

The Oboda potter's workshop reconsidered

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History of research

Study of the Roman-Byzantine cities of the Negev desert has been a focus of archaeological research for nearly a century. While much of the early research has focused on architecture, agricultural installations, water-supply, and trade routes, the typology, technology, and distribution of the pottery vessels found in these cities were relatively neglected prior to the surveys and excavations by J. H. Iliffe and N. Glueck.¹ The latter's work drew attention to the elaborated Nabatean Painted Fine Ware (NPFW), found also on several sites in Jordan, including Petra. An important landmark in the study of NPFW occurred nearly a half-century ago with the discovery of a potter's workshop at Oboda (Avdat) by A. Negev. His narrative is important for our discussion:

Given the enormous quantities of Nabatean painted ware, I had little doubt that such an installation existed on the site. To this search I devoted much of the winter and spring of 1959, but to no avail ... Then came a stroke of luck. For some reason or other, one day I came to Oboda much earlier than usual, an hour or so before sunrise. It was a pleasant early June morning and, with time on my hands, I again went to the eastern outskirts of the town in search of the potter's workshop. Suddenly, when the first rays of the rising sun glinted off the ground, my eye was struck by a segment of a small circle made of field stones covered with grey-brown moss. With my small pick I could easily make out a circle some two meters in diameter. Clearing off the shallow topsoil produced thick black ashes. Eureka! I had discovered a potter's kiln.²

The excavation of the workshop yielded enormous quantities of pottery. Dating the workshop was based on the assemblage of 49 coins found in it, which included two Hellenistic coins, 16 Nabataean (of which 12 were firmly attributed to Aretas IV), one coin of the late 1st-early 2nd c. A.D., and two Late Roman (3rd-4th c.). With no obvious stratification, the dating of the entire installation to the 1st c. A.D. was based on the bulk of the identifiable coins. Other evidence for the dating came from oil lamps, terra sigillata (including significant amounts of Eastern Sigillata A [ESA] vessels), and other wares. Due to its abundance in the workshop, Negev suggested³ that the ESA too was produced locally. Recognizing the importance of this discovery, Negev dedicated his doctoral dissertation to the chronology of NPFW, under the supervision of M. Avi-Yonah.⁴

Negev's idea that NPFW, as well as the ESA pottery found, were made locally in this workshop, and his dating, were adopted uncritically at the time. However, the discovery in 1979 of pottery kilns at az-Zurrahah near Petra added another dimension to the understanding of NPFW. Excavations by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan led to the unearthing of 5 pottery kilns dating to the 1st through 6th c. A.D., as well as parts of a large workshop dated to the 4th. Seven other kilns and parts of several workshops were discovered during later construction projects in the vicinity, making the industrial area at az-Zurrahah one of the largest and the longest-operating workshop zones known in the southern Levant.⁵

A research project in the 1980s using instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (NAA) was set up to provide additional information on the provenance of the NPFW and ESA from Israel and Jordan.⁶ The research focused on these wares as well as on clays and supposed "unfired

1 A. Negev, *The Nabataean potter's workshop at Oboda* (Bonn 1974); 18 nn.2-3; J. H. Iliffe, *Nabatean pottery from the Negev* (QDAP III, 1933) 132-35; N. Glueck, *Exploration in eastern Palestine I* (AASOR 1954) 1 ff.

2 A. Negev, *The Late Hellenistic and Early Roman pottery of Nabataean Oboda: final report* (Qedem 22, 1986) xiii-xiv.

3 Negev (supra n.1).

4 A. Negev, *The Nabatean painted pottery of Oboda and the chronology of the Nabatean painted pottery* (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem) [Hebrew, English abstract].

5 K. Amr, *ADAJ* 35 (1991) 313-21; id. and A. Momari, *ADAJ* 43 (1999) 175-94.

6 J. Gunneweg, I. Perlman and J. Yellin, *The provenience, typology & chronology of Eastern Terra Sigillata*