

The Arabs in the First Communication Revolution: The Development of the Arabic Script

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Abstract: Scholars unanimously agree that the development of the alphabet is a cornerstone of civilization and that Greece played a central role in the spread of this medium in the West. Both Latin and Arabic scripts were derived from the Phoenician, which represents a shared cultural heritage between the Middle East and the West. However, the question of the development of the second-most-used alphabet in the world, Arabic, is riddled with uncertainty for scholars. They disagree on the origin of this significant medium, which has been used by Arabs, Persians, and other nations for the past 15 centuries. This paper examines how critical communication theory may help solve this enduring mystery and finds compelling evidence to suggest that the Arabic script evolved from the Nabataean rather than the Syriac.

Résumé : Les spécialistes sont tous d'accord que le développement de l'alphabet a été une pierre angulaire de la civilisation et que la Grèce a joué un rôle primordial dans la diffusion de l'alphabet à travers l'Occident. Les textes latins et arabes sont tous les deux originaires du phénicien, représentant un héritage culturel partagé entre le Moyen Orient et l'Occident. Cependant, la question du développement de l'alphabet arabe, le deuxième plus répandu au monde, est entourée d'incertitude pour les spécialistes. Ceux-ci sont en désaccord sur les origines de ce mode de transmission important, que les Arabes, les Perses et d'autres nations utilisent depuis quinze siècles. Cet article examine comment la théorie critique en communication peut aider à résoudre ce mystère persistant et découvre des indices importants suggérant que l'écriture arabe a évolué du nabatéen plutôt que du syriaque.

Scholars of communication believe that media shape and are shaped by the cultures in which they serve. Sufficient attention therefore must be given to the early communities in which media served a formative role. In a global community made possible by new communication technologies, the part any culture plays can be effectively realized only if we understand the functions of communication in any and every community, both old and new (Richard F. Carter, communication

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professor and scholar, University of Washington, Seattle, personal communication, April 12, 1995). James Carey also believes that to “study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used” (1989, p. 30). In terms of critical communication theory, however, the analysis of major developments in communication media in relation to the rise and fall of cultures over time has opened prospects for a better understanding of media in early communities.

Scholars unanimously agree that the development of the alphabet is a cornerstone of our present civilization and that Greece played a central role in the spread of this medium in the West. Both Latin and Arabic scripts evolved from the Phoenician, which represents a shared cultural heritage between the Middle East and the West. However, the question of the development of the second-most-used alphabet in the world, Arabic, is riddled with uncertainty for scholars. They disagree on the origin of this significant medium, which has been used by Arabs, Persians, and other nations for the past 15 centuries. This paper aims to examine how history may be reconstructed on the basis of theoretical considerations.

Why is it important to determine the origin of the Arabic script from a communication perspective? First, because the Arabic script, in which the Koran is written, is in use by Arabs and Muslims worldwide. Arabic is internationally acknowledged as one of the world’s major languages. Second, the development of critical historical communication theory itself should help us understand how older media could have developed, which may constitute a breakthrough for an academic puzzle that has long stymied scholars because of a lack of concrete evidence. Third, such an approach could prove very instructive: it may help us interpret crucial historical junctures of media development in other parts of the world as well.

The challenge that lies ahead therefore is this: can communication theory help solve the origin of an important medium that one billion Arabs and Muslims use and revere? Such an academic venture must deal with a great cultural heritage, in its attempt to prove that the Arabic script that developed in Petra (in Jordan, where no written record has been found except for about 4,000 inscriptions, mostly on stones and some great monuments), is the forerunner of the present Arabic script rather than the Syriac, which developed in northern Syria.

The First Communication Revolution

Two writing systems exist in the world today: the alphabet that is used in Western civilization and the character system of writing that exists in the Orient (Logan, 1986).

The First Communication Revolution was a watershed in human civilization. For the first time in history, humans were able to precisely express their thoughts in a few easy-to-learn symbols called words. Scholars who write about the development of scripts agree on the crucial role the alphabet has played in modern human history. Although this invention was frowned upon by Socrates, who felt it would “create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls” (Innis, 1972, p. 56), it came to be understood by later scholars as “the foundation on which all our subsequent

education was based” (Healey, 1990, p. 202); one which “multiplied the sources of learning and literature” (Cross, 1990, p.78). Because writing made possible “the passage from barbarism to civilization, and secured the continuous progress of the human race,” the birth of the alphabet is regarded as “one of the greatest and most momentous triumphs of the human mind” (Clodd, 1970, p.13). The contribution of the First Revolution paved the way for the two subsequent Communication Revolutions: Printing and Electronics. Each of these innovations left an indelible imprint on life and hastened the development of civilization.

The Phoenicians are familiar to the West as the people who lived on the Syrian coast in present-day Lebanon. They are credited with developing the proto-Canaanite phonetic script, which was founded in Sinai c. 1500 B.C. The Phoenician script was borrowed by the Greeks and spread by the Romans and the Church of Rome through Europe and into the New World. The same Phoenician script travelled throughout the East, but in a different version from the Latin. Today the Arabic script is considered, after Latin, to be the most widely used in the world.

The Arab world is well known for its contribution to the development of numbers: “Arab numerals and algorithms made arithmetic so simple ... [and] easier to grasp” (McLeish, 1991, p. 140). However, uncertainty overshadows the development of the Arabic script, which is still in use in many nations worldwide, by Arab and non-Arab peoples alike.

The origins of Arabic

In general, there are two schools of thought regarding the origin of the present Arabic script. One believes it is Nabataean (of Petra in Jordan), while the other insists it is Syriac. The Syriac, like the Nabataean, is another offshoot of the Aramaean script, which evolved from the Phoenician (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The Syriac was used in the Aramaean city-states that existed in ancient times on the site of present-day Syria. Some of these city-states proved influential, such as Edessa (Urfa in southeastern Turkey), which later became the seat of the Syrian Christian Church. It is thought that Syriac might have been developed in Edessa to become the lingua franca of Eastern Christians (Shahid, 1984a, pp. 147, 156). Some scholars believe that the Syriac script was developed in Palmyra (Jensen, 1970, p. 317). The Syriac alphabet was used by the Syrian Christians from approximately A.D. 50 until the fourteenth century. But a schism in the Syriac Church at the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) resulted in the division of the Syriac language and script into two forms, western and eastern. The western variety nearly died out sometime after the seventh century, while the eastern remained in use in Central Asia and Siberia until the fourteenth century (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1990, p. 470). The Syriac script, however, remains alive in only one or two villages in present-day Syria.

The Nabataean kingdom, on the other hand, which flourished between 320 B.C. and A.D. 106, was a powerful Arab trade nation that ruled over present-day Jordan, southern Syria, the Negev, and the Sinai. It left a unique legacy, repre-

sented by the majestic monuments of its desert capital, Petra, which still fascinate people 2,000 years after their construction.

Powerful and influential though the Nabataean kingdom was, classical Arabic sources point to a Syriac origin of the Arabic script. Before the advent of Islam, Arabic writing was in use in the sixth century, in the Arab kingdom of the Syria-Mesopotamia region (mainly in Al-Hira) as well as in Mecca (*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1978, p. 1120). These sources suggest that the Arab writing system was “derived from the Syriac and ... had originated in Iraq or Midian” (Bellamy, 1990, pp. 100-101). Some scholars, however, treat these sources as being “legendary” or “contradictory,” even though they may contain some element of truth. Still, in the mid-’60s, a “small number of scholars sought to revive the theory of ... an assumed cursive variety of Syriac” (Healey, 1990, p. 245), which they believe “was used in the chancellery of the Lakhmid kings of al-Hirah” (Bellamy, 1990, p. 99).

The other theory, which is accepted by most scholars, points to a Nabataean origin, first proposed by Theodore Noldeke in 1865. Scholars generally agreed that there had been a “progressive transformation, in Arabic characters, of the symbols used several centuries earlier, by the Nabataeans of the Kingdom of Petra” (*The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1978, p. 1120). This position influenced some scholars to the extent that they came to believe “the Nabataean script lies at the origin of the Arabic script” (Healey, 1990, p. 248).

To muddy the waters further, a contemporary scholar, who perhaps does not feel the forces of communication are central to the development of organizations, made the following statement:

When the Arabs set about fashioning their own alphabet, they modeled it on some form of the Aramaian alphabet.... The Arabs, if they had been willing to make the effort, could have derived their alphabet from the old South Arabic. (Bellamy, 1990, p. 97)

Such ambiguous, contradictory statements would inevitably cast more confusion on the origin of the Arabic script. This uncertain genesis warrants more focus when we realize that the Arabic script was destined to spread in the East to become, after its sister alphabet, the Latin, the most widely used system of writing in the world today. The Arabic script, since it developed in the seventh century A.D., has been used in the writing of about 15 different languages worldwide.

This ambiguity regarding the origin of the Arabic script has even manifested itself in the works of major communication scholars. Harold Innis (1972), in his most famous book, *Empire and Communications*, writes on the relationship between communication and the rise and fall of empires. Although he acknowledges the “commercial genius of the peoples of Syria and Palestine” (p. 55) in the development of the alphabet, he totally ignores the Nabataean script (regarded by most scholars as the forerunner of the Arabic script) as having been used by the Arabs and many other non-Arab and Muslim nations worldwide for the past 1,300 years. Thirty years after Innis published this work, a wealth of information on the Nabataean script and culture had been published. It led one of Innis’ disciples,

Logan, in his 1986 book *The Alphabet Effect*, acknowledged the Nabataean script as “the predecessor of classical Arabic.” However, the level of recognition here seems very modest, and also somewhat distorted.

The Sabaeans [of South Arabia] utilized an alphabet script, but it was not destined to become the predecessor of classical Arabic. This honor fell to the Nabataean script developed from the Aramaic writing system by the Nabataeans who occupied that part of the Fertile Crescent bordering on the northern edge of the Arabian peninsula. Through trading activities, the nomads of northern and central Arabia came in contact with the Nabataeans and borrowed their script, which they used primarily for economic activities in their trading cities. This script, however, eventually evolved into the classical Arabic into which the Koran was eventually transcribed. (pp. 139-140)

I use the term “modest” because here Logan has made the Nabataeans’ monumental achievement look like a matter of mere borrowing by nomads and traders. His argument is distorted because the Nabataeans were the only Arab group, in contrast to many other Arab groups existing in the Middle East at the time, who were able to establish a viable and organized kingdom that lasted for 500 years and has left a legacy (represented by Petra) unparalleled in the ancient world. Further, the Nabataeans were able to develop into a civic society.

In recent years, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and linguists have added valuable information to our knowledge of the Nabataeans. This data allows us to re-evaluate the Nabataeans’ communication achievement from a new angle. The development of the Arabic script, as a communication medium, is therefore better re-evaluated from a communications and cultural perspective. The objective of this study is to utilize critical communication theory to prove that the Arabic script in use today is a descendant of the Nabataean, rather than the Syriac.

Communication and organization

Harold Innis in 1972 suggested that communication “occupies a crucial position in the organization and administration of government and in turn of empires and of Western civilizations” (p. 5). He argues that “the concepts of time and space reflect the significance of media to civilization” (p. 7). In his view, “media that emphasize time,” such as parchment, clay, and stone, “are durable in character” and “favor decentralization and hierarchical types of institutions,” whereas media that emphasize space, such as papyrus and paper, are “less durable and light in character” (p. 7). He contends that “large scale political organizations, such as empires, must be considered from the standpoint of two dimensions, those of space and time, and persist by overcoming the bias of media which over-emphasize either dimension” (p. 7). The concept of empire, and effective government, is related to the efficiency of communication: “It [the concept] will reflect to an important extent the efficiency of particular media of communication and its possibilities in creating conditions favorable to creative thought” (p. 9). He adds that the “sword and pen worked together” so that increasing power and the medium of writing helped in forming “the monarchies of Egypt and Persia, the Roman empire, and the city-states” (p. 10).

Smith, in taking a wider communication perspective, believes “the craft of writing was, if not the cause, then the defining instrument of social and psychical transformation in all the societies that it reached” (1980, p. 7). He argues further that “this first revolution in the means of communicating information” has brought about “fundamental changes in human organization and in conceptions of social order”, and “created several important new divisions of labor” (p. 7). To Logan (1986), phonetic writing is “more than a writing system; it is also a system for organizing information”: it is the “roots” of Western civilization for it has “influenced the development of our thought patterns, our social institutions, and our very sense of ourselves” (pp. 17-18).

The alphabet and social order

From time immemorial, it is possible to trace major shifts in social or political human life in relation to media development. The First Communication Revolution, which took 7,000 years to materialize, began in Mesopotamia in the eighth millennium B.C. The introduction of a counting system by the Sumerians, which between 4000 and 3500 B.C. yielded abstract numerals, had “major consequences for the origin of Sumerian script.” The invention of these numerals coincided with “the transition to agriculture” and the “rise of the Sumerian temple, which was to lead to state formation” (Schmandt-Besseret, 1990, p. 32). The Sumerian pictographs were written in cuneiform on clay tablets and served “to document the affairs of an extensive bureaucratic network controlling labor, materials, and subsistence resources,” a process that rendered greater precision in management, helped political expansion, and led to the creation of the Babylonian Empire (Green, 1990, p. 56). But the Egyptians went a step further. They developed their writing system, the hieroglyphic, into a “pseudo alphabet” in which signs represented “a consonant (and any vowel)” (Cross, 1990, p. 85). This phonetic writing in Egypt coincided “with the unification of the country under a divine king, who was identified with the God Horus” (Fischer, 1990, p. 59). The shift from stone to papyrus, as a medium for writing, coincided with “the shift from absolute monarchy to a more democratic organization” (Innis, 1972, p. 15).

But the complexity of writing in these ancient cultures, in the words of Innis, “favored increasing control under a monopoly of priests and the confinement of knowledge to special classes” (p. 24). Such monopolies prevented any serious attempt to further develop the writing system, which led to the downfall of these empires.

The Egyptian “pseudo alphabet,” however, served as a model for the Seirites of the Sinai Peninsula who developed, c. 1700 to 1500 B.C., the “old-Seirite” script (Logan, 1986, p. 33). This new system of writing is familiar under its two common names: the proto-Canaanite or the proto-Sinaitic script.

The proto-Canaanite alphabet ultimately evolved into the Phoenician and proto-Arabic alphabet. The latter developed in southern Arabia (Yemen) and Ethiopia but is not related to the Nabataean-Arabic script. The Phoenician alphabet, however, was destined to become the ancestor of most, if not all, of the world’s

alphabets (see Figure 1). The phonetic alphabet that the Phoenician traders developed was a very simplified system needed for business (Ogg, 1971, p. 69).

Figure 1: Evolution of Languages from the Phoenician

Phoenician → Greek (Latin) + Aramaean

While the Latin script evolved from the Greek, the script used in the East evolved from the Aramaean (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Evolution of Languages from the Aramaean

Aramaean → Nabataean + Syriac + Palmyrene + Mandaic + Jewish + Hatran

The Syriac was used in the Aramaean city-states. The Aramaean city-states, with the exception of Palmyra, were vulnerable and flourished only under Assyrian rule, from which they fell first to the Greeks, then to the Romans c. 65 B.C. Palmyra was later destroyed by the Romans in the third century A.D.

The Nabataean kingdom, on the other hand, never fell to the Greeks, and was able to survive until it *peacefully fell* to the Roman Empire in A.D. 106. It was the first recognized Arab state in history. Its capital, Petra, described as the eighth wonder of the ancient world, still exists today in southern Jordan, challenging the imagination of tourists and scholars alike as a living example of the great caravan centres of a bygone era. This kingdom, which thrived on trade, flourished around the time when Jesus Christ was born. It is well-known now for the majestic, breathtaking ruins that still exist in Petra, in southern Jordan. Poet Dean Burgon immortalized the city in his much-quoted prize sonnet, “Petra”: “It seems no work of man’s creative hand, . . . / A rose-red city, half as old as time.” Although hundreds of books and articles have been written on the Nabataean culture, its importance in the history of Middle Eastern communication has never been fully appreciated.

Problem and discussion

To recap: two schools of thought exist today in relation to the origin of present-day Arabic script, which as a communication medium is widely used by many nations in the East. The first theory advocates the Syriac, while the second advocates the Nabataean.

Communication theoreticians who study media history and organization find a strong relationship between the development of media, social shifts, and the construction of a civic society. In accordance with what Innis, Logan, and Smith have established, communication is related to the rise and fall of empires, their power structures, their organization, their administration, and their development into more civilized societies. Based on such findings and the historical review of the Syriac city-states compared with Petra, it is obvious the former could not have

developed into a viable system that could foster a lasting script for use in everyday life, whereas Petra did exactly that. What follows is an attempt to prove this point.

The conclusions reached by communications scholars in this century and the combined research of those who have studied the Nabataean civilization allow us to raise the following two questions :

1. Were the Nabataeans able to effect “changes” or “divisions in labor” (Smith) in their social, political, and economic structure, which provided:
 - the “sense of ourselves” (Logan)
 - the “psychical transformation” (Smith)
 - the decentralized “hierarchical types of institutions” (Innis)
 - the combined power of “the sword and pen” (Innis)?

And were these sufficient strengths from which to organize and develop into a civic society—one with artistic capability and efficiency, i.e., “conditions favorable to creative thought” (Innis)?

2. Were they able to develop the Aramaian script into a communication medium, with Nabataean characteristics, that would check the spread of competing scripts (such as Greek, Latin, and proto-Arabic) and favour the adoption of the new medium by later Arabs (and Muslims) worldwide?

Because Syriac city-states were never able to develop into viable organizations, the answers to these questions should certainly allow us to see that communication was central in Nabataean life. The salient position of that kingdom in relation to future Arab land and the civilization they attained and protected by the sword were also crucial in relation to the development of Near Eastern communication in that era, making Petra “the Greece of the East” in terms of the development of script.

In relation to the main findings of communications scholars, these two questions are examined from various perspectives in what follows.

Historical developments: The transformation from nomadic to civic society

The Nabataeans were Arabs who hailed from the Arabian Peninsula possibly as long ago as the seventh century B.C. (Lawlor, 1974, p.10) to settle in and around Petra, where they came in contact with ancient Jordanian, Palestinian peoples. Petra, which became the capital of the Nabataean kingdom, is a city hewn from rock by its people, who called it Reqmu—in Arabic, Reckeem means “of varied colours,” and in Greek, “rock” (Salibi, 1993, p. 11).

The first recorded reference to Petra is made by the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus, who describes the Nabataeans toward the end of the fourth century B.C. as “enterprising nomads,” already “literate to some extent in that there were at least some scribes capable of writing in Syriac [Aramaic] letters” (Bowersock, 1983, pp. 13-16). Diodorus wrote in his *Bibliotheca Historica* that these Arabs “continue to be free men, and in addition to this, they never admit a ruler from outside, but maintain their freedom unshaken forever.” Their immense wealth comes from marketing asphalt (bitumen, needed for mummification), which they collect from

“a large lake” (the Dead Sea), from balsam, and from trading with “frankincense and myrrh and the most costly of the spices, receiving them ... from Arabia Felix” (South Arabia). The powerful states of the time, the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Macedonians, were never “able to subdue them, though they brought many great forces against them” In this context, Diodorus records how Antigonos, one of Alexander the Great’s generals, tried to subjugate them to control their trade routes, but was “persuaded” to “accept precious gifts ... and to put an end to” the whole affair (Robinson, 1930, pp. 464-465).

By the third century B.C. the Nabataeans had expanded into the Negev (southern Palestine) and Hauran (present-day southern Syria). In the second century B.C., “the institution of a Nabataean kingship” was established beginning with King Aretas (Harith I); a sea battle was fought in the Red Sea with the Ptolemaic-Egyptians, a “competition between these two great powers” over controlling trade routes (Bowersock, 1983, p. 21); and, most importantly, the Nabataean national script emerged at a time when Greek control of neighbouring areas had begun to decline.

By 169 B.C., the Nabataeans were able to exploit “the power balance between the Seleucids and Ptolemaics to emerge as an independent Trans-Jordanian kingdom” (Salibi, 1993, p. 10). For this, according to Graf, they “developed a standard professional army, based on the Hellenistic model, prior to their contacts with Rome” (1994, p. 305).

With the emergence of an independent kingship, Nabataea began to develop a sense of identity and uniqueness essential for any nation. This era witnessed, according to Hammond, “the gradual emergence of Arabisms in later inscriptions” (1973, p.10). The Nabataeans, however, used Arabic words and names in their inscriptions throughout their history, a fact historians invoke when explaining their “Arabism.” Shahid suggests that the Nabataeans “remained Arab in ethos and mores and above all in their use of the Arabic language” (1984a, p. 9).

The first century B.C. was the zenith of the Nabataean kingdom. King Aretas II, an “energetic expansionist,” was the first “to strike coins” (Bowersock, 1983, pp. 22-23). According to Hammond, the minting of independent coinage “fed the national self consciousness of the people” (1973, p. 109). Aretas’ successor, Obadas I, defeated Alexander Jannaeus, a Jewish leader, whose army was “broken to pieces by the multitudes of camels” (Josephus, 1960, p. 9), forcing him to surrender some captured territory. About 88-87 B.C. he also defeated Antiochus XII, a Seleucid king, who was killed in a second battle. The Nabataeans thus “brought to an effective end the Seleucid dynasty” (Graf, 1994, p. 305).

Aretas III pursued the policy of expansionism and was able to occupy Damascus, from which he mounted an “expedition against Judaea and beat Alexander in battle; but afterwards retired by mutual agreement” (Josephus, 1960, p. 10). While in Damascus, Aretas minted coins with epithets describing him as “philhellene.” Sometime near A.D. 35, Saint Paul was being sought by Aretas’ governor of Damascus, a matter that made him escape the city: “I was let down in a basket

through a window in a wall, and so escaped his hand” (Corinthians 11:32-33). Further, when Hyrcanus, a Jewish leader, sought Aretas’ help in “Petra ... the royal seat of the King of Arabia” against his brother Aristobulus, who had usurped his throne, Aretas provided him with a huge army consisting of “fifty thousand footmen, and horsemen.” Aristobulus was defeated and “was driven to Jerusalem,” where he could have been “taken by force, if Scaurus, a Roman general, had not come and seasonably interposed himself, and raised the siege” (Josephus, 1960, p. 12).

With the coming of the Romans, a new page in the history of the Nabataeans unfolds. It shows the “flowering” of the Nabataean “civilization” (Bowersock, 1983, pp. 59-60). As soon as the Romans began to occupy the Middle East, Scaurus, Pompey’s general in Syria, tried to occupy the Nabataean kingdom. He “made an expedition into Arabia, but was stopped by the difficulty of the places about Petra”; and Scaurus asked Aretas “to pay him money to buy his peace” (Josephus, 1960, p. 16). In this incident, history repeated itself: Scaurus, like Antigonus 300 years earlier, would settle for a financial solution, which the Nabataeans were willing to pay in order to protect their independence.

The change that took place in the kingdom is attested to by Strabo (66 B.C. to 24 A.D.), a Roman historian, who depicts the Nabataeans’ life toward the late first century B.C. as “sedentary, temperate and industrious and with stringent laws concerning theft” (Hammond, 1973, p. 17). Strabo, in his *Geography*, derived this information “from his friend Athenodorus, a Stoic philosopher and the tutor of Augustus, who was born in Petra” (Robinson, 1930, p. 471). Strabo states that Petra “has excellent laws for the administration of public affairs,” that the “natives had never any dispute amongst themselves, and lived together in perfect harmony” (p. 472). His description testifies that these people had become urbanized, cultured, and democratically governed. This in itself reinforces the proofs that they had effected change in their lives from a nomadic to a civic society.

Roman civil wars contributed to Nabataean commercial development. In 47 B.C., King Malichus I sent cavalry to Alexandria in support of Julius Caesar against Pompei. He was also able to secure the “goodwill of Octavian, by a master stroke,” when he “sent forces to burn the ships which Cleopatra had managed to salvage from the debacle at Actium and had beached in the vicinity of Suez” (Bowersock, 1983, p. 43). Aretas IV, known as the “lover of his people,” who ruled in the first century A.D., had ushered in “a golden age of Nabataean civilization” (p. 45). However, the route of development he implemented did not prevent him from waging a war against Herod Antipas, who had divorced Aretas’ daughter to marry his own niece and sister-in-law, Herodias. One of the results of this marriage was that John the Baptist was beheaded by Antipas, to satisfy his promise to Salome, his wife’s daughter, after she danced her famous dance for him (Lawlor, 1974, pp. 18, 113).

Malichus II, Aretas’ son, continued his father’s “policy of urban growth and a peaceful transition from commerce to agriculture” (Bowersock, 1983, p. 69). The Nabataeans’ last king, Rabel II, who assumed the throne in A.D. 70, was

described on his coins as the one “who brought life and deliverance to his people.” He distinguished himself “on two counts in particular: the increased use of irrigation in the Negev for the development of terraced agriculture and the transfer of the royal capital from Petra to Bostra” (p. 73) in present-day southern Syria.

The Romans’ discovery of alternative trade routes in the Red Sea contributed to Nabataea’s decline. Despite this, the Nabataeans were able to successfully repel a “series of subsequent attacks” by the Romans between 62 and 55 B.C. (Graf, 1994, p. 271). Finally, in A.D. 106, Trajan had to “reduce Petra in order to actually establish any de facto control over the kingdom, regardless of Roman pretensions to the contrary” (Hammond, 1973, p.108).

Social developments: Class structure and role diversification

In less than three centuries, the Nabataeans had developed their nomadic society to become organized, urbanized, and agricultural. To Hammond (1973), the “monarchic structure of the Nabataeans” set them apart “from the rest of the Arab tribes of that era and later.” Further, he believes, they were able to “absorb” other tribes “into a federation,” which led to a “nascent nationalism (i.e., a self awareness of Nabataeans as such)” (p. 106).

They had developed a rigid and structured class by the later Nabataean period, which resulted in “urbanization and commercial expansion,” enabling the society “to function efficiently.” They developed a “hierarchy of roles” that included “division of the military arm at the top ranks.” In the management of their labour force, the Nabataeans “developed a number of professional, trade, and labor groups.” They also had “musicians, singers, sculptors, artists and other craftsmen and professionals in the ‘non-essential’ realms of a commercial and agricultural society.” The Nabataeans were democratic as is reflected in their treatment of women. There was “strong public female participation and high respect for women within [their] society” (Hammond, 1973, pp. 109-111).

Economic development and the division of labour

Although international trade was the source of Nabataean wealth, more accurately, “the spirit of alert enterprise” was their “chief asset” (Glueck, 1965, p. 537). According to Hammond (1973), “the economic structure of Nabataea was varied and extensive in its scope” (p. 109). In addition to monopolizing trade routes that linked South Arabia with the Mediterranean, Syria, Egypt, and the West, they monopolized the balsam and bitumen industries. The Nabataeans also supplied passing caravans with provisions, a matter that led to the development of villages along these trade routes. As these centres moved toward self-sufficiency, they became more urbanized and agriculturally productive. Thus, “from the necessity to overproduce came the spectacular Nabataean hydraulic engineering which revolutionized the agriculture of that day” (Hammond, 1973, pp. 109-110). Present-day water engineers in Israel make use of original Nabataean installations and engineering methods (Lawlor, 1974, p. 84), which are also still in use in Jordan.

The expansion of commercial markets resulted, according to Hammond, in the “establishment of agencies ... travelling agents” and “professional trade and

labor groups,” a clear indication of labour division. He believes that Petra, the capital and headquarters of these operations, served as a “manufacturing center or a processing depot more probably for the ‘balm’ or perfume trade which shipped its wares westward..” An example of this, Hammond suggests, is of course the notorious jar of precious oil that “had to be broken in order to pour its contents” on Jesus Christ at the house of Mary and Martha, an event that made Judas, the treasurer, loudly lament the high expense of the product (Hammond, 1973, pp. 66-72). The Nabataeans also engaged, among other things, in the industry of ceramic goods, cult figurines, and lamps. They provided Jerusalem “with much needed salt” and engaged in copper mining in the Sinai (Lawlor, 1974, p. 75). This demonstrates the division of labor in Nabataean commerce.

The Nabataeans excelled in two methods of agriculture: terracing, and wadi-farming. They built dams and cisterns, which allowed them to push “the boundaries of agriculture farther into the desert than any other people in this part of the world” (Lawlor, 1974, p. 84).

To conclude, it is obvious that the development of the Nabataeans was sophisticated and complete: from a nomadic Bedouin society they became a diverse civic society. The following points supply proofs of this transformation:

- *Society.* The Nabataeans provided a “sophisticated legal organization” to run their lives (Bowersock, 1983, p. 77). Inscriptions show “well developed legal and contractual clauses” necessary for commercial operations (Hammond, 1973, p. 109). The papyri documents of Babatha, in Nabataean, Greek, and Aramaean, dating to A.D. 93-99, written during the reign of Rabel II, “reveal a stable and peaceful society in which a modest Nabataean bureaucracy can be seen accommodating the efforts of a Jewish family to establish itself within the Nabataean Kingdom in a neighborhood of Arabs” (Bowersock, 1983, p. 77).
- *The arts.* The Nabataeans were a “society not without a high degree of aesthetic interest” (Hammond, 1973, p. 111). They excelled in the art of pottery, which was “extraordinarily fine, well-fired, highly decorated,” and ornamented with “painted designs” (Lawlor, 1974, p. 86). Their art influenced the Copts in Egypt, the Byzantines, and the Arab Ommayads (Glueck, 1965, p. 533).
- *Religion.* As pagans, the Nabataeans worshipped many gods comparable to those that prevailed in the civilized cultures of the time. Their “principal God” was “Dushara (Dousares in Greek)” (Bowersock, 1983, p.122), whom Glueck called Zeus-Hadad, the “multifaceted deity” (1965, p. 472). Al-Uzza was a second major goddess who was identified with the Syrian Atargatis—the Arabian Aphrodite (Bowersock, 1983, p. 87). However, when the time was ripe, they converted en masse to “Byzantine Christianity” (Glueck, 1965, p. 51).
- *Written language.* For the Nabataeans, writing was a holy act: most striking was their adoration of the goddess al-Kutba, who as “a

scribe-type deity” (Hammond, 1973, p. 97) attests to the importance of writing in that culture. Strugnell (1959) concludes that this goddess is “a scribal god of the Nabu/Thoth/Hermes /Mercury pattern” (p. 35). Albright (1959) believes that al-Kutba was a reflection “of the Babylonian-Aramaean planetary god Nabu” who “controlled the destiny of man” and was “in charge of the learning contained in the cuneiform tablets” (p. 37). Milik & Teixidor (1961) believe that the meaning of this divinity is “the great he/she scribe,” whose “principal sanctuary was situated” in Petra. She was described “also in documents of Syriac literature[,]” which reveal that her cult was founded in the cities of “Edessa, Nisbis and Mahuze” (pp. 22-24).

- *Philosophy.* Hellenic culture prospered in Nabataea. Two sophists from Petra could be identified: Callinicus, who was “sufficiently distinguished to practice rhetoric in Athens itself[,]” in which profession he was “confronted with a rival, Genethlius, who was also a native of Petra” (Bowersock, 1983, p. 135). Bowersock concludes that “complex philosophical discussions appear to have been conducted among the educated persons” in Petra (ibid.).
- *Oral tradition.* Unfortunately, the Nabataean culture relied solely on oral communication to preserve its literature. Never written down, this literature was preserved “in memories and related verbally from one generation to another, a tradition still practiced by the Bedouins of the Near East and an indication of how strongly the Nabataeans adhered to their original customs” (‘Amr, 1987, p. 12).
- *Cultural interaction.* The Nabataeans were active participants in “an enriching interchange of goods and cultural influences” (Glueck, 1965, p. 537). Lawlor quotes Hammond, who sees in the Nabataean capital “the best example of the desert culture that brought Petra to her zenith and made her the queen of a thousand commercial holdings, ruling the trade routes that were an avenue of culture from the fourth century BC to the end of the first century of the present era” (Lawlor, 1974, pp. 12-14).

This brief overview clearly shows that the Nabataeans, between the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D., were able to transform themselves into a highly “organized” (Logan) social system. Theirs was a vibrant desert culture, unique in its characteristics and achievements and effecting considerable growth (Smith) in the lives of its people. These changes were profound; they transformed nomads into a settled people, trader-caravanserais into manufacturers, and unorganized tribe-raiders into a disciplined army, thus effecting the “psychical transformation” (Smith) necessary to bring about the achievements that carried them to great heights. By their ingenuity in agricultural and water-preserving methods, the Nabataeans made the desert bloom. Their economic development made them a pragmatic, wealthy nation stabilized by stringent laws. They diversified their economy and created “divisions in labor” (Smith). The Nabataeans decentralized

their hierarchical society to oversee the small industries they built and to supervise the endless trade routes their caravans traversed. This increased their “efficiency” (Innis) in both bureaucracy and in architecture, their second best achievement. Their finest contribution, however, was the development of a national script.

The Nabataeans actively participated and interacted with other nations. Freedom, individuality, and “creativity” (Innis) were valued aspects of their lives; their “sense of ourselves” (Logan) was profound. Although a small nation, the Nabataeans were very proud people who relished their independence. When their trade monopoly began to decline, it did not drive them to despair, but prompted them to conquer new frontiers. They penetrated deeper into their ever secure haven, the desert, erecting glorious monuments in Petra and Mada’in Salih (in Saudi Arabia). Their best qualities were genuineness and flexibility: they knew their strengths and limitations and were a very pragmatic people. To Glueck, theirs was “a success story ... one of the most fascinating ... of any age” (1965, p. 11). As a people, they were to rise in the span of less than three centuries from a nomadic lifestyle to agricultural, commercial, and artistic prominence. Hammond finds sufficient evidence in the communal Nabataean character to suggest that Rome’s annexation of Nabataea in A.D. 106 did not annihilate this society. Their influence “continued to be felt throughout subsequent eras in many ways” (1973, p. 38), foremost among which was their communication legacy.

Communication and independence

Communication scholars, beginning with Innis, have long attempted to examine the relationship between communication and the rise and fall of organizations/empires. Innis (1972) describes the impact of the invention of writing on the states/empires of the ancient world as follows:

Writing enormously enhanced capacity for abstract thinking.... Man’s activities and powers were roughly extended in proportion to the increased use, and perfection of, written records.... An extended social structure strengthened the position of an individual leader.... The sword and pen worked together... Power was increased by concentration in a few hands, specialization of function was enforced,.... The monarchies of Egypt and Persia, the Roman empire, and the city-states were essentially products of writing. (p. 10)

His statement applies very well to Nabataea. But when Innis says that “the spread of Aramaic hastened the growth of trading oligarchies under the shelter of the Assyrian imperial structure” (1973, p. 54), he is referring only to Phoenicia and the Aramaean city-states. Nabataea, on the other hand, distinguished itself from the Syrian city-states by remaining politically independent. In such states, the pen did not go with the sword. Free trade helped the Nabataeans maintain an independent state for several centuries to build a varied and profitable economic infrastructure. Although a small nation, Nabataea managed, by the use of the sword sometimes and diplomacy at others, to remain independent.

Mastery of an international language

The Nabataeans' gift for not only surviving but prevailing is best manifested in the development of their most ingenious achievement, the communication media of script. The following events testify to the importance of communication in their lives. At the time Nabataea emerged in the history of Diodorus, Aramaic was already, according to Hitti, "the vehicle of international commerce from India to Ethiopia" and "the international language of diplomacy" (1960, p. 105?); but by 500 B.C. Aramaic had become, "with local variations, the vernacular of the entire Fertile Crescent" (p. 106). Its triumph over Hebrew made it the language in which Christ communicated his message (Hitti, 1960, p. 106). It is no wonder then that the Nabataeans spoke Aramaic, the international language of the time, to communicate with Antigonus, who, c. 311 B.C., failed to conquer their land. They thus mastered the medium of international relations early in their politically organized life, proving the centrality of communication to their activities.

Arabic: The mother tongue

With the coming of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., the process of Hellenization took effect, to the degree that Greek replaced Aramaic. Although some Arab entities had "acculturated," some did not integrate, as is the case with the Nabataeans, "who kept their traditional laws, ancestral customs, Semitic rites, and the Arabic language" (Shahid, 1984a, pp. 153, 10).

Their salient and strategic position in the region was also crucial for reinforcing Nabataean culture with traditional language and values. Unlike the rest of their Arab neighbours to the north, the Nabataeans remained independent until A.D. 106. They interacted with Arabia by virtue of trading with the south. Among all Arab peoples they therefore remained "most retentive of their (particular) Arab identity" (Shahid, 1984a, p. 13). Trading activities over several centuries kept them in close contact with "the sophisticated south Arabian civilization" (Glueck, 1965, p. 4) and forced them to continue using the "language of the peninsula for purely commercial reasons" (Shahid, 1989, pp. 11-12). Their "lexicon" shows links "with other south Arabian tribes" (Hammond, 1973, p. 106).

Their central position helped to reinforce their Arabic language with borrowings from other cultures. Hammond finds out that in their vocabulary they intermixed "loan-words of Persian, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Accadian, and Egyptian origin, as was common among all Near Eastern dialects of the time" (1974, pp. 10, 111). Even the theory that advocates that the Nabataeans "arose in the Mesopotamian sphere" and that their trade activities carried them as far as the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Persian Gulf (Graf, 1990, pp. 66-7), is another indication of the wide scope of their business activities. From Petra, they were able to connect and interact with all the ancient cultures.

Nabataean script

While using Aramaic in governmental and commercial activities, the Nabataeans used Arabic for discourse (Shahid, 1984a, p. 9). Nabataean inscriptions, numbering around 4,000, have been found in the Near East and as far as Rome itself, wherever a Nabataean merchant colony existed (Healey, 1990, p. 238). These

inscriptions, which have “contributed greatly in piecing together the Nabataeans’ history,” are mostly of a “funerary nature, many are honorary; others are dedicatory, and some are architectural” (Lawlor, 1974, pp. 20-22). The inscriptions usually include Arab words and names. But the fact remains, per Healey, “that the Nabataeans normally spoke Arabic,” a matter that “is reflected in the intrusion of certain distinctively Arabic forms and words into the Aramaic of their inscriptions” (1990, p. 246). To Hammond “about 90% of all names used by Nabataeans were of Arabic etymological origin” (1974, pp. 10, 111).

The Nabataeans, however—in addition to using pure Arabic, their mother tongue, in their daily discourse—were conversant enough to write “in a script peculiarly their own” (Glueck, 1965, p. 7), or as Hammond (1973) put it, “in a peculiar semi-cursive script” (p. 111). They developed their own “national script,” which evolved “from the Aramaic hand of the late Persian empire” (Cross, 1990, p. 87). Persia used Aramaic because it was the *lingua franca* of the time.

The Nabataean script itself is found in two forms: the “formal,” used “for monumental inscriptions,” as on tombs, and the “cursive,” which was “used principally on papyrus” (Healey, 1990, p. 246). The modern Arabic script, used by Arabs and those influenced by the Arab-Muslim civilization, descended from the cursive form. Bellamy (1990) refers to another interpretation when he suggests that a “late form of the Nabataean alphabet, found in the Sinai Peninsula and hence called Sinaitic, is believed by many scholars to be the immediate ancestor of the Arabic alphabet” (p. 96).

The medium of script and social change

Examining the historical period when this medium emerged in Nabataea is significant. The development of the Nabataeans’ national script coincided with two events: the emergence of Nabataea as an independent kingship, and the declining Greek control of neighbouring areas. When the Nabataeans realized they could withstand the encroachments of the Seleucids and the Ptolemaics and even defeat them, the result was an increased national confidence. To feed that national pride, the Nabataeans minted coins and created a flexible national script with which to write their Arabic language and carry out commercial transactions. Hammond (1973) comments on the emergence of the Nabataean national script as follows:

Yet even here the individuality of the Nabataeans soon asserted itself, and their script assumed independent development into a semi-cursive, ligatured form by not later than the second quarter of the second century BC. By that point, Greek control of outlying areas had weakened and then ceased, and Nabataean national identity had begun to realize itself. (p. 10)

The development of a national script that adjusted itself to classical Arabic should not be considered in isolation from the Nabataean scribe goddess, al-Kutba. The importance of her name springs from the fact that the name itself is associated in Arabic with “writing.” In this sense, writing to the Nabataeans was central, a holy act of communication, as it was amongst most ancient cultures. The Nabataeans were individualistic enough to have their own deity for writing, as did

other great nations of the time. (The Sumerians had Nebo, the Egyptians Thot, the Greeks Athene, and the Romans Hermes.)

A flexible script

The Nabataean script would over time become better designed to express Arabic sounds. Additionally, it would have an advantage over competing scripts: South Arabian, or proto-Arabic script, had never really developed to a significant level. The Sabaeans of the south, writes Bellamy, had formed powerful “trading colonies along the trade routes far to the North” and were “literate[,]” having left “innumerable inscriptions” dating back to the sixth century B.C. (1990, pp. 95-96). Unfortunately, the Sabaeans’ script of South Arabia (which survives in present-day Ethiopia) never developed and thus was not destined to survive in the Arab culture. Instead, the Nabataeans opted to develop the Aramaean, which they found more representative and more versatile. This is obvious in “the gradual emergence of Arabisms in later inscriptions” (Hammond, 1973, p.10), indicating that Aramaean was developed to accommodate Arabic sounds and names.

Although both Greek and Roman Empires had dominated the Near East for more than 10 centuries, their script never gained a foothold there. The “Latin alphabet marched” with the Roman legions (Stroud, 1990, p. 117) and spread in Western Europe, but it failed in two cultures: Greece itself and the Arab world. Although Rome was, in the words of Wallace, “the major political force in Greece from the second century BC[,]” the “linguistic habits of the Greeks [had] not really [been] altered at all. The Greek language continued to be written in the system inherited from Phoenicians in the ninth century” (1990, p. 132). The Nabataean script succeeded in checking the proliferation of Latin script, exactly as it had succeeded in checking the Greek language, which “exclusively appears throughout the region” by the third century A.D. (Graf, 1989, p. 394) .

The sword, the pen, and the self

With the emergence of an independent kingship, Nabataea began to develop a sense of identity and uniqueness essential for any nation. This era witnessed, writes Hammond, “the gradual emergence of Arabisms in later inscriptions, as well as the preponderance of Arabic names” and “certain linguistic shifts from Aramaic usage” (1973, p. 10). This development signifies the emergence of an organized political power (“the sword,” to Innis) helped to feed the national identity (its “sense of self,” to Logan) of this unique people and encouraged the development of its national symbols, of which the script (or “pen,” to Innis) was the most valued and effective.

The Nabataeans’ steadfastness (which is a part of their national identity) tells the story better. With the Roman Empire knocking at their door, the Nabataeans were forced to adjust their policies. They undoubtedly faced a dilemma: having been able to reach this far in developing their “sense of self” (Logan), which had effected great “changes” (Smith) in their lives, they now had to face the hegemony of this mighty neighbour, a situation that surely left them at a crossroads. They had either to surrender to the Romans or resist them. Their decision was congruent with their history: they opted to “resist the force of imperial Rome” from

their desert “fortress” (Hammond, 1973, pp. 38-39). Since they had been able to sustain their entity longer than any other Arab entity in the Middle East, and to keep it independent in the face of the attempts of various powers of the past, it appears that their kings were very confident they could stand up in the face of the new conquerors.

Creativity and continuity

Discovering that the source of their economic wealth was waning through the direct acts and policies of Rome itself, their last kings realized that they had to face the new situation with new vision. As capable and nationalistic as the leaders were, they had no alternative but to stand up to Rome’s designs as they had in the past. If continuity was their goal, they had to foil these attempts to destroy their independence. In order to achieve this aim, they had no choice but to carve a new ingenious path, with patience.

Their new policy of defiance and resistance helped the Nabataeans to prevail . Embarking on urbanization and development was an expression of the maturity of their national identity and their determination to face Rome’s hegemony. They had to become “self-satisfied.” While they were carrying out this new policy, increased centralization helped to bring about a climate favourable to creative thought. Being a people “sensitive to beauty[,]” as shown in their buildings and pottery (Glueck, 1965, p. 5), they had to devise a new symbol, a more powerful one, to signify their development and resistance. The one they chose would be in line with the statement of an equally agile theorist some 2,000 years later: Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message.”

Standardization of the Nabataean script

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Nabataean script became “standardized” (Derlinger, 1968, p. 209), allowing for wider use. Roman pressure brought about standardization, a sign that this script was being accepted in wider circles. Roman pressure also caused the Nabataeans to look for a new front line to which they could retreat if the need arose. At the same time, they moved their capital to Bostra, in present-day southern Syria. They had only a short time to build on their national standardized medium of writing, a significant new cultural dimension stemming not only from their formidable resolve, but also from their renewed spirit of defiance. For the Nabataeans, it was essential that this new medium should be comparable with, and improve upon, other communication mediums of the ancient world. It should also signify their resistance. Therefore, significant measures during the first century A.D. had to be taken. King Aretas IV (A.D. 8 to 40) and his successors pursued a vigorous policy of development, urbanization, economic growth, and increasing settlement of the people. More significantly, Aretas IV built the greatest monuments of Petra. According to Bowersock, these monuments are

the theater cut in the rock ... and the free-standing temple in the center of the city with the popular name of Qasr al-bint ... [showing] that the Nabataeans, in the days of their independence, had developed a highly sophisticated style under the influence of the Hellenic tastes of the eastern Roman Empire. The

theater is an even more obvious case of the Nabataean absorption of Graeco-Roman styles.... Petra was, after all, a cosmopolitan place.... Furthermore, ... it becomes highly probable that the stunning facade of the so-called Khazneh (Treasury) belongs to the same age. (Bowersock, 1983, pp. 60-64)

These symbols of development and resistance mark a new phase in the life of the Nabataeans, a phase that exhibits their success as a nation in effecting direct control over the local environment. The Nabataeans in their last years became self-sufficient agriculturally, which allowed them to give up their monopoly over trade routes. The new policy made the desert bloom and the rocks speak.

For a century and a half, the Nabataeans were able to coexist with the Romans, during which time they readjusted their internal policies toward more urbanization, centralization, and mobilization. Urbanization brought with it new forms of labour division (Smith) such as the development of sophisticated water-control systems, terrace and wadi-agriculture, and the mining of the Sinai for copper. In fact, the Nabataeans were effecting a total change in their lives: from nomadic caravaners to urban settlers. As proof of this new sense of self, the "psychical transformation" (Smith), and the influence of their script rendering their lives more efficient, conditions became more conducive to creativity.

Increased centralization

The Roman pressure, and the resistance generated by that pressure, resulted in the Nabataeans raising their national consciousness. They took stock and realized that the only medium in the desert, their safe haven, that could challenge time was rocks. They chose the rocks as a secondary medium to the written word to send a highly representative message. This message, which they did not inscribe but hewed with chisel, would emphasize "the importance of monarchy and centralized power" (Innis, 1972, p. 54). It was intended to be universal, as Petra became more cosmopolitan. The Nabataeans' message was designed to last forever, challenging the human imagination of any culture and conquering the two dimensions of time and space. It certainly expressed their artistic pre-eminence over other contemporary civilizations, Rome included, in a durable medium. The widely travelled Nabataeans consciously attempted to create monuments with which they might surpass the wonders of the ancient world. Theirs was a message of resistance, challenge, and hope.

A second communication legacy

During the last years of their independence, the Nabataeans lived in peace and prosperity. Their kingdom was, in the words of Bowersock, knitted "together by a royal road system that provided easy communication" (1983, p. 74). When the kingdom was later annexed, its political power "disappeared ... but the spirit which had permitted the resistance to that dominion lived on, especially in Art" (Hammond, 1973, p. 112), but also in script. It is no wonder then that a Roman emperor later took pride in giving Petra his name, impelled by a sense of its divinity, as was Burgon, 2,000 years later, when he wrote that it was "no work of man's creative hand." This was the Nabataeans' second great communication legacy: proving that a medium can retain a universal message that challenges time.

Annexation as one effect of a flexible medium

Monopoly over trade routes, political organization, economic viability, and a deep sense of self allowed the Nabataeans to develop their script. It was a flexible medium of communication, whose makers' nascent nationalism and long years of steadfastness had given them greater precision in controlling their immediate environment, the desert (much like neighbouring civilizations, which had gained control over the Nile and the Euphrates). This final phase of the Nabataean civilization also brought with it new divisions of labour, generating more organization and defiance, which in turn led to the flowering of creative thought. By emphasizing the time dimension in the development of their script first, and monuments second, the Nabataean civilization was inviting annexation—rather than occupation—to a far more organized superior power using more flexible media. Romans, and Greeks before them, used vowels, and this was done by changing the unused consonants borrowed from the Phoenician. The inclusion of the vowels allowed for the Latin script to become more flexible than the Nabataean script, which did not have vowels at that stage. Hence, annexation of Nabataea was made possible because the Romans used a better medium of communication.

The Arabian provinces

The annexation of political Nabataea was a victory in itself, for its cultural-communication effect continued in the Middle East during the next centuries. Shahid (1984a) suggests that for a century and a half after the annexation in A.D. 106,

the Nabataean Arabs had remained independent but clients of the Romans. The annexation of Nabataea and its conversion into a province entailed the acquisition by Rome of a vast territory inhabited by Arabs, and this territory included not only Sinai, Trans-Jordan, and Trans-Araba, but also a large part of Hijaz in northwestern Arabia. Its Arabs were the oldest organized Arab group in the region politically and commercially, and their territory, Nabataea, formed probably the most thoroughly Arab and Arabized province in the whole of the Orient. Even in the fourth century, ecclesiastical history testifies to the use of the Arabic vernacular in the province for the celebration of the pagan Arab liturgy. The Arab character of Nabataea was reflected onomastically after the annexation. (pp. 14-15)

Furthermore, the Romans named the new province Arabia, emphasizing its ethnic character. Healey (1990) observes that during “the first half of the first millennium AD, the Arabic language was spreading into the area of Palestine, Jordan and Syria, replacing the older (Arabian) language of the area as well as Aramaic, which had become traditional” (pp. 246-247).

The third communication legacy: The rise of modern Arabic script

The most significant Nabataean communication effect (legacy) was the everlasting inheritance they left for their Arab kin—a script that had been dispersed worldwide. In the hands of those who followed, the script of the Nabataeans would continue to evolve, rendering life more efficient, until its adopters, i.e., Arabs, prevailed 500 years later.

With the peaceful annexation of the Arab kingdom in A.D. 106, the highly civilized Nabataeans continued to live in their villages and towns. Petra itself was designated by Trajan a metropolis by A.D. 114. Trajan's successor, Hadrian, conferred his name on Petra around A.D. 130, and "henceforth Petra rejoiced in the epithet Hadriane" (Bowersock. 1983, pp. 85, 110), which revealed that the Romans did not diminish the role of Petra, but retained it as an important centre. Its annexation gave Petra a golden chance to spread its culture and script, while keeping the spread of Greek and Latin scripts in check. When Rome was converted to Christianity in the fourth century, there was mass conversion among the Nabataeans to the new religion they had previously resisted. Political continuity allowed the Nabataean legacy, especially its script (which had proven itself operational enough), to spread widely among other Arab groups in the Middle East. Hammond (1973) suggests that Nabataean descendants, 800 years later, remembered "their ancestry and could boast of its achievements in their writings." He specifically refers to "Abu Bakr Ahmad ibn Ali ibn Qais ibn Wahsiyah[,] known as 'An-Nabati' " (pp. 38-39).

Inscriptions as historical evidence

Nabataean-dated inscriptions, although few in number, reveal the continuity of this influential culture very clearly. The most famous among these inscriptions is the Namara (found on the tomb of Imru'l-qais, king of all Arabs in south Syria), which dates back to A.D. 328 and about which Bowersock writes:

This early Arabic text, written in Nabataean letters, is in itself an illustration of the emergence of the Arabs from their long dependence on various dialects of Aramaic, such as Nabataean and Palmyrene, for public documents. The Namara Inscription begins: "this is the tomb of Imr'l-qais, the son of 'Amr, king of all Arabs." (1983, pp. 138-139)

Shahid (1984b) suggests that the language of this inscription was "classical Arabic" (p. 447). The inscription shows that the Arabic language, by the fourth century A.D., had adopted the Nabataean Arabic script, which represented, according to Healey, "the outcome of a continuous tradition of writing in ... the Hejaz-Jordan-Syria area" (Healey, 1990, p. 249). Hence we may conclude that later Muslim Arabs who ruled from the Hejaz (Mecca) area in the seventh century A.D. opted to continue using the Nabataean script, which the Nabataeans had developed. Derlinger's observation thus becomes true: "the unifying force of Arabic ... is the main reason for the extinction of Aramaic" (1968, p. 198). The Nabataean script had won the round over competing scripts, Syriac included.

The spread of Arabic and the enduring legacy of Nabataea

After the annexation, the Nabataeans became intermediaries between the south of Nabataea and Rome and Greece. This new position gave them an upper hand in maintaining their culture and keeping their script intact. That the vitality of the Nabataean-derived Arab script was later able to expel, in Derlinger's words, "the Greek alphabet from Anatolia, Syria and Egypt, the Latin from Northern Africa,

and the Cyrillic from Bosnia” (1968, p. 11), marks the climax of the Nabataean major communication effect.

It is possible to conclude, therefore, that the Arabic script, which finally arose from the Nabataean, was used by the early Arab Muslims. This script attained “the widest circulation” and was used to reproduce not only the Arabic language but also the Persian, Turkish, Tartarian, Afghan, Hindustani (Urdu), Malaysian, Swahili, Husa, Hebrew, Berber, Bosnian, Ukrainian, Polish (Bellamy, 1990, p. 92; Derlinger, 1968, p. 211; Jensen, 1970, p. 305), and most recently Fallani (in Africa) languages. Arabic became the international language in the Middle Ages, as is English today.

The Arabic and Latin scripts in use today, according to Healey (1990), might “be regarded as the culmination of a major historical phase in which writing by means of a relatively simple alphabetic system became the foundation of European and Middle Eastern culture, replacing the old traditions which had existed for millennia before” (p. 200). Clearly the Nabataean culture continues to live into the present among those who write in the Arabic alphabet. For those who do not use the Arabic script, the fascinating messages emanating from Petra, or Reckeem, should testify to the ingenuity of its people. The Nabataean kingdom thus, in the history of the First Communication Revolution, becomes, for posterity, an “empire” as important in the Near East as Greece is in the West.

Conclusion

It has been suggested by significant scholars that communication occupies a “crucial position” in the rise and fall of empires. This study demonstrates that the development of a very important medium, the written script, requires a highly organized civic society, one powerful enough not only to produce, but also to promote it. The Syriac script was never able to achieve such a status, unlike the Nabataean. Communication, in the Nabataean Arab kingdom, was central to various activities. It played a significant role in the organization and rise of this kingdom, and in its prolonged effectiveness. The script’s effectiveness was not limited to Nabataea itself, but, like a wave, the script spread across Arabia and became a unifying force. It was destined to reach its pinnacle a few hundred years later, when Nabataea itself fell tragically into oblivion, as a mirage evaporates into the desert. Nabataea’s culture is an excellent example of the transition from an oral tradition to writing. Three ancient nations—Phoenicia, Greece, and Nabataea—conferred on humanity the greatest invention ever made by man. That the kingdom of Nabataea left no recorded literature of its own could be viewed as another great paradox in the history of the East.

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