; 3) the Arabic influence, which can be observed mainly in the vocabulary.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Diem 1973, 227–37.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed description and definition of Middle Aramaic, see in particular Fitzmyer 1979, 61–2 and Beyer 1986, 43–53. For a summary of the main theories with related bibliography, see Moriggi 2012, 279–89.

<sup>14</sup> Beyer 1986, 27.

<sup>15</sup> In particular, see Healey 1993, 55–9; Healey 2009, 38–40; Morgenstern 1999, 136–9. Some typical linguistic features of Nabataean are e.g.: 1) the usage of the relative *dy* < *zy* (archaic); 2) the graphic preservation of etymological \**n* before consonants; 3) the usage of the grapheme *š* instead of \*/*š*/; 4) the extension of the perfect 3rd m. pl. verbal suffix to the feminine; 4) the masculine plural in *-in*; 5) the employment of *'* instead of *h*- in the formation of the causative *ap'el* form; 6) the transformation of /*l*/ > /*n*/, like in *mknw* < *mlkw*; 7) the shift of /*ā*/ > /*ō*/, like in *'nws* < /*ēnāš*/; 8) the assimilation of *n*, like in *'tt*' < \**'ntt*', *mšb* < root *nšb*; 9) the usage of final *-w* in masculine personal names of probable Arabic origin; 10) the employment of *yt* like *nota accusativi*.

<sup>16</sup> Gzella 2015, 213.

The Nabataean inscriptions were written in a local Aramaic variety using a local script. Nevertheless, various Arabic loanwords<sup>17</sup> and grammatical borrowings have been observed.<sup>18</sup> Today most scholars believe that the linguistic presence of Arabic in Nabataean is due to the fact that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic in everyday life but employed Aramaic as a *lingua franca* to write their inscriptions or other documents;<sup>19</sup> in fact, according to G. Garbini and O. Durand, the Nabataeans were already sociologically an Arab people, but were still linguistically Aramaic.<sup>20</sup>

Nabataean uses a typical script deriving from the Persian Chancellery, as is evident, for instance, in the 5th century BCE Elephantine papyri. F. Beer, in 1840, was the first to correctly read some graffiti from Sinai, deciphering the Nabatean characters.<sup>21</sup> The Nabataean script could be classified as a monumental script used for public, funerary or religious inscriptions on stones,<sup>22</sup> and as a cursive script adopted for legal, diplomatic and commercial documents.<sup>23</sup> The script used in graffiti does not belong to a specific classification. It is probably that carvers of graffiti always attempted to make their inscriptions more formal than the common calligraphic script.<sup>24</sup>

From a historical point of view the development of the Nabataean script can be classified into three specific stages. The first is the ancient period, dating from the end of the 2nd century to the beginning of the 1st century BCE, during which the letters are quite wide in shape and there are not many ligatures; the second is known as the classical or calligraphic period<sup>25</sup> represented by the inscriptions, dating back to the 1st c. BCE-1st c. CE, in which the writing shows elongated characters and a growing tendency to ligature; finally, the last stage depicts the usage of the characters during the period following the end of the Nabataean Empire, but immediately before the Islamic period. It would not be suitable to analyse here the late development

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**17** For instance: *gt* 'corpse' (< Ar. *ǧuṭṭah*); *wld* 'offspring' (< Ar. *walad*); *l'n* 'to curse' (< Ar. *la'ana*); *nšyb* 'father-in-law' (< Ar. *nasīb*). Cf. Nöldeke 1885; O'Connor 1986; Healey 1995, 78-9.

**18** See al-Hamad 2014.

**19** Healey 2011, 46.

**20** Garbini, Durand 1994, 51.

**21** See the work of Beer 1840.

**22** As, for instance, the tomb inscriptions from Mada'in Šaleḥ show (Healey 1993).

**23** These documents were mostly written on papyri or scrolls, as we can see in the Nabataean texts of the Babatha archive in Yadin et al. 2002.

**24** Healey 2011, 49.

**25** The term calligraphic for the Nabataean calligraphy was first employed by J. Starcky on the basis of the "numerous curves and ligatures due to the quill of the scribes" (Starcky 1966, 931).

of the Nabataean alphabet; it is sufficient to underline the fact that the majority of scholars today agree that Arabic writing originated from the Nabataean<sup>26</sup> rather than from the Syriac script.<sup>27</sup> The writing from Hauran shows some different features compared to the genuine Nabataean script. The inscriptions from Hauran, dating back to the end of 1st c. BCE, preserve less elongated and more isolated letters.<sup>28</sup>

The most ancient Nabataean epigraph comes from the town of Haluza dating back to about 170 BCE. The geographical area within which the Nabataean inscriptions have been found includes Jordan, south Syria, the Negev, Egypt (the eastern desert and the Sinai Peninsula), the northwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula (Hejaz), the Aegean islands and various sites in southern Italy.<sup>29</sup>

The inscriptions, including the bilingual examples, are of two types: dedicatory and funerary. The former are written on an object, a statue or an altar dedicated to a deity. The main formula is: this is the statue (altar etc.) that X made + the name of the god to whom it is dedicated + the reason (often 'for the life') of the ruling king + the date + the artisan's name (not always available). The latter are engraved on tombs, blocks of stone (in this case the text is longer) and directly on rocks (the extension of these letters is usually less significant).<sup>30</sup> The main structures are the following: if they deal with long texts written on tomb façades, they highlight the owner's name (of the tomb) + the members of the family + formal data about the tomb and the family.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, in the short texts the sequence reports *npš'* ('tomb') + the name of the deceased. The graffiti, which are carved on rocks,<sup>32</sup> follow approximately the same pattern, that is: *dkyr* ('let be remembered') + the believer's name frequently followed by *šlm* ('peace') or *bṭb* ('in good').

**26** For further details see Gruendler 1993 and the more recent work of Nehmé 2010.

**27** Cf. Starcky 1966, 933 and Noja 2006.

**28** A good example is the inscription of Salkhad, dating back to 95 CE (*CIS* II nos. 184 and 183 = Milik 1958, 227-8). Cf. also the bilinguals from Si', nos. 26-29.

**29** More specifically, about 1,000 inscriptions (partly unpublished) have been found in Petra. They are dedications on statues erected by members of the royal family. In Mada'in Šaleḥ, there are monumental tombs decorated with majestic façades in Greek style; the inscriptions are longer than those of Petra, reporting the judicial matters related to the property of the tomb and dating back to the first 75 years of the 1st c. CE. In Bosra, the epigraphs appear to be few. In Mount Sinai, 3,851 short graffiti are engraved (they are included in *RIGP*), dating back to 2nd-3rd c. CE. Bilingual inscriptions (nos. 49, 50 and 51) have been found in the Aegean Sea, in Miletus and on the islands of Delos and Kos. In Italy we have two inscriptions from Pozzuoli (in *Quellen*, 116-19) and three from Rome (*Quellen*, 108-11).

**30** Most bilingual inscriptions included in this corpus belong to this category.

**31** A lot of these inscriptions hail from Mada'in Šaleḥ.

**32** Especially Mount Sinai.

## 2.2 Nabataean Aramaic in Contact with Greek

The term bilingualism refers to an individual's alternate use of two or more languages. When defining the alternate employment of two languages in a society, the noun *diglossia*<sup>33</sup> is more appropriate; in fact, it more precisely identifies a situation in which two dialects or languages are used by a single language community.

Alexander the Great's invasion of the Ancient Near East laid the foundations for the spread of Greek in the new conquered regions. This study focuses on multilingualism in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, and in particular on the contact between Nabataean Aramaic and Greek. It is known that different varieties of Aramaic were widely employed as vernaculars in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. It is worth bearing in mind that Greek permeated large parts of the Fertile Crescent becoming the official language of the administration. The impact of Greek on Aramaic in these multilingual settings involved lexical loans regarding architectural and administrative terminology, but did not trigger any phonological nor morphosyntactic interference.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, in the Hellenistic and Early Roman Near East the interaction between Greek and Nabataean caused inhabitants to adopt the so-called Hellenistic epigraphic habit, which mainly consisted in erecting statues and engraving inscriptions in public spaces using one of the two languages or both. In this questionable diglossic situation, Greek was used by the upper classes as the high-register variant and Aramaic as the vernacular of the uneducated masses; in addition, the new written forms of Aramaic acted as prestige languages and as a vehicle of indigenous cultural affinity, as Gzella argues.<sup>35</sup>

The language that spread in the Nabataean territories, besides the local Aramaic, was Koine Greek, a common supra-regional form of Greek spoken and written during the Hellenistic and Roman antiquity and the early Byzantine era, or Late Antiquity. Koine Greek is also known as Alexandrian dialect, common Attic, Hellenistic<sup>36</sup> or biblical Greek<sup>37</sup> and it was used between about 330 BCE-330 CE (subsequent-

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**33** With the term *diglossia* we refer to a kind of bilingualism in a society in which one of the languages has high prestige and the other one has low prestige (Ferguson 1959).

**34** Gzella 2015, 223.

**35** Gzella 2015, 215-16 and in detail Gzella 2005 and 2006.

**36** It evolved as a result of the spread of Greek following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Koine Greek represents the second stage in the development of Greek after the ancient period (about 800-330 BCE).

**37** Koine Greek is the original language of the New Testament, the Septuagint (the 3rd century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), and the earliest Christian theological writing by the church fathers.

ly we refer to the medieval period, 330-1453 CE). Oral and written Koine Greek served as the *lingua franca* (also for literary purposes) of many Mediterranean regions and in the Middle East, spreading as far as India. In such a wide geographical context it was inevitable that speakers of different languages, in such distant regions, adopted Greek in a more or less correct form and according to their level of education. Presumably the same may well have been true in the Nabataean realm, where Aramaic speakers used Greek, with a degree of correctness which depended on their background.

Koine Greek was mainly based on Attic, but it was not Attic, or rather it was a local roughly *atticized* dialect. According to Meillet, *foreigners* (here we take into account the Nabataean speakers) spoke a type of Greek that: “a été celui des Grecs avec lesquels ils ont été en rapports, et ces Grecs n’ont été que pour une faible part des Athéniens”.<sup>38</sup>

From a historical point of view, Greek was not widely used in the Nabataean realm until about 106 CE as demonstrated in the documents from the Babatha archive. In fact, none of the Greek texts pre-date 106 CE.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, following the annexation of *Nabataea* to the Roman Empire, Greek began to spread considerably across Petra and the other Nabataean regions replacing Aramaic as the official language of bureaucracy after the 4th century CE, as previously mentioned.

In the Nabataean-speaking territories, as well as in Syria and Mesopotamia, a complex linguistic landscape, focused on bilingualism, took shape, in which the linguistic ability and proficiency of the speakers, the level and the nature of linguistic interference, and their awareness of the diglossic situation, are particularly salient.<sup>40</sup> Although the strong influence of Arabic on Nabataean is clearly evident, as witness the presence of Arabic personal names in the Nabataean onomastics, the lesser use of Greek personal names seems to be due to the fact that Greek was learnt through formal education and was not spoken in domestic environments.<sup>41</sup> In Palmyra, as well as in Petra, Aramaic was employed in religious and domestic contexts, while Greek was spoken in public activities and trading relations with foreign territories.

On the basis of evidence arising from the *Nabataea*, it would appear that the social and linguistic situation was different from that of the other areas in the Near and Middle East where the introduc-

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<sup>38</sup> Meillet, A. (1913). *Aperçu d’une histoire de la langue grecque*. Paris, 229, reprinted in Italian, see Meillet [1913] 2003, 375.

<sup>39</sup> Healey 2011, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor 2002, 298.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor 2002, 318.



tion and usage of Greek could be examined from synchronic and diachronic perspectives; we may indeed imagine the impact and the increased density of Greek usage in Palestine<sup>42</sup> and Egypt.<sup>43</sup>

In the 1st century BCE, the Aramaic varieties and Hebrew (in Palestine) were active languages in the Near East being the L1 for the indigenous inhabitants, whereas Greek became the L1 for the social and political elite and the L2 for the indigenous community who employed it in social, administrative and economic environments.<sup>44</sup> Greek was the *lingua franca* from Greco-Roman Egypt to the eastern Mediterranean where Ptolemaic Egypt and Seleucid Syria were created after the Alexander's death.

In the Arabian Peninsula and Mesopotamia, between the 1st c. BCE and the 1st c. CE, local Semitic languages were the L1 for the indigenous population, whereas Koine Greek was not an official language.

As regards the Nabataean Kingdom, a diachronic perspective describes some sociolinguistic environments of Greek usage bolstered by historical and material sources.

The first linguistic contact between Greek and Nabataean Aramaic dates back to 312 BCE thanks to the account by Diodorus Siculus<sup>45</sup> who recalls two Macedonian military campaigns, led by Antigonos I Monophthalmus, against the Arabs/Nabataeans in Petra.<sup>46</sup> The Macedonians reached Petra and took prisoners. Afterwards the Nabataeans defeated the Macedonians<sup>47</sup> and wrote to Antigonos 'in Syrian characters'.<sup>48</sup> This passage refers to Aramaic as a *lingua franca* of the powers of the Near East. Even though, according to classic authors (Diodorus and Strabo) Ἀσσύρια Γράμματα designates the cuneiform writing, it is sometimes also used in reference to Aramaic script. Although Greek was the official language in Palestine, in the

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**42** Koine Greek became first *lingua franca*, then prestige language and finally a widespread vernacular among the inhabitants in the 1st century CE. The Greek New Testament documents constitute one piece of synchronic evidence for this, as do the significant number of documentary Greek papyri found in a variety of sites, including Masada and different sites around the Dead Sea. See Porter 2016, 212-27.

**43** The documentary papyri found in Egypt show that Koine Greek was not only the prestige language of the Greco-Roman elite, but also the second language of the working class with Demotic and then Coptic being its first language. See Vierros 2014.

**44** The L1 is the first language and the L2 the second language; the L1 is the native language or mother tongue, whereas the L2 is a language learnt in a second moment in relation to the mother tongue.

**45** Diod. Sic. 19.94.1-98.1.

**46** The expedition against the Nabataeans is believed to have taken place in 311 B.CE following the previous campaign against Gaza (Graf 1990, 51 fn. 30).

**47** Diod. Sic. 19.95.3-5.

**48** Diod. Sic. 19.96.1: πρὸς δ' Ἀντίγονον ἐπιστολὴν γράψαντες Συρίους γράμμασι.

4th century BCE in Petra the Nabataeans were not continually exposed to Koine Greek and they used their Aramaic variety to write their official letters.

Following the Seleucid dominion and the forced Hellenization, led by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Nabataeans were 'clients' of the Seleucids and involved in their affairs regarding Judaea. In this period, until the Hasmonean revolt (116-110 c. BCE), an important linguistic change occurred and Greek became the *lingua franca* and the prestige language in the eastern Mediterranean as well. The Nabataeans, who were one of the numerous nomadic tribes of Bedouins wandering the Arabian desert,<sup>49</sup> still remained on the fringes of the Hellenistic territories and their contacts with the Greek world usually took place through the trade routes, when Petra was the last staging point for the caravans who carried spices to send to the European markets through the port of Gaza.<sup>50</sup>

The first Nabataean king, Aretas I (169 BCE), recorded in 2Mac 5, 7-8, is cited in the inscription from Haluza in Aramaic, but not in Greek.<sup>51</sup> This represents further evidence that the language used by the Nabataeans was still Nabataean Aramaic. In the 2nd century BCE the Nabataeans were not in contact with Greek in a diglossic situation, and therefore presumably still used Aramaic for their official purposes.

From the 1st century BCE the Nabataeans started to use Greek alongside Nabataean Aramaic. During the reign of Aretas III (85/84-62 BCE), who conquered Damascus, the Nabataeans began to coin as a proof of their wide economic and politic independence. Coins were written in Greek and Aretas styled himself as 'Aretas Philhellen'.<sup>52</sup> Under Aretas III's rule the Nabataeans, who were a nomadic tribe, changed their style of life becoming a Near Eastern power allied with Greek culture and language; in fact, Koine Greek was imposed by king Aretas III as a vehicular language and Hellenistic architecture was also promoted, as is especially visible in Petra. During this time the inscriptions were carved in Nabataean Aramaic and also in Greek; but until the middle of the 1st century there is no sign of bilingual Nabataean Aramaic-Greek inscriptions. Presumably for most of the 1st century BCE, in accordance with the wishes of Aretas III, the

<sup>49</sup> They were described as 'Arabic nomads' as reported in Joseph. *AJ* 12.333-335 and 1Mac 5,24-25 and 2Mac 12.

<sup>50</sup> The Nabataeans controlled many trade routes towards the South along the Red Sea shore in the Hejaz desert, and towards the North to Damascus.

<sup>51</sup> *Quellen*, 393-5.

<sup>52</sup> See the coin of Aretas III from Damascus: βασιλέως Ἀρέτου Φιλέλληνος '(coin) of king Aretas, Philhellen' (*Quellen*, 142-3). According to numismatic data, the Nabataeans coined until 72 BCE when their rule of Damascus was interrupted in 72 BCE by a successful siege led by the Armenian king Tigranes II.

Hellenized Nabataeans employed Greek as vehicular and official language or as a prestigious language, and this situation persisted until the Roman conquest of the *Nabataea* into the Greco-Roman culture.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, in the Near East, Greek monolingual inscriptions date back mostly to the Roman (1st c. BCE-4th c. CE) and Proto-Byzantine (4th-7th c. CE) period, even if there also exist a significant number of Hellenistic inscriptions (3rd-1st c. BCE).<sup>53</sup>

The Romans adopted the cultural conventions of the Greeks and Koine continued to be the primary idiom of the Greco-Roman east; in addition, Roman officials were often: “not only code-switching between Latin and Greek but also being diglossic in their knowledge of Greek, using a High Attic form and a Low vernacular”.<sup>54</sup> This period marked a linguistic and social transition during which the Nabataeans definitely entered into the Greek linguistic sphere.

During the reign of Herod the Great (40 BCE-4 CE), the Greek language prevailed over the other Semitic languages. Herod was educated in Greek language, philosophy and culture, so he imposed Greco-Roman culture throughout his Hellenized territories. Even though he pretended to be Jewish, his policy was to impose Greek on all the strata of society, with a significant decline in Semitic languages, and above all of Hebrew.<sup>55</sup>

During the late antique period, the importance of Greek was different in Mesopotamia and Syria, as compared to the Nabataean Realm.<sup>56</sup> In Dura Europos, where no native variety of Aramaic is attested, Greek was apparently dominant, probably in public life. In Palmyra, Greek coexisted, as a written language, with Palmyrene Aramaic, and in Edessa its social usage is clearly evident, with bilingualism becoming more visible after the first records of Classical Syriac.<sup>57</sup> Even though in Dura Europos and Edessa there exists no clear proof of a diglossic or bilingual situation, we do know that Palmyra was strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture. Some two-thousand inscriptions written in the local Aramaic of Palmyra and accompanied by a Greek and/or Latin parallel text have emerged to date. This suggests that Greek was neither deliberately relegated to an informal language, nor did it take over from Aramaic as an offi-

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**53** The *corpora* of *IGLS* represent a systematic collection of Greek and Latin inscriptions from the Ancient Near East.

**54** Porter 2016, 210.

**55** Porter 2016, 210-1.

**56** See Taylor 2002.

**57** Gzella 2015, 247. In Edessa the former presence of Greek culture and language can be deduced from Edessa's foundation as a Seleucid colony and from some lexical loans, but all found inscriptions are monolingual and do not reflect Greek syntactic interferences or do not encompass Greek expressions.

cial language, but instead: “it was integrated into a more complex multilingual environment”.<sup>58</sup>

It is also difficult to establish whether local varieties of Aramaic in Mesopotamia, especially at Assur, Hatra and their surroundings, were spoken alongside other languages. Greek seems to be less present and restricted to a couple of lexemes concerning economics and Hellenistic architecture with no syntactic interference in Aramaic.<sup>59</sup>

It is intriguing that the first bilingual Nabataean Aramaic-Greek inscriptions were found outside the linguistic borders of *Nabataea* and date back to the 1st century BCE; in particular the oldest inscriptions date back to 9 BCE. They were found in Miletus and in Delos<sup>60</sup> and were commissioned by Sylleus during his journey to Rome. Another inscription, found in Sidon dates back to 4 BCE<sup>61</sup> and was probably written by a Nabataean trader in honour of his god Dūšarā. Therefore, the first signs of bilingual inscriptions are found outside Petra and the Nabataean Kingdom, and this suggests that in the 1st century BCE the Nabataeans did not yet use Greek alongside Aramaic; they were neither bilingual, nor, probably, diglossic. In fact, the inscriptions from Delos and Miletus reveal that Sylleus only wanted a simple Greek translation, of the Nabataean text, to leave in a Greek-speaking region. In addition, Littmann (*PPAES* IVA, XV-XVI) gives the story of the inscription from Miletus on the basis of the shapes of the Nabataean engraved letters. In fact, the Nabataean script is cursive and tends to ligature, as compared to the Greek text carved in beautiful and regular letters. It can therefore be surmised that Sylleus arrived at Miletus carrying a Nabataean handwritten copy of the text, drafted by himself on a papyrus or on a parchment. Later, he delivered it to a Greek mason who translated the text, but he did not know Nabataean Aramaic and so he exactly copied the Nabataean part.

The rest of the bilingual inscriptions, carved in the Nabataean regions, date from the 1st century until the 2nd-3rd century CE. Whereas in Palmyra the population appears to have been bilingual, in Petra and in the rest of the Nabataean kingdom the situation was quite different. Although in some inscriptions the Aramaic text is almost of the same length of the Greek, in other bilingual inscriptions the Nabataean part provides more information than the Greek, which is only a summary of the Nabataean text. As regards, Mountain Sinai, the graffiti (dating back to the 2nd-3rd century CE) consist in short and fragmentary texts. They are mostly dedicatory and funer-

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**58** Gzella 2015, 249. See also Gzella 2005, 445-58. For a *corpus* of Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions see *PAT*.

**59** Gzella 2015, 275.

**60** Respectively nos. 49 and 50.

**61** No. 48.

ary inscriptions and provide no noteworthy evidence of the alleged bilingualism of the Nabataeans. The majority of the graffiti are only carved in Nabataean Aramaic, there remaining a mere fourteen examples of inscription engraved in Nabataean Aramaic and Greek.

The bilingual epigraph from al-Ruwāfah, north of the Arabian Peninsula,<sup>62</sup> shows the usage of Greek in honorific and historical contexts; the epigraph was erected by the tribe of the Thamud using Nabataean and Greek that: “would thus both serve as prestige languages for representational purposes among speakers of Old Arabic and Ancient North Arabian vernaculars”.<sup>63</sup> So, Nabataean and Greek were a sort of combined *lingua franca* for the North Arabian people.

The bilingual inscriptions show us that the texts were written independently, probably following the same content, but not translating from one language to another. Furthermore, the Greek linguistic influence on Nabataean Aramaic is reflected in a handful of loanwords referring to architecture.

Generally, these are funerary and votive inscriptions, in spite of being short and often fragmentary. They consist in burial stones that often refer to the possessor of the tomb through the sentence *dnh mqr'/npš'* ‘this is the tomb’, or simple graffiti that record the passage or the death of somebody through the common formula *dkrt* = Gr. Μνησθη ‘let be remembered’.

The texts exhibit different patterns of content following the typical stylistic tradition of the two languages. So, there are distinct versions of the same content of an inscription within a multilingual environment. Moreover, only nine inscriptions are ‘really’ bilingual (nos. 9, 16, 19, 22, 25, 32, 33, 37, 39), even if in nos. 32 and 33 the Nabataean text reports the initial formula *šlm* ‘peace’ and the closing formula *bṯb* ‘in good’ (in no. 33) and no. 9 only reports the same personal name in both languages.

In the rest of the epigraphs, elements of the texts are distinct and in two cases the Nabataean and the Greek versions are totally different in content (nos. 29 and 34).

Two texts are exclusively in Greek, including a series of Nabataean letters (no. 12) and a Nabataean personal name (no. 18). Conversely, only one inscription is entirely in Nabataean (no. 20), with the exception of a Greek personal name.

As regards the different patterns of the epigraphic habits, in no. 26 the Nabataean opening formula is ‘this is the statue of...’, whereas the Greek one is ‘the people (or council) of... honoured’, both reflecting the West Semitic and Greek traditions. Furthermore, nos. 10 and 26 report the Hellenistic expression ‘out of affection’ and ‘of his

<sup>62</sup> No. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Gzella 2015, 242.

piety', whereas some inscriptions contain a more extensive genealogy in Nabataean like in nos. 11 and 28. Only three inscriptions give more information in Greek (nos. 13, 21, 47).

Two epigraphs are not bilingual, but instead contain two completely different texts (nos. 29 and 34) and, curiously, three inscriptions report different personal names (nos. 10, 37 and 44).

Considering the content and the small number of the bilingual Nabataean-Greek inscriptions, we may assume that direct evidence for bilingualism is rare in *Nabataea*. In the first-century Near East there was a complex multilingualism among the various peoples, who used varieties of languages such as Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek and in some strata, Latin.

The discovery of such a large number of unilingual inscriptions written in Greek and in Nabataean Aramaic suggests a sociolinguistic environment in which Koine Greek was used in a diglossic situation as a prestige language, whereas Nabataean, as the ethnic language of the conquered, was used for personal purposes. These unilingual Greek inscriptions were functionally communicative for the Nabataean population.

Some bilingual inscriptions were engraved due to the writer and the place written, the inscriptions out of *Nabataea* are cases in point. Other epigraphs reflect ethnic or religious traditions, regardless of knowledge of Greek. The addition of further information, such as a more extensive genealogy, to the Nabataean version rather than in the Greek is a typical mark of the Nabataean epigraphic habit in which the writer wanted to highlight his Semitic-Aramaic tradition.

In conclusion, we may assert that Greek was not solely the *lingua franca* or prestige language of the Nabataeans, but, as epigraphic evidence would suggest, that it was probably also the vernacular employed by some social strata of the population. So, the Nabataean-Greek bilingual inscriptions are apparently not bilingual, but rather multilingual texts carved within a diglossic linguistic situation among the Nabataeans. Nabataean was the L1 of the indigenous population and possibly even the primary idiom for some in the lower social stratum, whereas Greek was used as the L2 in lower social contexts and as an administrative language.

### 3 Nabataean Aramaic-Greek Inscriptions

#### 3.1 Research Background

The presence of *corpora* of Semitic inscriptions, and in particular of Aramaic inscriptions,<sup>64</sup> is indicative of the exponential expansion in epigraphic studies in the field of the Near Eastern philology. The interest in Greek epigraphy in collecting Greek inscriptions found in the Ancient Near East<sup>65</sup> conveys the desire to further study and analyse the linguistic contacts between the Classical and Semitic worlds.

The Eastern Mediterranean, during the period between the end of the 7th century BCE and the 5th century CE, saw intense cultural and commercial exchanges between the Syro-Palestinian territories and the Aegean area. The contacts between Semites (above all the Canaanites, the Phoenicians and the Syro-Palestinians) and Greek speakers increased in North Africa, Rhodes, Kos, in the rest of the Central Aegean islands, Crete and Greece up to southern Italy and Sicily.

In the field of epigraphy, this intricate network of relationships triggered the intriguing linguistic phenomenon of these bilingual inscriptions; epigraphs written in Greek and in Semitic languages record a contact between various cultures, especially along borders and in prolonged contact areas.

The aim of this study is to collect the bilingual inscriptions carved in Nabataean Aramaic and Greek. Although around 6,000 Nabataean inscriptions, dating to the period between the 2nd c. BCE and the 4th c. CE, have so far been discovered, a complete *corpus*, comprising all Nabataean inscriptions, has yet to be compiled.<sup>66</sup> A wide selection of texts from the entire Nabataean region is recorded in *Quellen* (see bibliography), and a number are also included in Yardeni 2000,<sup>67</sup> while a great

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**64** For Old Aramaic and Official Aramaic, see for instance Gibson 1975; KAI, 201-79, 309-20; Schwiderski 2008; Porten, Yardeni 1986-99; Beyer 1984, 29-32 and 1986, 15-16 including a supplement in 2004, 17. Apart from Nabataean, for the varieties of Aramaic in the Hellenistic and Early Roman period, see e.g. Magen et al. 2004 for inscriptions from Mount Gerizim; the series *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert (DJD)*, 1955-) and Beyer 1984 and 2004, including YTDJD and Yadin et al. 2002, for Aramaic of the Qumran scrolls; PAT for Palmyrene; Beyer 1998 for Hatraean.

**65** Along with the monumental works of the *Inscriptiones Graecae (IG)*, designed as a continuation of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum (CIG)*, which collect all Europe's ancient Greek inscriptions in 49 volumes, it is worth mentioning the great project *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie (IGLS)* which brought together Greek and Latin inscriptions mainly from Syria, Jordan and Lebanon in 21 volumes. Furthermore, a useful online database (<https://inscriptions.packhum.org/>), constantly updated, consisting in all the Greek inscriptions of the Mediterranean area, including the Greater Syria and the East is to be found in the *Searchable Greek Inscriptions of The Packard Humanities Institute (PHI)* - Project Centers at Cornell University & Ohio State University.

**66** Gzella 2015, 239.

**67** See Beyer 2004, 23 for additions.

many inscriptions remain unpublished or partially described. The *corpus* of M.E. Stone (in *RIGP*) includes the graffiti found at Mount Sinai, one of the regions in which the greatest number of Nabataean inscriptions have been discovered. A *corpus* including the bilingual Nabataean-Greek inscriptions, found in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Near East dating back to the period from the 2nd century BCE to the 3rd-4th century CE, has also yet to be compiled. For this reason, the assembly of the above-mentioned bilingual texts could deepen our understanding of the morphological, syntactic and lexical aspects of the two languages in question and shed light on the cultural, social, political and religious relationships between the Nabataeans and the Greeks.

This collection is not to be considered as complete, and we hope it will be expanded by further discoveries of bilingual epigraphs.

This work represents the research that I began in my PhD dissertation that also includes a brief history of the Nabataean kingdom and, above all, a close examination of the Nabataean onomastics, and Nabataean names transliterated in Greek, performed with a view to reconstructing the phonological system of Nabataean.<sup>68</sup>

### 3.2 The Numbering and Nature of the Inscriptions

This corpus is made up of 51 bilingual inscriptions. The epigraphs are collected following a geographical order, and the numbering of the inscriptions reflects this same pattern; the first assembled epigraphs come from the main region in which the Nabataean society flourished, i.e. the territory of Jordan, around the capital city of Petra, and they have the numbers from 1 to 17. Those that follow are from Syria and, more specifically, from Hauran (nos. 18-30). Other inscriptions were found in Egypt, two in Safājā, while another epigraph is located in the vicinity of a further station on the road that leads from Qift to al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm; the remaining inscriptions, found in Egypt, were discovered at Mount Sinai (nos. 31-46). Subsequently, we come to the sole and longest bilingual inscription unearthed in Saudi Arabia, at al-Ruwāfah (no. 47). Outside the borders of the Nabataean kingdom we find an epigraph from Sidon, in Lebanon, (no. 48), and three inscriptions from the Aegean Sea: one found at Miletus, Turkey (no. 49) and two on the Greek islands of Delos and Kos (nos. 50-51).

The large geographical area across which the inscriptions were found suggests the presence of Nabataean traders on the caravan routes that led to Egypt in the west, passing through Mount Sinai, and to the Aegean Sea in the north-west.

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<sup>68</sup> For a more in-depth the reconstruction of the Nabataean Aramaic phonological system, see Petrantoni 2020.



## Editorial conventions

- [x] Lacuna that is reconstructed.
- [...] Lacuna that is not reconstructed, the missing letters are replaced by dots.
- [---] Lacuna that is not reconstructed and of which we have no suggestion of the exact number of the missing letters.
- (x) Lacuna that is considered as uncertain.

As regards the forms of the Nabataean personal names given in translations, they reflect my own close examinations and studies of these during my research<sup>69</sup> in the course of which I attempted to cite them in a vocalized form. In addition, the pronunciation of the names of Arabic origin is rendered as the Arabic form suggests.

The Nabataean graph š is here transliterated as š even though in some names of Arabic origin, the same letter can be read /š/. As concerns the six plosive consonants *b, g, d, k, p, t* they are pronounced with spirantisation following a vowel like in the Biblical Hebrew and in the other varieties of Aramaic;<sup>70</sup> but since it is only a phonetic phenomenon, here the spirantisation will not be marked and only the graphematic transcription will be provided.

## Transcription

For the transliteration of the varieties of epigraphic Aramaic and Hebrew we use the transliteration adopted by *SBL Handbook*, 26. For the transcription of Biblical Aramaic we follow Rosenthal (2006, 11 for the consonants, and 14-6 for the vowels).

Syriac Aramaic is transcribed by the ancient and classical variety of *ʿEstrangēlā* script following *SBL Handbook*, 26 for the consonants, whereas the vowels are not written, but they are marked in the transcription using the East Syriac vocalic system. The transcription of Syriac Aramaic vowels and fricative consonants follows that of Mu-raoka (2005, 4-7).

The Romanization of Arabic is based on The Hans Wehr transliteration system (Wehr 1976, VIII-XV).

For the transcription of Greek we prefer to report the words of the inscriptions without accents and breathing marks. Therefore, when a Greek term occurs in the comment, footnotes and indices, it will be written precisely with accents and breathing marks.

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<sup>69</sup> Petrantoni 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Spirantisation occurred during the earliest stages of Aramaic and was stabilized as a consonantal feature in Classical Aramaic. Rosenthal (2006, 17, § 15) points out that this feature began to appear from the 6th century BCE

