

Using Plant Taxonomy to Identify the Flowers Depicted on Nabataean Painted Fine Wares

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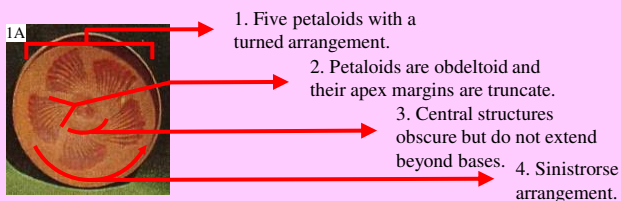


Introduction

The Nabataeans are notable for their eggshell-thin fine ware pottery on which they often painted botanical designs. Since the discovery of these painted fine wares, several archaeologists have attempted to identify some of the plants depicted on the vessels (Dalman 1908: 357; Schmitt-Korte 1970; Tahseen and Al-Tantawi 2023). However, these attempts were incidental and not explicitly systematic. The purpose of my study is to apply the principles of plant taxonomy to identify flowers that are depicted on Nabataean fine wares and to then determine what significance these flowers held for the Nabataeans. I have been able to confidently identify the flowers depicted in several of these motifs. My study encourages further research to systematically identify the remaining plants depicted on Nabataean fine ware pottery. My study also helps archaeologists better understand the plants that the Nabataeans interacted with and valued.

Methods

Plant taxonomy is the use of “anatomical and morphological clues to compare known plants with unknown plants” (Bock and Norris 2016: 31.) Since I was identifying flowers in paintings, I relied exclusively on morphology to identify each flower motif. This involved studying flower shapes and arrangements, counting flower parts, and comparing actual flowers to the flower motifs. I also ensured that the flowers were native to the Nabataean kingdom, were found as remains in Nabataean archaeological sites, or grew in regions where the Nabataeans regularly traveled.



Vinca (periwinkle)

- ✓ 1.
- ✓ 2.
- ✓ 3
- ✓ 4



Nerium (oleander)

- ✓ 1.
- ✓ 2.
- ✓ 3
- × 4



Hibiscus

- ✓ 1.
- ✓ 2.
- × 3
- × 4

Images by 1A: Schmitt-Korte 1970: 58; 1B: Mnas (*Vinca major*); 1C: Syrio (*Nerium oleander*); 1D: Fragman-Sapir (*Hibiscus flavifolius*)

Results

Using the principles of plant taxonomy, I have determined the flowers that the Nabataeans may have depicted on their fine ware pottery. Below are seven flower motifs that I studied with their respective identification and an example of an actual flower for comparison.



Images by 1A: Schmitt-Korte 1970: 58; 1B: Mnas; 2A: Schmitt-Korte 1976: 46; 2B: Alvesgaspar; 3A: Khairieh 2022: 74; 3B: Nova; 4A: de Jong, Horsfield 1941: 74; 4B: ZellImages; 5A: LaurieAnnie (photo taken at the Metropolitan Museum of Art); 5B: Tau'olunga; 6A: Author (photo taken at the Petra Archaeological Museum); 6B: Whaley; 7A: Schmitt 2000: 10; 6B: Albero.

Conclusion

My study shows the usefulness of applying plant taxonomy to the identification of the botanical designs on Nabataean fine wares. I have identified several flowers that the Nabataeans may have painted on their fine ware pottery. The Greek pharmacologist, Dioscorides, wrote about these flowers and discussed their medicinal uses. Most of these depicted flowers, according to Dioscorides, were used by the ancients to treat stomach problems and help with digestion (Dioscorides 2000: 1, 296, 380, 548-549, 580, 715, 726, 780). Perhaps the Nabataeans depicted digestive and medicinal plants on their fine ware vessels.

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