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History, Culture and Spirituality of the Ancient Biblical Peoples of the Transjordan Area

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Abstract

The present study aims to present – briefly – some elements of history, culture and spirituality of the ancient peoples residing, in antiquity, in the Transjordanian space: the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Edomites and the Nabataeans; In terms of their spirituality, the divisions of the past, the forms of worship, the places of worship and the cult staff (priests) were highlighted. The books of the Old Testament and the results of archeological investigations are available to us as sources of information.

Keywords

The Old Testament, Holy Land, Jordan, spirituality, biblical peoples.

I. Introductory considerations

In ancient times, the region on both sides of the Jordan River was generally inhabited by semi-nomadic populations, who were engaged in agriculture and animal raising. In this area, since the ninth century BC, there has been a desire to centralize the tribes in the form of a national state organization, led by a governor and with a strong ethnic identity, based on values

preserved within the family. Historical sources show that these small states in the Transjordan area retained their independence until the period of Assyrian rule led by Tiglathpileser II, and following his military actions against Damascus and Israel in 734-732 BC, the neighboring kingdoms. Jordan became vassals of the Assyrian Empire¹.

The tribes that occupied the Transjordanian space at the beginning of the first millennium BC. were distributed in this area as follows: *the Gileadites* settled between the city of Yarmuk and Zerqa, *the Ammonites* occupied the territory north of Heshbon, *the Moabites* encompassed the north and south of the Arnon, *the Edomites* settled in the center, between Zered and Negev, and also here, later, *the Nabataeans* managed to extend as far as Damascus; with the exception of the Gileadites, who were permanently under Jewish or Aramaic rule, the other Trans-Jordanian kingdoms managed to maintain their independence under a king, each with their own capitals².

In the present study, some elements of Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite and Nabataean history, culture and spirituality will be pointed out.

II. The peoples of the ancient Transjordanian space

II.1. Ammonites

The Ammonites³ were a semi-nomadic population of the mountainous heights of the northern Transjordanian area and gradually settled in the territory between the eastern course of the Jordan and the northern border with the Dead Sea and Heshbon. The settlement of the Ammonites in the area began at the end of the Bronze Age and lasted until the beginning of the Iron Age, being part of the extensive process of forming the Transjordanian nation-states, along with the Edomites and Moabites. At the end of the Bronze Age, the Ammonites were under the control of various competing political centers, but at the beginning of the ninth century BC. marked

¹ Paolo XELLA, *Religione e religioni in Siria – Palestina*, Carocci, Roma, 2007, p. 95.

² Herbert NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso dell'Israele antico*, trans. by Paolo Merlo, Paideia, Brescia, 2002, p. 211.

³ Randall W. YOUNKER, "Ammonites", in: A. J. HOERTH, G. MATTINGLY, E. M. YAMAUCHI (eds.), *Peoples of the Old Testament Times*, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, 1994, pp. 303-316; H. O. THOMPSON, F. ZAYADINE, "The Ammonite Inscription from Tell Siran", in: *Berytus*, 22 (1973), pp.115-140.

their organization in a well-organized state. It is the period in which the first inscriptions and statuettes appear, and the biblical mentions of the Ammonites date from the period between the 8th and 6th centuries BC. The first mention of Ammon appears in a neo-Assyrian list from 729 BC. and presenting the Ammonites as tributes to King Nimrod. The Ammonite king mentioned here is Shanipu, probably the same person who appears in an Ammonite inscription on a statue in the capital Rabbat Ammon. According to this list, Ammon appears as tributarian to the Assyrians along with Moab and Edom. Ammonite seals date back to around 750 BC, and from the 5th century BC, Ammon became a vassal of the Persian Empire. The last Ammonite king seems to have been Baalyta, according to the testimonies in the Ammonite royal lists⁴.

In relation to the Jewish biblical civilization, the Ammonites are mentioned during the occupation of Canaan, along with the Moabites who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites, for which reason they were forbidden to be part of the congregation of Israel until the tenth. generation (Deuteronomy 3, 11). Along with them, they are also in the time of the judges, the king of Moabite Eglon succeeding, for a time, to subdue the territory of Israel (Judges 3, 3). They are then expelled by Judge Jephthah (Judges 11), and Saul is also expelled from Jabesh Gilead (I Kings 1, 1-11). David puts an end to the Ammonite incursions into the territory of Israel, succeeding in occupying the Ammonite capital Ammon (II Kings 12, 26-31). King Solomon, however, would take his Ammonite wives into his harem, and these were the ones who caused him to worship the Ammonite god Moloch (III Kings 11, 1, 5, 7, 33). In the days of Jehoshaphat, the Ammonites united with the Moabites and the Edomites in an incursion against Judah (II Chron. 20, 1-3), and the strained relations between Judah and the Ammonites continued even after their return from Babylonian exile. In this sense we learn from the book of Nehemiah (2, 10; 4, 3) that the governor of Ammon opposes the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Ezra and Nehemiah, for their part, would forbid intermarriage, especially with Ammonite women (Ezra 9, 1-2; Nehemiah 13, 23-31). In the second century BC, Judas Maccabeus was still fighting against the Ammonites (I Maccabees 5, 6).⁵

⁴ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 99.

⁵ J. A. THOMPSON, "Amon. Amoniți", in: J. D. DOUGLAS (ed.), *Dicționar biblic*, vol. I, Editura "Cartea Creștină", Oradea, 1995, p. 32.

The capital of the Ammonites, Rabbat Ammon (now Amman, Jordan), became – in Hellenistic times – Philadelphia, named after King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282-246). The conquest of the Ammonite capital by the Romans in 63 BC. determined, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117), its integration into the Roman Arab province⁶.

II.2. The Moabites

The Moabites⁷ are another semi-nomadic population involved in the occupation of the Transjordan area, established on the territory bounded on the west by the Dead Sea, and on the east by the Arnon Valley and the Arabian Desert. Although until around 900 BC. Moab does not appear to be an organized political form, the name Moab is mentioned in an Egyptian document from the time of Pharaoh Ramses II, dated to the 13th century BC. In the struggle for survival and territorial expansion, the Moabites confront the local tribes first and then the Jews. Before crossing the Jordan, the Israelites invaded the plains of Moab, Balak, the king of Moab, asking the sorcerer Balaam to curse the Jews (Numbers 22, 1). In the plains of Moab, the Israelites were seduced by Moabite and Midianite women into idolatrous practices. Eglon, king of Moab, subdued Israel until Jericho for 18 years, and Elimelech of Bethlehem emigrated to Moab, and his sons married Moabite women, and Ruth became David's great-grandmother (Ruth 4, 18-22). David would later subdue Moab, who would regain his freedom only after Solomon's death⁸. King Omri and his son Ahab compelled the Moabites to pay tribute, but the Moabite revolts, mentioned in the inscription on Mesha's star, allowed them to fix their capital at Dhibon⁹.

The confrontations between the Jews and the Moabites can also be interpreted as a struggle for the supremacy of the deities worshiped by the two peoples, Yahweh and Kemosh, respectively, and one of the most important episodes of the battle is that in which the Moabite king Mesha

⁶ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 100.

⁷ G. L. MATTINGLY, "Moabites", in: A. J. HOERTH. G. MATTINGLY, E. M. YAMAUCHI (eds.), *Peoples of the Old Testament Times*, pp. 317-333.

⁸ J. A. THOMPSON, "Moab, Moabiții", p. 864.

⁹ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 103.

sacrifices his son to gain support from the divinity, this passage being rendered in the writings of the Old Testament, in II Kings III, 4-27. The king's gesture to sacrifice his son and successor in a holocaust ritual on the walls of the city causes the Israelites to retreat to their homeland¹⁰. The Moabites are often mentioned in the prophetic writings, many of which are directed against them (Isaiah 15-16; 20,10; Jeremiah 9, 26; 25, 21; 27: 3; Hezekiah 25, 8-11; Amos 2, 1- 3; Zephaniah 2, 8-11).¹¹

The chronology of the Moabite history, based on two Moabite royal inscriptions and numerous seals, as well as other archaeological evidence, identifies King Kemosyat, followed by Mesha, in the middle of the ninth century BC. Assyrian documents attest around 734 BC. a certain Moabite king Shalam, who pays tribute to the Assyrian Empire, and in 713 BC Moab participates in an anti-Syrian revolt under King Ashdod. During the reign of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, Moabites appear to be under the rule of Chemoshattu, and after 586 BC, in the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Moab came under Babylonian rule, and around 100 BC, it was integrated into the Nabataean kingdom¹².

II.3. The Edomites

The territory occupied by the Edomites stretched from the Zered River to Ras en-Naqb. Egyptian sources from the 14th-11th centuries BC certify the presence of a tribe, Şasu, in the Edomite territory, being a nomadic population organized in the form of local clans. Edom¹³ became a state-organized power around the ninth century BC, and in 796 BC. a Neo-Assyrian inscription lists the Edomites among the tributaries of the empire. It is believed that at this time Edom was the vassal of Damascus, while the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions mention several names of Edomite rulers: Qausmalak, Hairan and Qausgabar. At the beginning of the 7th century BC. the first Edomite architectural constructions also appear, and the fortress of Sela is highlighted as a form of concentration of political

¹⁰ Petre SEMEN, *Arheologia biblică în actualitate*, Editura Mitropoliei Moldovei și Bucovinei, Iași, 1997, p. 63; P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 104.

¹¹ J. A. THOMPSON, "Moab, Moabiții", p. 865.

¹² H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 214.

¹³ K. G. HOUGLUND, "Edomites", in: A. J. HOERTH, G. MATTINGLY, E. M. YAMAUCHI (eds.), *Peoples of the Old Testament Times*, pp. 335-347.

power, and in the 6th century BC, the capital of the Edomite kingdom was established in Bosra, the only city in Edom. In the 7th-6th centuries BC the flowering of the kingdom of Edom is noted, and its borders extend as far as Hebron in the north and Eilat in the south, and the city of the Negev becomes the suffrage of the Edomites¹⁴.

The Edomites are considered, in the Old Testament, to be the descendants of Edom or Esau (Genesis 36, 1-17), who owed their prosperity to agriculture, but also to the taxes they imposed on caravans crossing their land¹⁵. During the Holy Land conquest campaign, the Edomites did not allow the Israelites to cross their country. However, Israel was forbidden to hate its Edomite brother (Deut. 23, 7-8), as Joshua extended the territory of the tribe of Judah to the border with Edom, but did not take possession of its land (Josh. 15). Saul will be the one to fight Edom (I Kings 14, 47), but David will be the one to conquer the whole land of Edom where he will place garrisons (II Kings 8, 13-14). According to III Kings 11, 15-16, Joab, the leader of David's army, remained in Edom for six months, "until he had destroyed all the men". The conquest of Edom allowed Solomon to build a port at Etion Gheber and to exploit the copper mines in the area. For a long time the Edomites remained under the suzerainty of the Kingdom of Judah, often rebelling against it, Jehoshaphat (II Chronicles 20, 1), and Jehoram (IV Kings 8, 20-22; II Chronicles 21, 8-10), succeeding each time to defeat them. Amaziah was also to invade Edom, killing no less than 10,000 Edomites, whom he threw from the rocks of their capital Sela (IV Kings 14, 7; II Chronicles 25, 11-12). Uzziah would restore the port of Ezion-Geber, but later the port, as well as Jewish rule over Edom, would be permanently lost¹⁶.

The book of Avdie (Obadiah) is a prophecy directed exclusively against Edom. It should be noted that after the Babylonian exile, the Edomites, pushed by the Nabataeans, occupied the southern part of Judah, especially the area of Hebron, where the province of Idumea was founded. The disappearance of the kingdom of Edom is located in the Persian period, when the Nabataeans interposed over them, and in 127 BC. John Hircan's campaign marked the conquest of the Negev fortress, the only one that

¹⁴ H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 214.

¹⁵ Dumitru ABRUDAN, Emilian CORNÎȚESCU, *Arheologia biblică*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1994, p. 103.

¹⁶ J. A. THOMPSON, "Edom, Edomiții", p. 367.

had managed to maintain its independence even during Nabataean rule. This king forced them to circumcise them and incorporated them into the bosom of the Jewish people, Herod the Great being originally an Idumean.

II.4. The Nabateans

The loss of power over the Edomite Arab populations by the Persian Empire around 400 BC marked the development of a political force of the Nabataeans, who, in the fourth century BC, founded a kingdom in the Edomite territory. The Nabataeans¹⁷, originally from the northern Arabian tribes¹⁸, managed to establish themselves in territories previously ruled by the kingdom of Edom¹⁹. They appear in inscriptions under the name of *nabatu*, a rather obscure term which, in Nabataean and Greek sources, indicates a tribe called *shalamu*. As descendants of the Edomites, the Nabataeans fit perfectly into their culture, having some common deities and being speakers of an Aramaic dialect. The borders of the Nabataean kingdom, during the period of great flowering, extended to the Nile Delta in the west, and in the north and south to the Syrian territory of Hauran, respectively the Gulf of Aqaba; in the east of the kingdom the boundary extended to the Arabian Desert²⁰. The territory occupied by the Nabataeans represented an important point in the Indo-Arab trade relations of that period, which determined a demographic influx in the area.

The political center of the Nabataeans was established in the 4th century BC at Wadi Musa (he – Gi), and under the rule of kings Oboda III and Areta IV, the administrative and religious capital of the Nabataeans is fixed at Petra, although Bosra remained one of the most important Nabataean cities. The presence of the Nabataean kingdom in the history of the Middle East ended in Roman times, with the death of the last Nabataean king, Rabbi II (70-106 BC)²¹.

¹⁷ Robert WENNING, "The Nabateans in History", in: Konstantinos D. POLITIES (ed.), *The Word of the Nabataeans*, vol. II, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2007, pp. 25-44; J. STARCKY, "The Nabatheans. A Historical Sketch!", in: *Biblical Archaeologist*, 18 (1955), pp. 84-106.

¹⁸ D. F. GRAF, "The Origins of the Nabateans", in: *ARAM Periodical*, 2 (1990), pp. 45-75.

¹⁹ J. R. BARLETT, "From Edomites to Nabataeans: The Problem of Continuity", in: *ARAM Periodical*, 2 (1990), pp. 25-34.

²⁰ Philip C. HAMMOND, "The Nabataeans – Their history, culture and archeology", in: *Studies in Mediterranean Archeology*, 37 (1973), pp.18-20.

²¹ P. C. HAMMOND, "The Nabataeans", pp. 16-17.

However, the loss of political autonomy did not represent the end of Nabataean culture. The sources that provide information about the Nabataean kingdom are represented by a *corpus* consisting of funerary inscriptions and dedications of Nabataean origin, but mentions of Nabataeans must have reached Egypt or the Syrian-Palestinian and Arab territory. Literary testimonies about the Nabataeans are identified with the ancient authors Diodorus, Herodotus, Josephus, Pliny, Plutarch, Strabo, etc. Nabataean archeological finds, which are generally found in funerary constructions, are located in several cities in Jordan (at Petra, Wadi Ram and Kirbet et-Tannur), Israel (Negev), Arabia and the Egyptian delta (Madain Salih, Khirbet ed Dharih)²².

III. The pantheon of the deities of the peoples of the transjordan space

III.1. Ammonite deities

The Ammonite Pantheon²³ is dominated by the image of the god Milkom (Moloch)²⁴, which appears both in the sources of Ammonite origin and in the writings of the Old Testament. An inscription from the city of Amman, dating back to the 9th century BC, tells how the god Milkom (Moloch) ordered the king to build a building under the protection of the deity. The god Milkom (Moloch) himself appears preceded by the word “king”, an argument that supports the hypothesis of the rule of the pantheon ammonite by this god. In the Old Testament, in III Kings 11, 5; 7, 33; and IV Kings 23, 13, there are mentions of the supreme god of the Ammonites²⁵. Thus, it is said of Solomon that he married an Ammonite princess, and later came to worship Milkom “the abomination of the Ammonites” (3 Kings 11, 5). Of the sacrificial altars that Solomon erected to Milkom, Scripture tells us that they were destroyed only by King Josiah during his religious reformation (IV Kings 23, 13)²⁶.

²² P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 124.

²³ A. LEMAIRE, “Essai sur le religions ammonite, moabite, et edomite (X-VI s.av.n.e.)”, in: *Revue de la Societe Ernest-Renan*, 41 (1993), pp. 48-53.

²⁴ E. PUECH, “Milcom”, in: Karel VAN DER TOORN, Bob BECKING, Pieter W. VAN DER HORST (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, Brill Academic Pub, Michigan / Cambridge, 1998, pp. 1076-1080.

²⁵ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 100.

²⁶ J. A. THOMSON, “Milcom”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS (ed.), *Dicționar biblic*, I, p. 841.

The personality of the god Milkom is very obscure. His image is closely linked to royalty and the idea of government, his origins being attributed to ancient religious manifestations in the Phoenician city of Tîre, where the god Melqart was the “governor of the city”, a deity later associated with the Greek Heracles²⁷. The fact that elements such as ,l or b’l’, which means “lord” or “god”, appear among the Ammonite names, raises some questions about the names of deities such as El or Baal, but there are few concrete arguments that attest to their presence. deities in the ammonite pantheon²⁸.

Among the female deities worshiped by the Ammonites, most clues define the goddess Astarte as Milkom’s companion, as evidenced by numerous representations of seals and terracotta. The same images attest to the existence of other female deities in the Ammonite pantheon, and the names Yahweh and Ninurta appear to be revered by the Ammonites, even though these deities do not belong to the local pantheon, being introduced into the territory in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian eras. A list of deities includes, in addition to the national god Milkom, a number of names such as: Adon, Addin, Ali, Anat, Ashima, Astarte, Baal, Bes, Dagon, Gad, Hadad, Ninurta, Il, Mot, Shamash, Sid , Yahweh, Nania and Qos²⁹.

III.2. The Moabite deities

The information regarding the Moabite pantheon is provided, for the most part, by the inscription of King Mesha of the Moabites, the famous Moabite stone³⁰ dated around 830-810 BC. This inscription tells us how Mesha, king of Moab, broke the yoke of Israel and honored Chemosh, raising a height to Qarhoh in gratitude. According to this inscription, the supreme god of the Moabites was Chemosh³¹; he is the savior god of Moab, who commands the king to conquer the territories of the enemy. The

²⁷ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 101.

²⁸ H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, pp. 218-219.

²⁹ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 101.

³⁰ Gerard L. MATTINGLY, “Moabite religion and the Mesha inscription”, in: John Andrew DEARMAN (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha inscription and Moab*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989, pp. 211-238; H. P. MULLER, “Konig Mesa von Moab und der Gott der Geshichte”, in: *Ugarit-Forschungen*, 26 (1994), pp. 373-395.

³¹ U. WORSCHER, “Der Gott Kemosch”, in: *Ugarit-Forschungen*, 24 (1992), pp. 393-401; H. P. Muller, “Chemosh”, in: K. VAN DER TOORN, B. BECKING, P. W. VAN DER HORST (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, pp. 356-362.

image of Kemosh is also mentioned in Ebla and Ugarit, probably related to aspects of fertility³².

In the writings of the Old Testament the name of the Moabite god Chemosh is mentioned in III Kings 11, 7, 33, IV Kings 23, 13 and Jeremiah 48, 7; 13; 46. Chemosh is said to be the god of the Moabites, who are also called the people of Chemosh (Num. 21, 29; Jer. 48, 47). The sacrifice of the children, as a burnt offering, was part of the cult dedicated to the god Chemosh by the Moabites (IV Kings 3, 27). Regarding Solomon, Scripture also mentions that he raised a height in Jerusalem for Chemosh (III Kings 11, 7), which was later destroyed by Josiah (IV Kings 23, 13)³³.

The presence of the term *ttrkmš*, which also appears on the star of Mesha, is interpreted as an appearance of the divine couple Kemosh – Astarte. The iconography of Chemosh is given by two archeological testimonies: a Moabite star from Rugm el-Abd and the so-called star from Balua. The latter shows the image of a king flanked on the right by a crowned goddess, and on the left by a god wearing a crown with horns. A third iconographic testimony of the god Chemosh is the seal of Dhiban, who represents him as master over all nature, foreshadowed by snakes, goats and scorpions. The cult of Chemosh lasted even after the disappearance of the Moabite kingdom, a fact confirmed by an Aramaic inscription from Kerak, dated to the 3rd century BC³⁴.

III.3. The Edomite deities

The supreme deity of the Edomites was the god Qaus³⁵, a name related to the Arabic term *qaus* and the Hebrew *qš*. The earliest attestation of the god Qaus is a 7th century BC ostrakon from Horvat Uza in the Negev. The text reads a letter to the king containing the passage: “I bless you in the name of Qaus”. Also, many Edomite names contain the theophoric element *qaus*, a term encountered until the beginning of the Christian era.

Testimonies about the worship of the god Qaus are also present in the period following the fall of the Edomite kingdom, in the city of Gerasa

³² Walter E. AUFRECHT, *The religion of the Ammonites*, pp. 153-155.

³³ J. A. THOMSON, “Chemoš”, in: J. D. DOUGLAS (ed.), *Dicționar biblic*, I, p. 841.

³⁴ H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 222.

³⁵ E. A. KNAUF, “Quas”, in: *Ugarit-Forschungen*, 16 (1984), pp. 93-94; A. KNAUF, “Qos”, in: K. VAN DER TOORN, B. BECKING, P. W. VAN DER HORST (eds.), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, pp. 1272-1278.

being attested the worship of the god Paqididas (*paqid qos*)³⁶. The image of the god Qaus, identified in the Nabataean period with Dusara, is found at Khirbet el-Tannur, where the god appears sitting on a throne flanked by bulls and having a lightning bolt in his left hand, an element that characterizes him as a god of the celestial heights³⁷. Discoveries attesting to other deities of the Edomite pantheon do not exist, except for archeological sources from Qitmit, which attest to the presence of a goddess adorned with three horns, but whose name is not known, being identified as accompanying Qaus³⁸.

III.4. The deities of the Nabataeans

The definition of the Nabataean religion can be known from a thorough research of the religion in the city of Petra, the capital of the Nabataean kingdom. The Nabataean pantheon was dominated by the god Dušara, deity of the heights and “god of the mountains of Petra”. The earliest evidence of the god Dušara appears in Petra in 96 BC. Associated with the gods Hadad and Zeus, Dušara is named master and protector in various cities, such as Wadi Musa, Madrasa and Khirbet el-Tannur, where he absorbed the image of the Edomite god Qaus³⁹.

The most worshiped female deity in Petra and accompanying Dušara is the goddess Allat, nicknamed “the strong one” and associated with the Greek goddess Aphrodite. A peculiarity of the two Nabataean deities is their iconography in the form of stones. Sometimes they are worshiped in the form of stars, with a nose like a stick and no mouth. A different image of the goddess Allat is found in the “Temple of the winged lions”, where a stone appears with a rounded face, arched nose and open mouth, an image considered a manifestation of the private worship dedicated to the goddess. Of particular importance is the discovery of such a stone in ez-Zantur. The face identified on this stone bears a crown with the image of the emblem of the Egyptian goddess Isis, which leads to the idea of the fusion between

³⁶ L. H. VICENT, “Le Dieu Saint Paqididas a Gerasa”, in: *Revue Biblique*, 49 (1940), pp. 98-129; H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 224.

³⁷ John Raymond BARTLETT, *Edom and the Edomites*, Continuum International Publishing Group, Sheffield, 1989, pp. 195-197.

³⁸ H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 224.

³⁹ P. C. HAMMOND, “The Nabataeans”, pp. 94-95.

the goddesses Allat and Isis, revered until then as independent deities⁴⁰.

Among the deities worshiped by the Nabataeans are the following: Manot, the goddess of destiny, Šai al-Qaum “protector of the warrior people”, Qaiša, Sha’bu, Hutbal and the goddess al-Kutba. Among the deities of foreign origin are the Egyptian goddess Isis and the god of the Aramaic, Baalsam. A characteristic of the Nabataean religion is the multitude of ceramic forms, as iconographic images of deities. An epigraphic testimony attests to the tradition of deifying the representatives of royalty, a fact attested for the first time to King Oboda III, ruler of the Nabataeans between 30 and 9 BC⁴¹.

IV. Places of worship for the peoples of the Transjordanian area

IV.1. Ammonite places of worship

The possibility of the existence of temples to serve the worship of the Ammonite religion is argued only by the inscription in Amman, in which the king is responsible for the god Milkom to erect a building, and where, along with the royal palace, there was a place of worship. The so-called temple of Heracles in Amman, from the Hellenistic period, seems to have been built on the ruins of an older building, which supports the theory of the existence of a temple in the architectural complex, built by the king at the behest of the deity Milkom. A newer discovery testifies to the existence of an ammonite temple at Rujm-el-Kursi⁴².

A place of worship for the Ammonite god Milkom (Moloch) was also erected by the Israelite king Solomon, who was influenced by foreign women whom he married (III Kings 11: 7).

IV.2. Moabite places of worship

The information contained in the stele of Mesha (Moabite stone) indicates the existence of a *bmh* (place, edifice) dedicated to the god Chemosh, but it remains uncertain whether such a place of worship is

⁴⁰ Maria Giulia AMADASI-GUZZO, Eugenia Equini SCHNEIDER, *Petra*, Mondadori Electa, Milano, 2002, pp. 98-100.

⁴¹ P. C. HAMMOND, “The Nabataeans”, pp. 96-98.

⁴² P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 102.

represented⁴³. An epigraphic fragment from Dhiban supports the alleged existence here of a temple of worship for Chemosh, and another inscription from Kerak attests here to the presence of another place of worship attributed to the same god. In addition to these discoveries, the text on the star of Mesha reminds us of some objects of worship used to perform the Moabite religious ritual⁴⁴. King Solomon erected an idolatrous head in Jerusalem for Chemosh (III Kings 11, 7) when, toward the end of his life, he deviated from the faith in God-Yahweh, being influenced by foreign wives whom he married he built them places of worship for their gods (III Kings 11, 8).

IV.3. Edomite places of worship

In the kingdom of Edom, the presence of a temple in the capital Bosra is very likely, a sanctuary identified in the so-called “B building” and which has been interpreted as either a palace or a temple. An important shrine was discovered at Qitmit (10 km southwest of Arad), in the Negev. At Qitmit there are two complexes, probably both for worship. The first is structured in the form of three rooms facing south, measuring 10.5×5.5 m, 1×1.25 m and 4.5×5 m, respectively, and the second complex, located further north, it is not known for certain what kind of activities it was intended for⁴⁵.

An Edomite temple was discovered 60 km from Arad in the town of Ein Hazeva⁴⁶ in the Negev. The temple is dated around the 7th century BC, and inside it were identified 67 decorative clay objects (pedestals, cups, perfume vessels, etc.). The cult complex comprises a rectangular room, where the walls are lined with storage shelves for various objects intended for worship⁴⁷.

⁴³ William WRIGHT, *The Moabite Inscription*, Editura Thomas & Archibald Constable, Edinburgh, 1870, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁴ G. L. MATTINGLY, “Moabite religion”, pp. 215-218.

⁴⁵ Itzhaq BEIT-ARIEH, *Horvat Qitmit: an Edomite shrine in the biblical Negev*, Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 1995, pp. 10-15.

⁴⁶ Jason C. DYKEHOUSE, *An historical reconstruction of Edomite treaty betrayal in the sixth century B.C.E. Based on biblical, epigraphic and archaeological data*, ProQuest, Ann Arbor, 2008, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁷ J. R. BARTLETT, *Edom and the Edomites*, pp. 190-193.

IV.4. Nabataean places of worship

The places of worship discovered during the existence of the Nabataean kingdom are structured by archaeologists in three categories: shrines dedicated to the gods, shrines dedicated to the gods in the open air and funerary temples for the worship of deceased kings.

- a. Among the temples erected in honor of the gods, there are two types of temples: of Syrian origin and of Arab origin. Petra excavations have brought to light both types of buildings in the same fortress. Thus, the temple of the god Dušara, of Syrian origin, dating from the 1st century BC, was discovered. and which apparently functioned until the 4th century AD. The building that defines the temple has the dimensions of 32×32 m and is located on a foundation of 180×180 m. The temple is divided into three rooms: narthex, nave and adyton⁴⁸.

Also in the city of Petra, the Arabic style is represented by the “Temple of the winged lions”, so named because of the statuettes that represented winged lions and that surrounded the temple. The building was used until around 110 AD, and its destruction was caused by the earthquake of 363 AD. The entrance to the temple was imposing, on an ascending slope, stretching over a distance of almost 100 m. The temple was divided into two rooms: a vestibule of 9.58 m and a square room of 17.24 m / side. It is believed that the worship of the goddess Allat (al-’Uzza) predominated in this temple⁴⁹.

In front of the “Winged Lions Temple”, but in a different way, there was another temple, located on a 70×70 m temenos, surrounded by a wall of columns. This temple seems to have been functional until the beginning of the Byzantine era, but the exact deity worshiped here is not known exactly.⁵⁰

- b. The existing open-air shrines were mostly found in Petra. Almost 40 such places of worship have been identified, equipped with those necessary for the performance of the rite, namely: altars, sacred stones, vessels for libations, basins, etc. Unlike the built

⁴⁸ P. C. HAMMOND, “The Nabataeans”, pp. 99-101.

⁴⁹ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 129.

⁵⁰ H. NIEHR, *Il contesto religioso*, p. 239.

temples, it seems that these open places are much older in the Nabataean cult. However, from the point of view of the priestly class, the organization of the temple servants was clearly superior to the worship officers in these places, where the sacrifices were performed by the leading members of the tribe. It seems that these shrines were used especially in connection with a special pilgrimage, reserved for worship in a family reunion setting, the ritual being followed by a ceremonial banquet⁵¹.

- c. The buildings built to serve the burial of kings, became places of worship and worship, the beginning of the deification of sovereigns being located with the death of King Oboda III. The monuments dedicated to this ritual are more numerous, the most representative being those of Avdat and Petra. Oboda's tomb was discovered at Avdat in the Negev, but the tomb is claimed by a similar site in Petra, where other members of the royal family are believed to have been buried. The tomb, called "Khazne" (treasure), was attributed to King Areta III (84-62 BC) and has three large niches for sarcophagi. Urna's tomb is attributed to Areta IV, and the tomb called "Palace" belongs to King Malic II and his family. Identifying all the buildings that served as royal tombs and then became places of worship is an extremely difficult process, but the list of names of Nabataean sovereigns corresponds almost entirely to the burial sites found in Petra and other Nabataean administrative centers⁵².

V. The cult of the priesthood among the peoples of the Transjordan area

V.1. Priesthood and Ammonite Worship Practices

The epigraphic documents that provide information about the organization of the priestly class and the Ammonite worship practices are extremely limited. Only a few archeological discoveries give some evidence of this, especially regarding the funeral practices and the cult

⁵¹ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 129.

⁵² P. C. HAMMOND, "The Nabataeans", pp. 103-104.

of the deceased kings. Several sites have been discovered that represent the tombs of some Ammonite aristocrats. Next to two of these tombs is a well, probably used to bring libations in honor of the dead. Also, a peculiarity of the ammonite funeral ritual is the costumes in which the dead were dressed and then placed in clay sarcophagi. Burial in wooden sarcophagi was also practiced. Terracottas with representations of gods or goddesses were discovered, as well as some traces attesting to the practice of purifying those buried by burning incense near graves⁵³. The cult of the deceased sovereigns is certified by the presence of the large number of stone statuettes, representing men and women. Some people represented by these statuettes have on their heads a crown (atef), a sign of divine dignity. The statuettes played a very important role in the worship of the dead sovereigns, and their storage places were the entrance gates to the fortress or the mortuary chapels⁵⁴.

V.2. Priesthood and Moabite worship practices

Among the Moabite worship practices is the marzeah institution, associated with the organization of funeral banquets. A papyrus, accompanied by a Moabite seal and dated to the beginning of the sixth century BC, mentions a divine response that attributes to a man a building dedicated to the development of such manifestations⁵⁵. Caring for the dead occupies an important place in the Moabite religion. Archaeological excavations at Dhiban have unearthed tombs where precious metal objects and vessels were found for the dead, which strengthens the Moabites' belief in the immortality of the soul. A royal statue discovered at el-Kerak confirms the existence of the cult of the deceased rulers, although no tombs of Moabite kings have been discovered⁵⁶.

V.3. Edomite priesthood and worship practices

Sources that provide information about the cult practices of the Edomites are extremely limited. The archeological excavations at Horvat Qitmit are

⁵³ P. C. HAMMOND, "The Nabataeans", p. 220.

⁵⁴ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ P. BORDREUIL, D. PARDEE, "Le papyrus du marzeah", in: *Semitica*, 38 (1990), pp. 50-52.

⁵⁶ Frederick Victor WINNETT, *The excavations at Dibon (Dhiban) in Moab*, American Schools of Oriental Research, New Haven, 1964, pp. 57-60.

the ones that lead to the hypothesis of a very intense sacrificial cult, as a result of the numerous traces of ashes and animal bones discovered near the temple. Also among the many statuettes discovered are representations of people who bring sacrifices in honor of the deities. South of the Dead Sea, in the town of en-Hazeva, archeological excavations have brought to light, beyond the city walls, a small building, which probably had a cult function, here being discovered several objects used to officiate the Edomite cult. A peculiarity of this archeological site is the presence of pottery, characteristic of Jewish sites, while the so-called Edomite pottery, found inside the fortress, is completely missing⁵⁷.

V.4. Priesthood and worship practices among the Nabataeans

Although no detailed presentation of the Nabataean religious ritual has been discovered, the manner in which it was performed has been linked to the geographical context. Archaeological excavations have revealed objects used in worship, such as altars, incense altars, vessels for libations, and sacred stones used during worship. An excerpt from an inscription found in the “Temple of the Winged Lions” gives some information about how the representatives of the priestly class were paid for their work⁵⁸.

The practice of funeral banquets (*marzeah*), widespread in the Syrian-Palestinian area, is also found in Nabataeans, inscriptions attesting to this custom being discovered in Petra, Negev, Avdat and ed-Deir. More information about the worship practices of the Nabataeans is related to the funeral ceremony. A peculiarity is the presence of some rooms in the vicinity of the graves, rooms that were used to organize funeral meals. The inscriptions show that the souls were represented by an arrow (*npš*), while the dead of the royal families were represented in the form of statuettes, as a result of the ritual of their deification. The tomb is considered to be the home of the deceased, which is why various household items or jewelry were stored here. The ritual of deifying kings led to the worship of their tombs as places of worship where religious ceremonies were held as in a temple. The most famous deified Nabataean kings were Oboda III (30-9 BC), Areta IV (9 BC – 39 AD), Malic II (39-69 AD) and Rebbel II. (70-106 AD)⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ P. XELLA, *Religione e religioni*, p. 110.

⁵⁸ John F. HEALEY, *The Religion of the Nabataeans*, Brill, Leiden, 2001, pp. 168-169.

⁵⁹ P. C. HAMMOND, “The Nabataeans”, pp. 94-99.

The forms of manifestation of the Nabataean religion can be structured on two levels: one represented by the public, official cult, and another characterized by the limited ritual at the level of the clan or the family. Also a peculiarity of the Nabataean religion is the small number of deities worshiped in the pantheon, the national deity being the god Dušara, accompanied by Allat, his wife. Despite the penetration of Christianity in the Nabataean area, at the time of the disappearance of the kingdom (4th century AD) the ancient religious traditions of the Nabataeans left deep traces in the spiritual consciousness of their descendants⁶⁰.

VI. Instead of conclusions

The above lines were meant to point out some elements of Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite, and Nabataean history, culture, and spirituality; Regarding the last aspect, the divisions of the past, the forms of worship, the places of worship and the cult staff were highlighted.

⁶⁰ David W. TSCHANZ, *The Nabataeans: A Brief History of Petra and Madain Saleh*, Medina Publishing, Surrey, 2012, pp. 182-185.