

POEMS OF THE DESERT

ART AND LANGUAGE ARTS

GRADE LEVEL: 4–12

BASED ON

Jordan (Nabataean)
The Cult Statue of Qaws
Late 2nd century A.D.
Gift by Subscription, 1939.224

CONCEPT

By examining the Museum's *Cult Figure of Qaws*, students will learn about the Nabataean civilization. Early literature from the Arabian Peninsula was often transmitted from generation to generation through nomadic desert poems called *qasidas*. Students will listen to an example of this poetry, learn about its literary format, and create an opening verse for their poem, entitled an "Ode to Nabataea".

MATERIALS

maps of the Near East
Petra Rediscovered or other related books
examples of Arabic literature
individual copies of a *qasida*
pencils
highlighting marker

VOCABULARY

nomadic	Nabataean
Khirbet et-Tannur	Qaws
qasida	interpretation
censorship	

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn about the nomadic life of the Nabataeans.

Students will learn that the *qasida*, or Arabic ode is created using a specific literary format.

Students will create an opening verse for a *qasida* about the Nabataeans, using the correct literary format.

BACKGROUND

Nabataeans wrote in a form of Aramaic thought to be the precursor to Arabic. Most Nabataean writings on leather and papyrus are gone, and existing inscriptions on stone are mainly signatures of builders, worshippers, or the names of people buried in tombs. Why are these writings so limited? Robert Irwin gives us some insights into classical Arabic literature in his *Night & Horses & the Desert*. He says that before the coming of Islam (A.D. 622), "literature from the Arabian Peninsula was designed to be recited, committed to memory by the audience, then orally transmitted from generation to generation." He says, "Even after the widespread use of paper in the ninth century... literature was intended to be read aloud to an audience".

Many nonArabs find it difficult to grasp the culturally rich literature of the Near East. For example, Westerners often see the classical ode or *qasida* as a limited form of poetry because it focuses on nomadic life, like that of the early Nabataeans. Irwin says that the Arabic *qasida* was expected to "evoke nostalgia, erotic longing, or pride in battle", while using a specific literary format. As English translators interpreted these odes, they often omitted obscure desert locations and meaningful references to local flora and fauna, believing the edited version would be easier to appreciate.

PROCEDURE

Introduce the ruins at Khirbet et-Tannur in Jordan. Use books and photos to emphasize the following facts about the Nabataean culture:

- The Nabataeans first survived and flourished as nomads in the desert.
- They created an amazing rock-carved society.
- The Museum's *Cult Statue of Qaws*, the god of rain and thunder, illustrates a reverence and coexistence of man and nature for the Nabataeans.

(Optional) Ask what other examples of Nabataean art illustrate the culture's respect for nature and the desert? Students will search selected web sites for examples.

CLASS EXPERIENCE

3. An ode or qasida is an Arabic poem that tells about a journey through the desert. The opening verse should evoke nostalgia for ancient civilizations of the desert. Give each student a copy of the opening verse of one of the most famous poems in the Arabic language, The Mu'allaha of Imru' al-Qays. Read the verse aloud as the students follow along. Have the students listen for sights and sounds that refer to nomadic desert life.

Halt, friends both! Let us sweep, recalling a love and a lodging
by the rim of the twisted sands between Ed-Dakool and Haumal,
Toodih and el-Mikrat, whose trace is not yet effaced
for all the spinning of the south winds and the northern blasts;
there, all about its yards, and away in the dry hollows
you may see the dung of antelopes spattered like peppercorns.
Upon the morn of separation, the day they loaded to part,
by the tribe's acacias it was like I was splitting a colocynth;
there my companions haltered their beasts awhile over me
saying, 'Don't perish of sorrow; restrain yourself decently!'
Yet the true and only cure of my grief is tears outpoured:
what is there left to lean on where the trace is obliterated?

qasida by Imru' al-Qays, translated by A.J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*

4. Tell students to highlight the words or phrases, which refer to life in the desert and circle the words they don't know. Ask students their interpretation of the verse. (FYI: a colocynth is a cucumber)
5. Explain to students that the subject matter of an Arabic qasida follows a sequence:
- a) *atlat*- the opening verse, usually set at a desert campsite, recalls the ancient ruins of the past
 - b) *nasib*- to capture the attention of the listener, tales of a lost love, things the poet left behind
 - c) *rahil*- the tale of this difficult desert journey, complaining of struggles, heat, celebrate his endurance
 - d) *madih*- plea for honor and praise for the great story he has told

Now have students write an opening verse about the life of the Nabataeans, including specific references to ancient artifacts, glorious accomplishments, and the remaining ruins left to nature and the elements of the desert.

CRITICAL THINKING

Nelson Glueck first interpreted the meaning of the Cult Statue of Qaws in 1937. Which symbols convinced Glueck that the statue was the god of rain and thunder, sometimes called Zeus-Haddad?

English translators of Arabic odes or qasidas have been known to omit the names of desert locations and local flora and fauna to simplify these poems for non-Arabic readers. What do you think about this practice?

Compare and contrast the terms interpretation and censorship. State an example of each as they apply to the visual or literary arts of today.

EXTENSIONS—MIDDLE SCHOOL/HIGH SCHOOL

LANGUAGE ARTS

Challenge advanced or older students to complete their ode using the correct subject sequence.

High school students may be asked to analyze two translations of the same qasida, critiquing them for authenticity, bias, or censorship.

CLASS EXPERIENCE

VISUAL ARTS

Illustrate your “Ode to Nabataea” with the assistance of books and photographs about the culture.

Carve a plaster frieze about nomadic desert life.

ASSESSMENT

Students will write an opening verse for an Arabic ode or qasida entitled an “Ode to Nabataea”. The verse should tell of a journey through the desert and include information they learned about the Nabataean culture.

NATIONAL STANDARDS: VISUAL ARTS

Students will make connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

RESOURCES

Bratton, Fred Gladstone. Myths and Legends of the Ancient Near East. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970.

Glueck, Nelson. Deities and Dolphins. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965.

Haddaway, Husain. The Arabian Nights. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.

Irwin, Robert. Night and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature. New York: The Overlook Press, 1999.

Markoe, Glenn (editor). Petra Rediscovered: Lost City of the Nabataeans. New York: Harry N. Adams, Inc., 2003.

Vilnay, Zev. Legends of Galilee, Jordan, and Sinai. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978.

WEB SITES:

American Museum of Natural History

<http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/petra/icons/religion.php>

Arabia Petraea

<http://www.dalton.org/groups/rome/Arabia.html>

Collapse: Why Do Civilizations Fall?

<http://learner.org/exhibits/collapse/>

Nabataea.net

<http://nabataea.net/nab6.html>

Petra: Jordan City in the Rock

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/explorer/petra/index.html>

CIA World Factbook on Jordan

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/jo.html>