

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE IN THE NABATAEAN KINGDOM: A PALEOPATHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY BURIALS FROM HEGRA, SAUDI ARABIA (100 BCE–200 CE)

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Background: Hegra (Mada'in Salih) was the second largest city in the Nabataean Kingdom, inhabited from around 100 BCE–200 CE. More than 100 monumental tombs remain at Hegra as conserved evidence of the ancient civilisation. Excavations of Nabataean tombs have typically revealed commingled and fragmented skeletal remains resulting from reuse and looting, which hinders the exploration of individual experiences of health and disease.

Objective: This study analyses a unique collection of 38 discrete skeletons from primary Nabataean burials.

Material and methods: These form part of a larger commingled assemblage which was excavated from four Hegra tombs between 2008 and 2019. By comparing demographic profiles and pathology prevalence rates, with the broader archaeological and ethnographic context of the region, the present study aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of the health status of the Nabataean people.

Results: Nine skeletal and six dental indicators of trauma, habitual activity, and generalised stress were systematically recorded. Skeletal age and sex were estimated following standard anthropological methods. The sample comprises 2 foetal skeletons (<0), 2 infants (0–3 years), 5 children (4–12 years), 4 adolescents (13–20 years), 10 adults (21–50 years), 5 mature adults (50+ years), and 10 non-specific adults. Sex distributions of the skeletally mature individuals include eight males, six females, and one of ambiguous sex. Preliminary results indicate a relatively high crude prevalence of degenerative joint disease (39.5%), antemortem tooth loss (21.1%), and Schmorl's nodes (21.1%). Periosteal reactions were present in three adults (7.9%) and antemortem fractures in five (13.2%).

Conclusion: These findings are consistent with other Nabataean sites where skeletal remains were found to exhibit relatively good health, with only some evidence of terrain-related falls. When interpreted relative to the cultural and environmental context of Hegra, this study will be important for supplementing a larger paleopathology study with a more nuanced understanding of individual lived experiences at Hegra.

Keywords: Paleopathology; Biological anthropology; Health; Nabataeans; Hegra.

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