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The Role of International Trade in Development of the Nabataean Kingdom

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The paper is devoted to revealing of the role of international trade for the development of Nabataea. Appealing to the narrative, epigraphic and numismatic sources allows to conclusion that it was the intermediary trade that became the reason for conversion of Nabataea into a powerful kingdom, but in the same time led it for its annexation.

Key words: Nabataeans, international trade, intermediary trade, Incense route

Походнякова Альона. Роль зовнішньої торгівлі в розвитку Nabateйської держави. Стаття присвячена з'ясуванню ролі міжнародної торгівлі в розвитку Nabateї. Звернення до наративних, епіграфічних та нумізматичних джерел дозволяє зробити висновок, що саме посередницька торгівля стала причиною перетворення Nabateї в могутнє царство, але, разом з тим, призвела до її анексії.

Ключові слова: nabateї, міжнародна торгівля, посередницька торгівля, ладаний шлях

Походнякова Алена. Роль внешней торговли в развитии Nabateйского государства. Статья посвящена выяснению роли международной торговли в развитии Nabateи. Обращение к нарративным, эпиграфическим и нумизматическим источникам позволяет прийти к выводу, что именно посредническая торговля стала причиной превращения Nabateи в могущественное царство, но, вместе с тем, привела к ее аннексии.

Ключевые слова: nabateи, международная торговля, посредническая торговля, ладанный путь

The natural conditions of the territories between the Red and Mediterranean seas where the Nabataean nomadic tribes lived in earliest time were not favorable for successful development of agriculture and crafts, but the main important trade routes passed through this region. That fact led to the formation of economy based on intermediary trade, that had a significant impact on the entire history of the development of the Nabataean kingdom.

The evidence of the narrative sources, and first of all the works of Diodorus Siculus [7], Strabo [25], Cassius Dio [6], Josephus Flavius [10] and Pliny the

Elder [23, 24], allowed us to conclude that the Nabataeans had achieved a nearly total monopoly in the trade of incense and spices. At the same time, as the results of archaeological research demonstrate, they controlled the main trade routes having fortified camps throughout the whole region.

Scholars, in particular A. Negev [19, 20], G. Bowersock [4, 5], R. Wenning [27, 28], D. Graf [11, 12] and others involved in the research of the issue of economic development of Nabataea, noticed in their works that the Nabataean Arabs were engaged in transporting goods from Arabia, India and the Far East. To trace the ways of this caravan trade is allowed by epigraphic [7, 25] and numismatic [2, 13, 14, 18] materials found in Nabataean settlements.

The Incense trade route was a trade route linking the south of the Arabian Peninsula with states of the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, through which luxurious incenses were supplied from the Horn of Africa and the island of Socotra. Conducted archaeological researches led us to the conclusion, that the Incense road passed through at least five Nabataean cities: Petra, Avdat, Haluza, Mamshit and Shivta [4, P. 225]. A special place among them belonged to the Nabataean capital Petra, the famous “city in the rock”, which was the largest political and cultural center of Northern Arabia, and also the most important caravan point before Gaza on the way from the South to the Mediterranean. It was through Petra that the trade of Arabia and India with the countries of the Mediterranean basin on the caravan road leading from Leucê Comê was going on [17, P. 63–64].

Appealing to narrative sources allows to form hypothesis on the history of taking under the Nabataeans’ control all international trade routes throughout their territories. It should be noted that today there is no consensus between modern researches about the origin of the Nabataean nomadic tribes and territories they occupied at their early history [27, P. 25; 15, S. 74–86; 12, P. 53]. Only one fact is undoubted that for the first time the Nabataeans were mentioned in the Greek narrative sources refers to the fourth century B.C. However, the nomadic tribe of the Qedarites lived in that region, which, according to the biblical tradition, is named in honor of Qedar, the second son of Ishmael, mentioned in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 25:13) and in the First Book of the Chronicles (1 Chron. 1:29), that also contain references to Qedar as a tribe. Meanwhile, the Qedarites are known as the most organized northern Arab tribe and the territories to the north from Hejaz and the Negev to southern Palestine with Lahish as a center were under their control. At the time of their power which falls on the fourth century B.C. they controlled a large region between the Persian Gulf and the Sinai peninsula, where there as active incense trade took place [27, P. 26].

As a result of the increase of Persian influence in the Middle East, the rulers of Egypt and Salamis excited the rebellion of 385/80 B.C. At the same time, the Qedarites also resisted the Persians (Diod. 15.2.3–4), who successfully sup-

pressed uprisings, reorganized the Arabian territories depended to them and in 365 B.C. they established the satrapy of Edom [27, P. 26]. Ultimately the Qedarites lost the main strategically parts of their territories, and the control on the trade routes [27, P. 27]. Probably, that was the reason why the Nabataean tribes fortified their positions and then, having superseded the Qedarites, occupied leading positions in the incense trade.

Among modern scholars there are different points of view on these events. So, for example, E. Knauf believes that the Nabataeans were a group of tribes who separated from the Qedarites [16, S. 76–77]. In his turn, R. Wenning denies this statement, noting that the Persians' punishment to the Qedarites makes no sense at all if privileges in the trade of frankincense have passed to the detached part of the own tribes [27, P. 28]. Besides, there were differences in language, culture and religion.

Arabia did not become a Persian province and continued to maintain its own wide autonomy. Perhaps the Nabataeans lived in Hejaz or in northern Jordan, and afterwards they were chosen by the Persians as middlemen. This fact led to growing of the influence and power of the Nabataeans in the region [27, P. 27–30]. According to another point of view, it could be that the Persians lost their interest in the territory of Edom after 400 B.C., that enabled the Nabataeans to increase their power in the region [16, S. 76–77]. Nevertheless, all these changes resulted in the fact that the incense trade from Dedan to Gaza (the terminal trading station with the special status of a Persian garrison) felt under the Nabataeans' control. Since then the Persians had a chance to control the maritime and land trade routes to Egypt owing to the Nabataeans.

The narrative sources also contain important information for us about the Nabataeans' participation in international trade in the Middle East. So, Diodorus assumed that the Nabataeans supplied the Eastern Mediterranean incense and spices in the early fourth century B.C.: “τὸ δὲ προκείμενον ἀκρωτήριον τῆς νήσου κείται κατὰ τὴν καλουμένην Πέτραν καὶ τὴν Παλαιστίνην· εἰς γὰρ ταύτην τὸν τε λίβανον καὶ τᾶλλα φορτία τὰ πρὸς εὐωδίαν ἀνήκοντα κατάγουσιν, ὡς λόγος ἐκ τῆς ἄνω λεγομένης Ἀραβίας οἱ τε Γερραῖοι καὶ Μιναῖοι”¹ (Diod. 3.42).

Strabo in his description of the Arabian people mentioned in passing the territories from the Palestinian region to Petra, the Nabataean capital, where Arab tribes (including the Minaeans and the Gerrhaeans) supplied incense: “πλησίον δ' αὐτῆς ἀκρωτήριον, ὃ διατείνει πρὸς τὴν Πέτραν τὴν τῶν Ναβαταίων καλουμένων Ἀράβων καὶ τὴν Παλαιστίνην χώραν, εἰς ἣν Μιναῖοι τε καὶ

¹ “And the promontory which stretches out in front of the island lies over against Petra, as it is called, and Palestine; for to this country, as it is reported, both the Gerrhaeans and Minaeans convey from Upper Arabia, as it is called, both the frankincense and the other aromatic wares” [8].

Γερραῖοι καὶ πάντες οἱ πλῆσιόχωροι τὰ τῶν ἄρωμάτων φορτία κομίζουσιν”² (Strabo 16.4.18).

The Nabataeans, controlling the flow of costly goods and transporting them throughout deserts, began to surpass other nomadic tribes in wealth, about which the Greeks got to know. In 312 B.C. Antigonos, the former commander of Alexander the Great, sent an army against the Nabataeans, and Diodorus, reporting of the expedition, mentioned the amount of incense and silver ingots captured from the Arabs: “εὐθὺς δὲ τῶν ἐγκατελιμμένων οὗς μὲν ἀνήρουν, οὗς δ’ ἐζώγρουν, ἐνίους δὲ τραυματίας ἀπέλιπον καὶ τοῦ μὲν λιβανωτοῦ καὶ τῆς σμύρνης συνεσκευάσαντο τὸ πλεῖον μέρος, ἄργυρίου δὲ περὶ πεντακόσια τάλαντα”³ (Diod. 19.95.3).

The only one case of the Nabataeans’ robbery during that period is presented in the work of Diodorus, who reported about pirate raids on Greek merchant ships in the Red Sea. As a result it was organized a punitive expedition: “οἱ τὸ μὲν παλαιὸν ἐξήγον δικαιοσύνη χρώμενοι καὶ ταῖς ἀπὸ τῶν θρεμμμάτων τροφαῖς ἀρκούμενοι, ὕστερον δὲ τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας βασιλέων πλωτὸν τοῖς ἐμπόροις ποιησάντων τὸν πόρον τοῖς τε ναυαγοῦσιν ἐπετίθεντο καὶ ληστρικὰ σκάφη κατασκευάζοντες ἐλήστευον τοὺς πλέοντας, μιμούμενοι τὰς ἀγριότητας καὶ παρανομίας τῶν ἐν τῷ Πόντῳ Ταύρων· μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ληφθέντες ὑπὸ τεττηρικῶν σκαφῶν πελάγιοι προσηκόντως ἐκολάσθησαν”⁴ (Diod. 3.43.5).

It should be noted that Diodorus, like other Greeks (Cassio Dio 3.43 and Strabo 16.4.4 also wrote about these events), did not distinguish the nomads from each other, so it’s not necessary to say with certainty that just the Nabataeans were described, it might be representatives of other local tribes. In addition, Diodorus, when creating his work, used the evidence of his predecessors, and consequently, the fact of the raids might concern to an earlier period.

On the other hand, the robbery actions of the Nabataeans in the sea might have begun as a result of the intensification of the Egyptian maritime trade, which competed with the land one. It should be noticed that during that period

²“Near the island is a promontory, which extends to the Rock of the Nabataean Arabians, as they are called, and to the Palestine country, whither Minaeans and Gerrhaeans and all the neighbouring peoples convey their loads of aromatics” [26].

³“Of those that were caught there, some he slew at once, some he took as prisoners, and others who were wounded he left behind; and of the frankincense and myrrh he gathered together the larger part, and about five hundred talents of silver” [8].

⁴“Now in ancient times these men observed justice and were content with the food which they received from their flocks, but later, after the kings in Alexandria had made the ways of the sea navigable for the merchants, these Arabs not only attacked the shipwrecked, but fitting out pirate ships preyed upon the voyagers, imitating in their practices the savage and lawless ways of the Tauri of the Pontus; some time afterward, however, they were caught on the high seas by some quadriremes and punished as they deserved” [8].

the Egyptians were the first who began using monsoons for navigation, which greatly facilitated the movement of merchant ships in the sea (Pliny, NH 6.100–101). Ships loaded with incense could arrive directly to the ports of Egypt in accordance with seasons, and from there the goods were delivered to the Mediterranean. It can be found in Pliny the Elder's work (Pliny, NH 6.100, 104), as well as in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (Periplus 57). The Nabataeans discovered that because of the development of maritime trade the land one, which was the main source of income and prosperity of the Nabataeans, fell into decay. Their fears were not unfounded, what was proved by the decline of the Nabataean economy in the middle of the first century A.D., when the land trade routes, passing through Petra, were not in demand [5, P. 21]. At that time when the Nabataeans began to attack Egyptian ships in the sea, the incense and spices trade grew, and the links between the East and the Egyptian ports on the western coast of the Red Sea were strengthening.

The entire trade of South Arabia and the East with the Mediterranean was completely dependent on the Nabataeans and their land routes. Their success in the trade, which required the fortified stations and irrigated areas along all the routes in northern Arabia and the Negev, allowed Nabataea to establish its power firmly on all its territories. During the period of its prosperity in the early first century B.C. the Nabataean kingdom extended almost from Gerar in the south to Coelesyria in the north. The Negev, except the Mediterranean coast, also belonged to the Nabataeans, and the eastern border of their state probably coincided with the eastern border of modern Jordan.

Thus, determining the role of the international trade in the history of the Nabataean kingdom, it is possible to draw following conclusions. Firstly, the tendency to control the most important trade routes was one of the main reasons of the Nabataeans' transition from the nomadic way of life to the sedentary one and statehood. Secondly, it was mediatory trade that became the key to the success in economic, social and cultural development, which, in fact, enabled Nabataea to keep its independence for three centuries. Thirdly, active international trade promoted the assimilation of elements of Hellenistic and Roman cultures by the Nabataeans, and it was reflected both in the policy of the Nabataean kings and in the Nabataean culture taken as a whole. At the same time, the geographical position of Nabataea, which allowed to monopolize the international trade in the region, attracted the Romans, who made regular attempts to seize and subjugate it with the purpose to establish their own control of trade routes. The latter, finally, was the main reason for the annexation of Nabataea by the emperor Trajan in 106 A.D. and its transformation into the Roman province, in consequence of which the Nabataean Arabs had lost their political independence.

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