NABATAEAN STANDINGS STONES
AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

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INTRODUCTION

Standing stones, or maṣṣebot (single- maṣṣebah) in Biblical literature, are stones vertically set into the ground, individually or in groups, and range from a few centimetres to several metres high. In the Near East they are primarily known from the Levant, but are found in Arabia and the Sahara deserts as well.¹ To our present knowledge they first appeared in the Natufian culture during the 11th millennium BC, and persisted until the early Islamic period. Of the 140 maṣṣebot sites documented or excavated to date in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai, the majority were dated to the 6th-3rd millennia BC, based on artifacts and radiometric analyses (Avner 1984, 1993, 1996). Most commonly maṣṣebot are made of natural, unhewn stones, although sometimes they have various degrees of shaping. Unlike stelae, they are usually neither decorated nor inscribed.

In the Nabataean culture, large obelisks are known in Petra (Brünnow & Domaszewski 1904:172, 238-9, 247, Figs. 198, 269, 281-2), and several sites contain niches carved into the sandstone rocks, with pillar-like bas reliefs. Similar to the Biblical term, they are called neṣṣibe (plural), or masgida in accompanying inscriptions (see below). Lesser known are the many small standing stones found in the vast Nabataean domain. In the present paper I intend to describe these stones and discuss their meaning. For convenience only, distinction in terminology will be made here between the earlier maṣṣebot and Nabataean standing stones.

STANDING STONES IN THE DESERT

Standing stones are common throughout desert areas inhabited or travelled by the Nabataeans, and have been observed in numerous sites in the Negev and Sinai. In the area of 'Uvda Valley alone, ca. 40 km north of Eilat, I have

¹ For standing stones in Arabia see e.g. Zarins 1979-1982; Doe 1971, 1983. In the Sahara e.g. Milburn 1983, Tillner 1981. For the cult of standing stones in pre-Islamic Arabia see Lammens 1919, Mettinger 1995:69-79, with references. Menhirs of Europe, the Far East, etc. will not be mentioned in this paper.
documented more than 2000 standing stones. Most were located at the back of
dwelling tent camp remains ("Atal") in Arabic;\(^2\) approximately 120 have
been surveyed over an area of 50 sq.km. (Fig. 1). Nabataean pottery sherds,
scattered over the surface are common, while Roman, Late Roman and Byzan-
tine sherds occur as well. Standing stones are also found along the ancient
roads.

Examination of these standing stones reveals several consistent characteris-
tics. They are usually only 20-40 cm high, and are always natural, unhewn
stones, carefully selected by shape and size. Generally, there is no difficulty in
distinguishing between the face and back of the stones. The face is always to-
wars the lower side of the ground and is usually smoother. Stone slabs, which
are sometimes placed at their foot as offering benches (Figs. 13, 25), and small
leaning stones embedded in the ground at their back side, also indicate their
face and back.

**BASIC MEANING OF STANDING STONES**

Study of the meaning of Nabataean standing stones may be based on data
from several sources:

A. Comparison with the ancient *masseboth*. To date, research on these in-
cludes documentation of 143 sites from the southern Negev and eastern Sinai;
a corpus of 134 sites from the fertile countries of the Near East, from Neoli-
thic to Iron Age; a collection of ancient written sources and artistic ma-
terial, anthropological material, and the results of previous studies. This re-
search (Avner 1984, 1993 1996, in press 1, 2, 4) indicates two primary and
principal types of standing stones. One represents deities, perceiving the stones
contain the power and spirit of the gods,\(^3\) and the second represents the ances-
tors. In this paper only the former will be addressed. Since great affinities are
found between ancient *masseboth* and Nabataean standing stones (see below),
comparison seems justified.

B. Unworked, small, simple stone slabs, as described above, have also been
found in Nabataean sanctuaries. One stood in *situ* in the Nabataean temple at

\(^2\) In the tent camps the remains of cleared circles, 3-5 m in diameter, are distinguishable, with
medium size stones around them, originally used for securing the ropes. The sites are 50-200 m
long and contained up to 30 tents. These camps were not used for short stays, but served as
dwellings for a population that subsisted on agriculture, grazing and commerce. For the ancient
agricultural settlement of 'Uvda Valley, see Avner 1998. The tent camps are attributed here to the
Nabataeans, based on the dominance of Nabataean pottery in the sites. However, Safaitic and
Thamudic inscriptions found in the Negev and Sinai indicate that other Arab tribes also lived in
these regions, and most probably erected standing stones as well. See also Ituraean standing

\(^3\) This perception is well connected to the Biblical term for *massebah*—"לְמָשָׁבָה" (Gen. 28:22), the Aramaic—"לְמָשָׁבָה" in the Sefire inscription (Fitzmyer 1967:83, 90), and
"Bait Allah" in the Arabian world (Lammens 1968:17).
Qasrawet, northern Sinai (Oren 1982:206, Pl. 27:B) and another was found lying in a small Nabataean sanctuary on top of Mt. Serbal, southern Sinai (Avner 1982, and in press 3). Both sites support the sanctity of crude standing stones.

C. Several written sources, 2nd to 6th centuries A.D., describe standing stones in the classical world as representing deities. Some sources refer to Arabs prior to the rise of Islam:

1. Antoninus of Piacenza, 6th century A.D., addressing the cult of the southern Sinai population, said: “On this mountain there is a place where the Saracens set up their idol, which is a snow-white stone...”. He continues, describing how the stone miraculously changes its color (Wilkinson 1977:87).

2. Ibn alKalbi, 9th century A.D., often referred to standing stones (ansab) and described the cult surrounding them. This included sacrifices, blood libation, and circumambulation. On page 33 he wrote: “Whenever a traveler stopped at a place or station in order to rest or spend the night he would select for himself four stones, pick out the finest among them and adopt it as his god, and use the remaining three as supports for his cooking-pot...”. A similar description was later repeated by Ibn Sa‘d (Fahd 1968:26) and other writers. When describing the cult of the goddess Allat at Taif, Ibn alKalbi wrote: “Allat is a newer goddess then Manah. She was a cubic rock...”. About the god Sa‘d in the Judaean coastal plain he said: “… it was a long rock...covered with blood” (Ibn alKalbi: 16, 37, Amin Faris 1952:14, 32, respectively).

3. The Suidas Lexicon, 10th century A.D., relating to the Nabataean cult in Petra, said: "Theusares (= Dusares - Dushara) - this is the god Ares of Petra in Arabia. This god is most venerated by the people. His statue is a square block of stone four feet tall and two feet broad. It stands on a golden base and they sacrifice before the stone and pour on it blood libation" (Adler 1931 II:713).

D. In several Nabataean sites small niches are found cut into the sandstone rocks, usually with rectangular low reliefs inside. About 30 niches were reported from Meda'in Saleh (Doughty 1884:62, Pl. 45, 46; Jaussen & Savignac 1909:407-441), nine are known from 'Ein Shellaleh, Wadi Ram (Savignac 1933, 1934), and 180 niches were documented in Petra (Dalman 1908:117-148 etc., 1912 II:44-49, c.f. Merklein & Wenning 1988). Doughty termed the rectangular forms “votive reliefs”, Jaussen & Savignac described them as having some religious, symbolic meaning, while Dalman named them “stone idols”, meaning they represented deities.

The latter interpretation is strongly supported by inscriptions accompanying some niches which directly identify the schematic reliefs as deities by name.

For example: an inscription from Mada'in Saleh (Hegra) referring to a niche with a single rectangular relief, reads - “This Masgida\(^5\) made by Shaku\(h\), son of Tura for A'ra of Bosra, the great god...” (Doughty 1884, No. 1; Jaussen & Savignac 1909:204, No. 39). An inscription below two adjacent reliefs at 'Ein Shellaleh mentions the goddesses “alKutba” and “al'Uzza” (Fig.2). Another inscription at this site addresses a pair of reliefs in a niche: “...al'Uzza and the lord of the house (= Dushara?)...” (Savignac 1933:414). An inscription from Petra relates to an empty niche, stating that: “These are the mass\(\text{e}b\)oth (מ\(\text{s}\)\(\text{h}\)) of al'Uzza and the lord of the house...” (Torrey 1907:349, Dalman 1912, No. 85).\(^6\) According to the inscriptions from 'Ein Shellaleh, this niche most probably originally contained a pair of portable stone slabs.

Based on these literal identifications, the reliefs undoubtedly represent deities, and therefore are commonly referred to as baethyls or stelae in literature (e.g. Bowersock 1986; Patrich 1990; Merklein & Wenning 1998; Wenning in press).

Interestingly enough, there are striking similarities (albeit some differences) between the small standing stones of the Negev and Sinai, and the reliefs in the niches. Their basic shapes are similar, and they share identical arrangements (see below). Inevitably, they must bear similar meaning. Although unembellished, we may assume that for the ancients they represented known deities or familiar mythological groups of deities.

FURTHER INTERPRETATION

Dalman (1912:53-56) had already noted the recurrence of several groups of baethyl reliefs, and suggested that each one in a group represents a different aspect of the same deity. This idea finds support in the “Puteoli base” with four baethyls, three additional sockets for missing baethyls, and an inscription “Dusari Sacrum” (Tran Tam Tinh 1972:144-5, Pl. 48-49).\(^7\) It may also find support in Pausanius’ words (IX:16,3, 19:6) describing double or triple statues of deities standing together in some temples. Bowersock, on the other hand, proposed (1986:12-17, 1990:31-32) identification of a triad of gods, in the case of three baethyls depicted on Transjordan city-coins, meaning that each one represents an individual deity. As to the groups of standing stones in the desert, it seems that in most cases they did represent groups of different deities.

\(^5\) Masgida (Ar.- masdjid) is usually interpreted as a “place of worship”, as well as a “sacred pillar” (e.g. Hillenbrand 1991:644). In the light of this inscription, and the term “House of god” applied to standing stones (Note 3), it should be understood as a noun. Therefore, a “sacred stone”, mass\(\text{e}b\)ah or baethyl, are preferred translations here.

\(^6\) For additional inscriptions identifying deities with baethyls in reliefs, see Savignac 1933; 1934, Patrich 1990:50-63; Linder & Zangenberg 1993.

\(^7\) I thank R. Wenning for bringing the Puteoli base to my attention, and for the reference.
ties, based on their varying, repeating arrangements. Moreover, they prompt the attempt to “decipher” them and identify the gods within the baetys or the crude standing stones. Following the study of older masseboth, certain criteria are adopted here to define several types of Nabataean groups of standing stones.

First, the higher stone in a group seems to represents a higher positioned deity. Second, the shape and proportion of each stone was meaningful to the ancients. In general, it is suggested that a narrow stone represented a god, and a broad one a goddess. Although this distinction is not always valid (c.f. Merklein 1995), support is found in various sources. For example, it accords well with the words of Ibn alKalbi: a long stone for the god Sa’d, and a cubic stone for Allat (see above). Also, distinction was sometimes found between flat-topped or pointed stones, and rounded-top stones (Figs. 3-7). It is suggested that the former usually represents male deities, and the latter, the female (Avner 1993:167-174, 1996:36-38). Similar observations were proposed by Butler (1919:207 following Littmann), who distinguished between two types of Nabataean memorial stones in the Hauran by means of the accompanying inscriptions: flat headed stones for males, and round headed stones for females. Exceptions are found also for this criterion, as seen in the rounded relief of Dushara in Petra (Merklein ibid.). Third, in the case of pairs, the smaller stone almost always stands to the right of the larger one, through the viewer’s eyes. However, looking through the eyes of the gods within the stones, the smaller one, representing the lower status god, stands to the senior’s left. Also, a “female stone” usually stands to the left of the “male stone” (see below). It should be noted again that there are exceptions for each criterion, and they will be referred to in the footnotes. In any case, the repeated pattern of the groups emphasizes that the stones were carefully selected according to their shapes, proportions and relative sizes, and then set in consistent, meaningful arrangements.

Based on the above criteria, we can identify, to date, five principal types of individual stone, six types of pair, seven types of triad and so forth. It is expected that each defined group of stones represents a specific type of group of deities. Worth noting is that similar combinations recur through several millennia (see below), so it seems that the basic imaginative attitude towards the shape of the stones did not change much with the ages.

Although we cannot be entirely certain about each interpretation, and cannot presently offer iconographic parallels for each and every combination, it is worthwhile to present several group of standing stones, and their connotations. Equivalents will be taken from neighbouring Arabian cultures, the Near East and the Roman world. Following are examples for some arrangements of standing stones, with suggested interpretations. The groups will be described with a right/left orientation from the viewer’s perspective:
1. Fig. 5: two narrow flat-topped standing stones, uneven in height. Suggested interpretation: a pair of gods, probably of unequal status, such as Dushara and Ba’al Shamem in a Nabataean inscription from ‘Ein Shelleleh (Savignac 1934:576), Dushara and Shai’ al-Qaum in an inscription from Palmyra, or Bel and Yarhibol in Palmyra, for whom a mutual temple was built, and who are mentioned together in a dedication inscription (Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939: No 1; Teixidor 1977:115).

2. Figs. 6, 7: pairs of narrow stones, even in height. In the first they are nearly conical and in the second they are rectangular. The latter is similar in shape to the pair of baetys in a cult niche from Petra (Fig. 8). Suggested interpretation: a pair of gods close in status, similar to several pairs from Palmyra: Aglibol and Malakbol as brothers (Teixidor 1977:121), Bel and Ba’al Shamem who were both titled “Lord of the Universe” and shared a common ritual (Teixidor 1977:136-8), Arsu and ‘Azzizu, Ma’n and Sa’d, Agbal and Ashar, (Teixidor 1979: Pl. 21, 26, 27).

3. Fig. 9: a pair of maseboth near Giv’at Shehoret north of Eilat, 5th-4th millennia B.C. (Avner, in press 4). The left masebah is higher (47 cm) and narrow, while the right one is shorter and rounded. Presently, this pattern of orientation is known from nine prehistoric sites, whereas the reversed order was found in only one (Avner 1984: Pl. 13:2). Fig. 10 shows an example for the Nabataean parallels. A study of the older pairs of maseboth, based on iconographic material, biblical sources and anthropological material, showed that almost universally, a secondary figure stands to the left of a prominent one, from their point of view, and also, a female stands to the male’s left (Avner 1993:174-175, 1996:40-43, with references). Placing the male on their right and the female to his left is comparable with mentioning male names first and the female second.\footnote{E.g. Adam and his wife (Gen. 3:21), Baal and Ashera (2 Reg. 23:4), etc.} This order of gender is also presented on a Hellenistic coin from Phoenicia (Fig. 11), depicting a shrine with a sacred tree, an incense burner and two maseboth on a common pedestal (mwh). Both maseboth are accompanied by symbols: a crescent on the left, the symbol of Melqart, and a star on the right, the symbol of Ashtar (Du Mensil du Buisson 1972:32-43; Bonnet 1988:100-104). The same symbols, in the same sequence, already appeared above a pair of maseboth on a Neo-Babylonian seal impression (Lloyd 1961:233). Hence the gods in both cases, represented by maseboth and symbols, are exhibited in the correct order of gender. Excluded from this pattern is the case of a prominent female, as suggested below in No. 5.

Following this distinction, the suggested interpretation for the type of pairs in Figs. 9, 10 is a couple, a god and a goddess, such as Hadad and Atarghatis in a Hellenistic inscription from Acre (Avi-Yonah 1959), Shai’ al-Qaum and Allat in a Safaitic inscription (Knaouf 1990:176), Bel Hamon and Manawat
from Palmyra (Teixidor 1979:12-18) and Dushara and Manutu in Nabataean inscriptions from Mada'in Saleh (Healy 1993: No. 19, 31, 34).

4. Fig. 12: two broad masseboth, uneven in height, attached to a sixth millennium BC tumulus tomb, in the burial site of Eilat (Avner 1991, and in press 1), and Fig. 13 presents a Nabataean parallel for this combination. Suggested interpretation: a pair of goddesses of unequal status, where the superior stands on the left. Pairs of goddesses appear in mythologies of the ancient Near East, mainly in connection with death and resurrection (Avner ibid, with references), and this is probably why pairs of broad masseboth are found attached to ancient tombs. An iconographic counterpart for a pair of goddesses from Palmyra is seen in Fig. 14, presumably Astarte and Gad as Tyche.9 Astarte, on the left, is seated, and therefore she is the larger figure, and superior to Gad/Tyche (Drijvers 1976:19; Teixidor 1979:97). Further examples of similar pairs are Astarte and Pygmalion in a Punic inscription (Peckham 1968:119-123; Teixidor 1977:119), alKutba and alUzza from 'Ein Shellaleh (Fig. 2), despite the fact that they are presented in the reverse order (see below).10 Possibly this type of pair also includes Nike carrying Tyche in a relief from Kh. Tannur, (Glueck 1966: Pl. 48), and "Sha'i'u (= Tyche) standing on Gea." in an inscription from Si' (Dentzer 1979). Pairs of goddesses were also common in the Greek-Roman world, sometimes in connection with death and burial, such as Demeter and Kore (Hadzisteliou Price 1971 passim, and Pl.II:3).

Equal-sized broad pairs are also known among both ancient masseboth and Nabataean standing stones, as are pairs of even-sized goddesses in iconography (Avner 1996:42-43, in press 1:66-68). However, some may represent a "double goddess" (Hadzisteliou Price ibid.).

5. Fig. 15: a pair of masseboth south-west of 'Uvda Valley, 4th millennium B.C. the left stone is larger and rounded, while the right stone is narrow and shorter. A Nabataean parallel is seen in Fig. 16. This combination may represent a pair with a senior fertility goddess and a young god. Possible equivalents are clay figurines from Petra, representing Aphrodite and Eros (Parlasca 1990), as well as Isis and Osiris, Aphrodite and Adonis, Rhea and Attis (e.g. Frazer 1913: Parts 3, 4, 6),11 and Allat and Rahim in Palmyra (Teixidor 1979:63). Fig. 17 suggests a Hellenistic iconographic example for this pair, Aphrodite and Pan (with Eros). Many presentations of Mary and Jesus throughout the world also suit this type of pair.

9 For the role of Tyche in the Nabataean religion see Augé 1990; Meklein & Wenning 1988.
10 It is not totally clear whether alKutba is a goddess or a god (see Starky 1966b:993; Zayadine 1990b:37; Patrich 1990:61). However, since in the case of 'Ein Shellaleh both rectangular reliefs are "eye idols", and all known inscriptions accompanying eye idols attest to goddesses, Alhat, Atra'ita alUzza and Isis (Patrich 1990:82-86; Linder and Zangenberg 1993), one must assume that here also alKutba is a goddess.
11 For the cult of Isis at Petra see Meklein & Wenning 1988; Zayadine 1990a:156-158; Patrich 1990:104-106.
6. Figs. 18, 19: a triad of elongated Nabataean standing stones, southwest of 'Uvda Valley, and a similar arrangement of carved baetyl from Petra. This group can be interpreted as a male triad of gods, similar to Bel, Aglibol and Yarhibol at Palmyra (Teixidor 1979:1-2 etc.), or Ba'al Shamem, Yarhibol and Aglibol (Fig. 20). An Aramaic inscription from Gözne (KAI 259) mentions Ba'al Shamin, Shahar and Shamash, and the third triad of the god-list in the treaty between Hannibal and Philip V includes Ares, Triton and Poseidon (Polybius VII 9:2-3; Barré 1983:123-125, etc.). A Greek inscription, apparently from the Hauran, mentions the male triad of Dushara, Ares and Theandrios, and according to Bowersock (1986; 1990) this is probably the triad represented by three baetyl on Roman city-coins from Transjordan.\(^{12}\)

7. Fig. 21: a 4th millennium BC shrine at Bir Sawaneh, eastern Sinai, with three masseboth. The central one is 1.5 m high, while the massebah on the right side is the broadest and shortest. This arrangement is often repeated in both ancient masseboth and Nabataean standing stones (Fig. 22), and a similar, but more symmetrical arrangement appears in several cult niches (Fig. 23). Suggested interpretation: a triad composed of a senior god in the centre, another god on the left, and a goddess on the right. An equivalent trinity is addressed in a Nabataean inscription from Mada'in Saleh, Dushara, Hubalu and Manutu (Healy 1993, No.16). Several similar triads occur at Palmyra: Shahar, Nikkal and Nushk; Shamash, Allat and Rahim and Rahim, Gad and Arsu (Teixidor 1979:45, 54, 62-4).

8. Fig. 24: three masseboth attached to a 4th millennium B.C. tumulus tomb at Wadi Zalaqa, eastern Sinai, a broad stone in the centre (83x88 cm.) and two smaller ones on either side. This triad was popular during both ancient times and the Nabataean culture (Fig. 25). Suggested interpretation: a triad of a fertility goddess with two young gods, a group with many iconographic expressions in the ancient world (Avner 1993, 1996). Later, several groups are identified with this type: Daimon Karchedonion (an earth goddess), Herakles and Iolaos, the second triad of the gods listed in the treaty between Hannibal and Philip V (Polybius VII 9:2-3; Barré 1983:123-125, etc.), Allat with two war gods from Palmyra (Drijvers 1976: Pl. 59), and in the Roman iconography, a goddess, probably Venus, with twin babies, possibly Romulus and Remus (Fig. 27).\(^{13}\) The popularity of this group can probably explain the placement of a similar triad of stones in a Late Byzantine or Early Islamic

\(^{12}\) Although Bowersock's interpretation of the coin seems logical, it should be noticed that only Dusares' name is mentioned on the coin. This may support the interpretation of the three stelae as different aspects of the same god; however, it could also be understood as mentioning only the name of the chief god of the trinity, due to a lack of space. For further interpretations of the coin see Patriarch 1990:72, n. 54.

\(^{13}\) For various identifications of the triad of Ara Pacis see Berczelly 1985 and Galinsky 1992, with references.
shrine at Nahal 'Oded, Negev Highland (Rosen and Avni 1997: 16 ff), and even in the mihrab of an Early Islamic open air mosque in the same site (Fig. 26).

9. Figs. 28-30: further compositions of triads. Briefly, the triad in Fig. 28 may represent a group of a god and two goddesses. Suggested parallels are Malakbel, Gad Taimi and Atragatis, or Bol, Isis and Aphrodite at Palmyra (Teixidor 1979:58-9, 89-92). In Fig. 29 the middle stone is short and broad, possibly a group representing a goddess with two gods, but unlike the triads in Figs. 24-26, the goddess seems to be of a lower comparative status. In Fig. 30 the side stones are both higher and broader than the central stone. This triad probably represents a pair of goddesses with a young god between them, such as Isis and Nephthys, with Horus or Osisis, Demeter, and Kore with Iakchos, or Leto and Artemis with Apollo (Hadzisteliou Price 1971:59, 62-63, Pl. III-IV). This type of triad probably appeared already in the 7th millennium BC, in Çatal Hüyük (Mellaart 1967:110-111, Fig. 23). G. Dumézil (1996: 141-390) has collected more information about the Roman triads and their religious role.

10. Fig. 31: a quartet of Nabataean standing stones in 'Uvda Valley. This group may be paralleled by the male quartet of gods presented on several reliefs from Palmyra, composed of the Bel triad plus Heracles (Fig. 32), or with Arsu (Teixidor 1979, Pl. 21:2). Other groups of four stones may represent a quartet of male and female deities, such as Shahar, Shamash, Nikkal and Nushk at Palmyra (Teixidor 1979:45) and Shai' alQaum, Gad, 'Awid and Allat in a Safaitic inscription (Knauf 1990:176).

11. Figs. 33-35: examples of singles, pairs and triads of Nabataean stones, standing one behind the other. These arrangements somewhat recall the words of Lucian (De Dea Syria 35, 38), describing statues of various gods standing similarly, but the meaning of this position is not yet clear.

12. Figs. 36, 37: two examples of groups of Nabataean standing stones backed by an additional broad stone, a characteristic which was also found in ancient masseboth sites (Avner 1996:4, 10, Figs. 3, 38). Suggested interpretation: the broad stone may represent a senior goddess, “progenitress of the gods” (e.g. ANET 131) or “mother of the gods” (Pausanias I:3,5; II:31,1, etc.), while her offspring are represented by the front line of stones. In cases where pairs of stones are standing in the back, one can imagine a couple of “olden gods” (Single- Deus otiosus). In Near Eastern mythologies these deities are usually perceived as staying back, without being involved in “everyday matters” (Elnes & Miller 1995).

13. Figs. 38-41: examples of various groups of Nabataean standing stones, with an additional, separated stone on the left side. This arrangement finds parallels in two sanctuaries in Timna Valley, north of Eilat, late 2nd millennium BC one with a group of four masseboth, plus one to the left, and the other, a

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14 I thank T. Mettinger for the Latin term, and see e.g. Eliade 1985:62-4, 184.
line of eight plus one on the left (Rothenberg 1972: 112-114, 125-129, respectively). Considering that through the eyes of the gods within the stones, the separated one stands on the right side, this stone should have some special importance.

14. Fig. 42: a segment of a Nabataean alignment of more than 50 standing stones, in eastern 'Uvda Valley, adjacent to an ancient road. Here it would be difficult to identify a different god in each stone. Instead, it is more likely that "personal" standing stones were added over time by caravan members and bypassers, so the alignment gradually grew longer. A somewhat similar alignment, dated to the 6th-3rd millennia BC, is located half a mile west of the Nabataean site, on the same ancient route (unpublished).

NABATAEAN STANDING STONES IN RELATION TO BAETYL RELIEFS

Besides the similarities between standing stones and reliefs, as described above, some differences should be noted. While the shapes and combinations of baetyl reliefs are quite schematic and standardized, the standing stones vary more in both. Of the 27 identified types of standing stone groups, only 11 are paralleled in baetyl reliefs. The impression is that, far from the major Nabataean centres the open desert population had a richer and more replete imagination, and probably, therefore, a more complex pantheon.

Another important difference is found in the attitude towards the arrangement of pairs. As described above, pairs of both ancient masseboth and Nabataean standing stones commonly stand so that, from the viewer’s perspective, the smaller stone is on the right side of the larger. Pairs of baetyl reliefs, on the other hand, often stand vice versa. Hence, Nabataean pairs of standing stones do conform to the universal pattern, while baetyl reliefs sometimes do not. A possible explanation for this may lie in the accompanying inscriptions, and the direction of Nabataean writing, from right to left. As we see in Fig. 2, the inscription below the two reliefs from Ain-Shellaleh bears the name of alKutba first, below the larger baetyl, and al’Uzza second, under the smaller one. This may mean that here alKutba was perceived as dominant. If the artist obeyed the “left/right rule”, the larger baetyl would stand “correctly” on the left side, to the viewer’s eye, but incorrectly, above the name of al’Uzza. If he did this, and also replaced the order of the goddesses’ names, alKutba could not be addressed first, as required from her position in this case. The same is also true for the inscriptions of “al’Uzza and the Lord of the house”. In spite of the high position of the god, probably Dushara himself, here the focus is on al’Uzza, so she is mentioned first. Again, the smaller baetyl stands to the left of the larger “eye-baetyl” (to the viewer). In sum, the suggested explanation for the re-
versed left/right order in the pairs of baetyl reliefs is the necessary adjustment to the accompanying inscriptions, due to the direction of Nabataean writing. As a result, some pairs of reliefs without inscriptions follow the reversed order as well. In the open desert, however, where no inscriptions accompany the standing stones, the universal left/right order prevailed.

NABATAEAN STANDING STONES IN RELATION TO OLDER MAŞŞEBOTH.

In addition to the similarities between the earlier desert maşşebeth and Nabataean standing stones in shape, relative size and recurring compositions, they share another important characteristic; both were made of natural, unhewn stones. From the words of Ibn alKalbi and Ibn Sa’ed, one can infer that the careful selection of stones was significant, as is also known from present day cultures (c.f. Kenoyer et al 1983:93). This characteristic cannot be due to a lack of technological ability, but rather to a principle which finds expression in Biblical passages. One says: “...and if stone altars you build you shall not build it of ashlar stone for you hit it with your sword and desecrated it” (Ex. 21:21, and c.f. Deut. 26:6,27; Jos. 8:31; 1K. 6:7). This means that the crude stone, shaped by nature, or god, not by man, is preferred for cultic purposes. This principle was directly associated with the aniconic theology, banning the portrayal of gods in human or animal form (e.g. Avner 1984, 1993, 1996; Patrich 1990; Mettinger 1995).

It should be noted that the obelisks of Petra and the small relief baetyl do not fully obey this Biblical principle, since they are carefully carved. Nevertheless, they are still abstract.

Some differences can be distinguished between the earlier maşşebeth and Nabataean standing stones; one is their orientation. While nearly all earlier maşşebeth face east, the Nabataean standing stones face all directions. This implies that Nabataean theology did not consecrate a specific orientation for the gods. Instead, their spirits were probably perceived as being everywhere, or in Heaven in general. An expression for such a pantheistic-like concept was preserved in the Qur’an (2:144): “To Allah belongs the east and the west and wherever you turn is the face of Allah”. However, some principle of orientation is apparent, since almost all standing stones were set with their back to-

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15 Patrich (1990:191) suggested that the Nabataean aniconism developed from an aesthetic tradition. Mettinger (1995:66), on the other hand, emphasized it as “programmatic, ideological aniconism” (p. 68). The material collected here seems to favor Mettinger’s position.

16 Nabataean temples are generally described as oriented toward north and east (e.g. Hachlili 1975:97, 102), but actually they are oriented to a wider range of directions, for example, the sanctuaries of Si’ face south-east and north-east (Butler 1916:Pl. 6), and the sanctuary on Mount Serbal, Southern Sinai, faces south (Avner 1982 and in print 3).
ward the nearby hill or a remote mountain (Figs. 33, 37). As a result, a person kneeling before it faces the stone aligned with the hill. One suggested interpretation may be that the standing stone and the hill, or the mountain, have a common trait. Their base is rooted in the ground and their head is in the sky, hence they can mediate between man and the gods. Another consideration was offered by Wenning (personal communication): Dushara, the chief Nabataean god, is the “the one from the Shara mountain”. He is present in the mountain and the rocks, and therefore, the standing stone or the baetyl is perceived as a miniature mountain. In both cases, it seems reasonable for the prayer to turn to the standing stones and the hill at the same time.\(^\text{17}\)

Another difference is found in the variety of masseboth arrangements and the number of stones in the groups. In addition to the regular groups, Nabataean standing stones are found in many diverse occurrences, unknown in the earlier periods. For example, only one group of four has been encountered among the masseboth of the ancient Near East, in Rajajil, northern Hejaz (Zarins 1979: Pl. 48), but this is most likely a combination of two pairs (Avner 1993:167). Concurrently, groups of four deities were extremely rare in the ancient Near East mythologies, and did not really act as a team.\(^\text{18}\) On the other hand, several groups of four were found among Nabataean standing stones (Fig. 31), four obelisks are well known from tomb No. 35 in Petra (Brünnnow & Domaszewski 1904: Fig. 198), and niches with four baetyl reliefs occur as well (see above No. 10).

**NABATAEAN ATTITUDE TO ICONISM**

Besides the abstract, modest representation of gods by crude stones, the Nabataeans also adopted the figurative, iconic manner. From the time of Obodas III or Aretas IV they were intensively exposed to the Hellenistic culture, and subsequently also portrayed their deities in sculpture. These are mainly known from Kh. Tannur (Glueck 1966), from Petra (e.g. McKenzie

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\(^\text{17}\) In a recent visit to Indonesia (August 1999), I saw ample examples for an identical Hindu concept of orientation. In Bali there were many shrines (at least one in every house, and several in every temple) with “empty thrones” of three different types (Tugu, Padmasari and Padmasana), prepared for an invisible, aniconic god. Sometimes, a crude standing stone was placed on it. Most were oriented with their back to Ujung Agung, the highest and most sacred mountain on the island (3142 m), even when the mountain was not directly visible. Others were oriented with their back to a closer mountain, such as Batukaru. Shrines for the rice goddess, Devisri, were often oriented similarly. The term for this orientation is “Ka-ja”, “to the highest”. “Empty throne” shrines in Hindu villages in Java also follow the same principle. I thank Made Sueta and Tali Ziv for their explanations during the visit. For a brief reading see Eiseman 1999: 2-10, 273-5, 299 etc. For the “empty throne” in the ancient Near East see Mettling 1995:46, 100-103, with references.

\(^\text{18}\) See, for example, the four sons of El and Ge (Philo of Byblos, Testamonia, C 15, Attridge & Oden 1981:49), and the four sons of Horus in Egypt (e.g Faulkner 1993:117).
1990) and from the Hauran temples (Butler 1919). Yet, strong opposition towards figurative art, or even iconoclasm, did exist in the Nabataean centers during the kingdom period (Lyttleton & Blagg 1990; Patrich 1990; Negev 1994).

Outside the major centres, the influence of the Hellenistic-Roman culture on the vast desert was minor. In 'Uvda Valley a small pottery relief was found, presenting Tyche in an oriental style (Fig. 43), and in Nahal 'Amram, north of Eilat, a large relief of an “eye idol” was carved on a high sandstone cliff (Fig. 44). The latter is best understood as a compromise between the two concepts, the abstract and the iconic (Patrich 1990:82-86, Merklein & Wenning 1998). In Sinai, the only indication for iconography found to date is copper ibex horns, 10 cm in length, and a small copper eagle foot, from the Nabataean sanctuary on Mount Serbal (Avner 1982, and in press 3). Both are probably connected with the representation of Dushara. At Hegra (Mada’in Saleh), iconism was limited to eagle reliefs, again probably symbolizing Dushara or other deities (Wenning in press). Altogether, the evidence for iconism outside the major centres is poor.

SUMMARY

Based on the partial material presented, several conclusions are proposed:
1. There is a close resemblance in characteristics between the earlier masseboth, the Nabataean standing stones, and the baetyl reliefs in niches. Although some differences between the three are found, their common traits are remarkable, and their basic interpretation as representing deities seems convincing. Moreover, they attest to similarities, and even continuity, in the conception of mythological groups of deities through several millennia.
2. The ancient masseboth and Nabataean standing stones discussed here form only one of several cult site types (c.f. Avner 1984, and in press 1, 2). In fact, the desert is unusually rich with cult sites from various periods, more so than the settled countries. It appears that the desert population was intensively involved in cultic activity and religious creativity.

19 The relief was made on Nabataean pottery material, probably a jug. The fragment is 22x35 mm, bearing clues of a larger scene (Avner 1990). It was found in 1989 by N. Minkowski on the surface near the Nabataean public building in 'Uvda Valley, excavated by R. Cohen (1980).
20 The Nahal 'Amram relief (G.R. 14398955) is situated on a sandstone cliff, 30 m above the wadi bed. It is 45 x 80 cm, cut smoothly into the rock face to a depth of 1.5 cm, while the rectangular eyes are 2 cm deeper. On both upper corners there are holes cut in the rock, probably for tying fabric as an offering. Additionally, there are two similar holes ca. 30 cm above and diagonal from the first pair. The relief was first noticed by hikers in 1975, and published by Z. Ilan as an Egyptian “false-door” in the “Haaretz” daily newspaper. Later, B. Brendel commented (oral communication) that this interpretation is incorrect since the relief faces west instead of east. In 1993 H. Eshel suggested (oral communication) the interpretation of an “eye idol”.

3. Although little is known about the Nabataean theology, and it is difficult to always ascertain the interpretation of every combination of stones, it seems that the endeavour to "decipher" the crude standing stones is justified. The impression is that the baetyl reliefs in the cult niches indicate a more complex pantheon than may be deduced from surviving sculptures, inscriptions, and temple ground plans, while compositions of standing stones reflect a far more complex pantheon and mythology.

4. The Nabataeans obviously began as a desertic society, with a suitable aniconic cult, but later absorbed foreign influence. Nevertheless, the aniconic trend persisted, even in the major centres. In the vast desert area, however, the population adhered more to the old tradition, almost totally avoiding iconism. Simple standing stones are found in hundreds of tent camps throughout the Negev, with Nabataean, Roman, late Roman and Byzantine pottery, and they still occurred in early Islamic sites. The modest, abstract standing stones dominated the desert over a long period of time, while iconography was limited and random.

5. The crude standing stones eloquently express the abstract, aniconic perception of gods. The stone served as an abode for the god's spirit, and signifies its presence. According to our present knowledge, this concept had already emerged in the desert by the 11th millennium B.C., developed and expanded, especially from the 6th millennium B.C., and persisted in large numbers for ca.10,000 years. In the Near East fertile areas, on the other hand, masseboth only became common from the 2nd millennium B.C. This fact reinforces the impression that they were predominantly a desert cultural element (see Note 15). While in religions of the fertile countries, including Christianity, iconism was dominant, the Jewish religion, the Nabataean and Islam, all with clear desertic roots, maintained the prehistoric tradition and shared the aniconic perception of gods. It may be said, therefore, that the desert population had the power to influence the citizens of the sown in the domain of religion and philosophy.

Standing stones did not totally disappear from the desert until recently (Fig. 44), although their original meaning may have been forgotten.

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1. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, scatter of standing stones along the back of a Nabataean tent camp.
2. 'Ein Shellaleh, Wadi Ram, *baetyl* reliefs of alKutba and al'Uzza, as stated by the inscription (Savignac 1934: Fig. 10).

3. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, rectangular standing stone (scale 20 cm).

4. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, broad and rounded standing stone.

5. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, pair of uneven, rectangular stones.
6. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, pair of even, pointed stones.

7. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, pair of even, rectangular stones.

8. Petra, even baetyls relief (Dalman 1908: Abb. 270).

9. Giv'at Shehoret, north of Eilat, pair of 4th millennium masbeboth with an offering bench.


12. Eilat, pair of uneven broad masbeboth, attached to a tumulus tomb, 6th millennium BC.
13. Southwest of 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean pair of uneven broad stones, with an offering bench.

15. Southwest of 'Uvda Valley, 4th millennium pair of *masseboth*, left-globular, right-shorter and narrow.


17. Delos, Hellenistic statue of Aphrodite and Pan, with Eros (Havelock 1995: Fig. 12).

19. Petra, triad of even baetys relief (Dalman 1912: Abb. 48).

20. Palmyra, triad of Baal Shamin (center) with Aglibol and Yarhibol (Teixidor 1979: Pl 8).

21. Bir Sawaneh, eastern Sinai, 4th millennium shrine with triad of masseboth, the central stone is 1.5 m high, the right one is the shortest and broadest.

22. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean triad of stones, the right one is the shortest and broadest.

23. Petra, triad of baetys relief (Dalman 1908: Abb. 76).

24. Wadi Zalaqa, eastern Sinai, 4th millennium triad of masseboth, a broad stone with two smaller ones on both sides.
25. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean triad with a broad and larger stone in the centre, and an offering bench in front.

26. Nahal 'Oded, Negev Highland, triad of standing stones in an early Islamic open air mosque, the central stone is 1.2m high (Rosen & Anvi 1997: Fig. 4.27).

27. Ara Pacis, Roman relief with Venus (?) and infant twins; a section of a larger scene (Galinsky 1992: Fig. 1).

28. Northwest of 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean triad with a narrow stone between two broad ones.

29. Northwest of 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean triad with a broad stone flanked by two taller ones.

30. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean triad with a small stone between two larger ones.

31. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean group of four stones.
32. Palmyra, relief with four gods—Bel triad plus Herakles on the left (Teixidor 1979: Pl. 31:2).

33. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, two single stones, one in front of the other.

34. Naḥal Betamin, north of Eilat, two pairs of stones, one in front of the other.

35. Naḥal Tsenifim, southern Negeb, two triads of Nabataean stones, one in front of the other.

36. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, five Nabataean stones, four in front and a broad one behind.

37. Southwest of 'Uvda Valley, seven Nabataean stones, six in front and a broad one behind.
38. Southern 'Uvda Valley, a Nabataean triad with an additional stone to the left.

39. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, four Nabataean stones with an additional one to the left.

40. Southwest of 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean group of five stones with an additional one to the left.

41. Southwest of 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean group of six, with an additional one to the left.

42. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, Nabataean alignment of standing stones, a section of a longer line.

43. Eastern 'Uvda Valley, a pottery relief of Tyche (Avner 1990).
44. Nahal 'Amram, north of Eilat, a relief of an “eye idol”
ca. 1m high.

45. Wadi Dhobai, southern Jordan “Masgida” in an open air mosque,
(Waechter and Seton Williams 1938: Pl. 10).