

Rethinking the Social Complexity of Early Iron Age Nomads

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Abstract

Recent evidence from the Arava Valley challenges the prevailing assumption that Bedouin ethnography and inferences from ancient Near Eastern archives can adequately compensate for the archaeological lacuna in the study of biblical-era nomads. The evidence indicates that nomadic social organization at the turn of the 1st millennium BCE could have been – and in at least one case was – far more complex than ever considered before. This paper discusses the implications of the now extended spectrum of possible interpretations of nomads to the *archaeological* discourse on early Iron Age state formation processes in the Southern Levant. Using the case of ancient Edom and Moab, the paper demonstrates that common reconstructions of “emergence” and “collapse” are, in fact, oscillations in the archaeological visibility of nomadic societies, which do not necessarily correlate to an increase or decline in social complexity. Rather, it is more likely that the appearance and disappearance of stone-built remains reflect processes along the sedentary–nomadic continuum (in which “sedentary” does not equal more socially complex), as well as a response to varying economic and geopolitical needs. It is likewise argued that in current biblical archaeology, *archaeology-based* historical reconstructions of ancient Israel and the United Monarchy are inherently flawed and suffer from a bias in favor of interpretations of the more “critical” school, as it gives an unbalanced weight to the sedentary (i.e., the archaeologically visible).

KEYWORDS: nomads, mobile societies, tribal societies, social complexity, state formation, Iron Age, biblical archaeology, Edom, Moab, ancient Israel

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1. Introduction: Setting the Stage for a New Discussion

Pastoralists are not likely to leave many vestiges by which the archaeologist could recognize their presence. They tend to use vessels of leather and basketry instead of pots, to live in tents instead of excavated shelters or huts supported by stout timber posts or walls of stone or brick. Leather vessels and baskets have as a rule no chance of surviving. Tents need not even leave deep postholes to mark where they once stood (Childe 1936: 81; cf. Cribb 1991: 65).

The question at hand is methodological. It concerns the way in which nomads are commonly interpreted in biblical archaeology, and how they are incorporated into archaeology-based historical narratives. The fundamental challenges in the detection and investigation of nomads in the archaeological record resulted early on in a quite narrow interpretational spectrum, which is mostly based on Bedouin ethnography (e.g., van der Steen 2013) and inferences from ancient Near Eastern archives (e.g., Rowton 1974). This rather flat perception of nomadic social organization includes an underlying assumption that increased social complexity and the creation of strong political bodies in the Southern Levant were exclusively phenomena of the settled. Accordingly, in discussions of early Iron Age state formation processes, tent-dweller “states” (or, for that matter, “kingdoms” in their biblical sense) are not taken into consideration, and for cases in which nomads are assumed to be an essential *original* component of the society under discussion, a “statehood” (of any kind) is never seriously considered without assuming a complete sedentarization of the population first.

This restricted view of nomadism – which in places is at odds with the biblical narrative itself and other evidence¹ – has become so entrenched in biblical archaeology that it is typically treated as an axiom, a generally accepted truth that needs no explanation.² However, recent research in the Arava Valley has revealed what

1. An example based on historical evidence is the Assyrian reference to an Edomite *kingdom* from the early 8th century BCE (Millard 1992), a period for which we have no evidence for a sedentary population in the region of Edom. Incidentally, this situation “forced” scholars to either admit that “this [reference] may have referred to a non-settled population” (Bienkowski 1990: 103) or insist that a sedentary population existed, contra the bulk of archaeological evidence from the well-studied region (Finkelstein 2020; and more on this issue in Ben-Yosef 2020).

2. Several factors have played a role in fixing this restricted view of nomadism in biblical archaeology (and biblical scholarship), from orientalism to simplistic applications of neo-evolutionary theory and ethnographic models (Ben-Yosef 2019a: 376–378). In addition, an underlying motivation to play a decisive role in text-related issues would inevitably have resulted (unwittingly

may not be entirely surprising: the decades-old and highly speculative interpretational framework is too rigid to account for *all* possible nomadic sociopolitical structures, and there were indeed exceptions. The research has yielded compelling evidence for a highly complex early Iron Age *nomadic* society, which created a strong and hierarchical polity while still essentially maintaining its nomadic way of life. The evidence and its methodological implications for biblical archaeology were introduced by the author in a paper entitled “The Architectural Bias in Current Biblical Archaeology” (Ben-Yosef 2019a), and discussed further in Ben-Yosef (in press). Given how rooted the restricted view of nomadism is in biblical archaeology, rejections of the new understanding of nomadic social complexity were soon introduced (e.g., Finkelstein 2020). The new evidence, however, makes adherence to old notions of nomads difficult (Ben-Yosef 2020).

The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate the implications of using a wider interpretational spectrum of nomads (one that takes into account the *possibility* of highly complex nomadic societies) for the reconstructions of historical narratives, in particular those related to state formation processes during the early Iron Age (12th–8th centuries BCE). The paper starts with early Edom, where the unique archaeology of copper production enables a detailed and unparalleled investigation of a nomadic society. This is followed by a discussion of early Moab with a new understanding of the phenomenon of the “Mudayna” sites. The paper concludes with some observations on the archaeological research on early Israel. It is argued that in all these cases the interpretation of the archaeological record is *simplified* when taking into account the possibility that highly complex nomadic (or mixed nomadic–settled) societies played a major role in the history of the region.

2. Points of Departure

The points of departure for the present discussion are as follows:

2.1. “Nomads”

In this discussion the term “nomads” is used in its extended sense to represent all sorts of mobile populations without designating specific economy or mobility patterns (cf. Knauf 1992). While pastoral nomadism (or semi-nomadism) was the main form of nomadism within the *longue durée* of the Southern Levant (e.g.,

or not) in the suppression of any attempt to widen interpretational possibilities that have no archaeological solution.

Bar-Yosef and Khazanov 1992), it is evident that in certain periods the reality was more complex. During the period under discussion here, animal grazing could have been supplemented (or supplanted) by other economic practices, such as agriculture, metallurgy, and trade of luxury goods (e.g., the early Arabian trade), which in turn would have affected mobility patterns (cf. “multi-resource nomadism” in Salzman 1972). Textual evidence indicates that alongside agro-pastoralist nomads such as the *Shasu* (Ward 1992) there were mobile groups of completely different origin, which included brigands and possibly mercenaries such as the *Habiru/hapiru* (Lemche 1992).

2.2. Archaeological Transparency

There is compelling evidence indicating that nomads can be *entirely* archaeologically invisible (Finkelstein 1992b). Moreover, even when archaeological remains of nomads (such as dung in rock shelters, pens, and ephemeral camp sites, usually in desert landscapes; cf. Rosen 2017) are found and properly dated (a serious challenge in itself), they typically represent only a fraction of the population and their quality does not allow for gleaning any substantial social insights. Most importantly, the fundamental disparity between the archaeological record of the nomads and that of the settled should be acknowledged in any archaeology-based historical reconstructions that include both components (chronologically or geographically). The archaeological features that are the basis for investigating the organization of past societies, such as the accumulation of waste, destruction layers, and rich assemblages of material culture, are completely absent from the partial and fragmentary archaeological record of nomads.

2.3. Fundamental Part of the Southern Levantine Social Matrix

Based on the combination of ethnography, ecological factors, the historical record, and archaeology, it is widely accepted that nomads were an important component in the Southern Levantine social matrix (Finkelstein and Perevolotsky 1990; Finkelstein and Na’aman 1994; LaBianca and Witzel 2007; van der Steen 2013; Hardin and Blakely 2019), including in regions outside of the desert (such as the hill country in the Late Bronze Age: Finkelstein 1992b).

2.4. The Nomadic Origin of Ancient Israel and Neighboring Polities

The pastoral nomadic origin of ancient Israel (e.g., Alt 1967; Finkelstein 1994; Rainey 2007), as well as Ammon, Moab, and Edom (e.g., LaBianca and Younker 1995), is widely accepted. It should be noted that other views, such as the

emergence of Israel from a settled Canaanite population (Gottwald 1979; Dever 2003), probably result from either a positivistic approach to the archaeology of nomads (i.e., that a nomadic phase should be clearly visible; see 2.2 above) or a simple perception of nomads (i.e., the difficulty of associating them with institutions that are [ostensibly] restricted to the settled), or both.

2.5. The Nomadic–sedentary Continuum and Polymorphous Societies

Bronze and Iron Age societies often consisted of settled and nomadic components (“dimorphic societies”, Rowton 1976). The term “polymorphous societies” (Lemche 1985) describes this phenomenon well, as it takes into account the countless possible situations along the sedentary–nomadic continuum (Cribb 1991). In sharp contrast to the reality of the modern world, transitions between situations, including in the settled–nomadic direction, were quite organic (cf. Schloen 2017); the mobility and social flexibility of the Near Eastern societies enabled the people to move along that continuum in accordance with changing environmental, political, and socioeconomic conditions (Finkelstein 1992b).

2.6. The “Tyranny of Ethnography”

The title is borrowed from a discussion in prehistoric archaeology (Wobst 1978), which is a discipline that deals with challenges similar to those presented by the archaeology of mobile societies of later periods. The real difficulties presented by the archaeological record of mobile groups (above) have made the reliance on ethnography so strong that it often hinders the mere consideration of solutions that are outside the ethnographic context.³ However, as noted by Belfer-Cohen and Goring-Morris (2009), just as one should be wary of biased interpretations based on archaeological conceptual frameworks, so too one should take heed of projecting the ethnographic present onto the past. Regarding the Bronze and Iron Age nomads of the Southern Levant, the problem is exacerbated, as even proper ethnography is lacking. Anthropologists did not take an interest in Western Asia before World War I, an event considered to be a turning point in the history of the region, after which the documentation of Bedouin societies has rather limited value for the study of ancient societies (e.g., Rowton 1976: 220). Thus, the available

3. The reliance on ethnography was strengthened with the advent of processual archaeology in the 1950s. With the introduction of the “scientific” approach to archaeological interpretations, geological principles such as the “law of uniformitarianism” were adopted, making it harder to consider exceptions and human behaviors that are outside the observable world of today and the recent past.

“ethnography” is mostly based on accounts of travelers, explorers, and orientalists, with all the problems this entails (cf. Ben-Yosef 2019a: 377). That said, the main point here is that regardless of the quality of the ethnographic record, it still might be that the modern example is not pertinent to *all* cases in the past, even if these cases are related to the same region and similar environmental conditions.⁴ Regarding the case at hand, the fixation on the “Bedouin model” (cf. Ben-Yosef 2020) in the treatment of nomadic societies is, in fact, detrimental to our efforts to better understand these societies and their role in the history of the region, as it blinkers the scholarly discourse on the topic.

2.7. “Enclosed Nomadism”

The term was first used by Lattimore (1962: 484) in reference to the nomads of Western Asia (as opposed to those of the Central Asian steppes) and adopted by Rowton (1974) to describe pastoral lands encircled by urban settlements and states, in which the nomads had a high degree of symbiotic, economic, and political relationship with the sedentary. Rowton developed his view on the basis of textual evidence from the Mesopotamian *settled* society; it is hence not surprising that his treatment of “enclosed nomadism” includes implicit assumptions of asymmetric power relationships in which the nomads are viewed as dependent on the settled in every aspect, including the political one (cf. Alizadeh 2010: 353). The concept of enclosed nomadism has been used in the research on the Southern Levant (e.g., Finkelstein and Perevolotsky 1990; Na’aman 1994); however, as in the case of ethnography (above), adhering to this particular model gives the false impression that we have the correct tools to understand biblical-era nomads, while in fact the degree of uncertainty is immense. Moreover, it is worth noting that the ostensible strength of this model – its being based on *historical* evidence – is in itself misleading, as the biased and skewed representations of nomads by the scribes of urban societies cannot be easily corrected. In any event, it seems that even the limited archaeological record of nomads reveals a more complex situation.

4. Environmental determinism underlies many of the studies of Southern Levantine nomadism (e.g., Finkelstein and Perevolotsky 1990) and is yet another reason for the heavy reliance on ethnography (cf. fn. 3 above). It is interesting to note that while post-processual and nuanced interpretational frameworks are broadly in use regarding archaeologically rich contexts (i.e., the archaeology of the settled), for archaeologically poor contexts, such as the archaeology of nomads, it is common to see adherence to processual interpretations. However, the multi-factor explanations that take into account human agency and other variables emphasized by the post-processual approach are probably equally relevant to archaeologically poor contexts, even if evidence is much more limited.

In a recent article, Alizadeh (2010) presents a clear exception to this model, based on evidence for the rise of the highland Elamite state in southwestern Iran. In this case of what he termed “enclosing nomadism,” there is evidence for the existence of social hierarchy and stratification in prehistoric pastoral nomadism, and for nomadic social processes that were detached from the settled farmers. Can this model, in which the nomads constituted the core society that “enclosed” the urban centers and farmlands while driving socio-political processes, be pertinent to the Southern Levant?

2.8. Exceptional Period

Within the *longue durée* of the Southern Levant, the early Iron Age witnessed exceptional conditions that were conducive to the accumulation of exceptional power by typically marginal societies such as nomads. The end of the long-lasting Egyptian hegemony in the region (e.g., Cline 2014), the desertification of certain areas due to worsening climate conditions (Langgut, et al. 2013), and the breakup of the Bronze Age trade systems and monopolies on certain goods created an opportunity for nomadic tribes to gain power by joining together to form strong political entities. In the case of the Aravah and neighboring regions (the Negev Highlands and the Edomite Plateau), this opportunity also involved the potential to generate immense profit from copper production surrounded by a safe trading zone in the period following the collapse of Cypriot control over this industry (Ben-Yosef, et al. 2010).

These points are the basis for the examples below, which demonstrate some of the implications of interpreting the societies of the early phases of Edom, Moab, and ancient Israel as polymorphous nomadic, while also taking into account the possibility that they created strong polities even before complete sedentarization.

3. Early Edom: An Exceptional Case of Highly Archaeologically Visible Nomads

The engagement of the early Edomite nomadic society with copper production created a unique situation that enables its investigation in high resolution.⁵ The mining and smelting activities have left archaeological remains testifying to a

5. The identification of the early Iron Age archaeology of the Aravah Valley with biblical Edom is discussed elsewhere (see Ben-Yosef 2019a and further references therein).

hierarchical and centralized society that was able to support a large-scale industry (an achievement that until the recent chronological revision was attributed to the Egyptian and Assyrian empires), protect the copper trade networks, and maintain stability around its borders (Ben-Yosef 2019a, in press). The emergence of this nomadic polity happened rather quickly after the Egyptian withdrawal from the Timna region during the second half of the 12th century BCE (Ben-Yosef, et al. 2019), when the local tribes were no longer under the control of any external force. While it is likely that the experience of working under the Egyptians facilitated the implementation of political institutions in the fledgling local tribal polity through emulation (Ben-Yosef 2018: 40), it seems that the process of political consolidation and the internal functioning of the early Edomite polity were quite independent of the settled, and that during the early Iron Age this nomadic entity was a dominant geopolitical power that drove processes in neighboring sedentary societies (“enclosing nomadism”; see 2.7 above).

Regarding the methodological question at hand, the discussion on the geographical extent of early Edom, which is overwhelmed by the archaeologically visible, is illuminating. Prior to the revised chronology of the Aravah copper industry and the new understanding that nomads could have established historically impactful political bodies, those who were looking for an early Iron Age Edom had a problem, as excavations and surveys on the Edomite Plateau found no substantial remains from this period (Bienkowski 1992a). The solution was either to dismiss the possibility that an Edomite polity existed before sedentarization started on the Edomite Plateau during the *late* Iron Age (e.g., Knauf 1985; Bartlett 1989), or to go against the prevailing notion that early Edom was confined to the region *called today* the Edomite Plateau⁶ and suggest the nearest place with tangible archaeological evidence – the Negev Highlands – as the location of this early Iron Age polity (Na’aman 1992).

The adherence to the *visible* remains has also continued after the wide acceptance of the early Iron Age date of the Aravah copper industry. Apparently, within the archaeological discourse the allure of the tangible has been so strong that even archaeologists who are aware of the problem of detecting nomads in the archaeological record and acknowledge the polymorphous characteristics of

6. The idea that early Edom was confined to the Edomite Plateau, which still underlies some of the current research (e.g., Finkelstein 2010: 15; Ben-Dor Evian 2017), is based on adherence to the visible *Late* Iron Age sedentary sites on the plateau, and has no support in biblical or non-biblical texts. It became fixed in the research on the region early on, predominantly as a result of Nelson Glueck’s work (see an elaborate discussion on this issue in Zucconi 2007).

ancient nomadic societies cannot avoid the snare of positive evidence. Finkelstein (2020), for example, highlights the “conflicting histories” of the Aravah Valley and the Edomite Highlands, and reconstructs a collapse of the nomadic polity at the end of the 9th century BCE. Indeed, this is based on the detectable archaeological remains; for the period of continuous copper production in Wadi Faynan and Timna Valley (the late 12th–end of the 9th century BCE) the archaeological evidence on the Edomite Plateau is negligible,⁷ and the period just after the end of copper production (late 9th century BCE) is not represented by any substantial archaeological remains in the entire region (the Aravah Valley, the Edomite Plateau, and the Negev Highlands). However, there is another way to interpret the same archaeological evidence, and surprisingly it is based on the arguments that Finkelstein himself put forward in the 1990s (see also 2.2 above). Given that the archaeological remains represent a polymorphous society that was essentially nomadic,⁸ it is more probable that synchronous differences and diachronic changes reflect the various varying factors that render nomads archaeologically visible, rather than the exact geographical distribution of the population or social processes that necessarily represent an increase or decrease in social complexity (Fig. 1).

To begin with, a major such factor is related to the economy of the early Edomite society. It is because the early Edomite tribes engaged in copper production that we know about their presence in the Aravah Valley. The archaeological remains consist of smelting sites and mines, which are evidently confined to the copper ore districts. The dwelling sites, i.e., tent camps, are almost entirely missing from the current archaeological picture (only a few were identified in Faynan by specially designed surveys, and their date is mostly based on their proximity to the Iron Age smelting centers; Knabb, et al. 2014). It is clear, thus, that the particular archaeological record of copper exploitation cannot be directly used to delineate the geographical extent of the Edomite polity. It is also evident that a shift in the economy of this polity – to anything other than copper, including agriculture and trade – would necessarily have rendered it archaeologically inconspicuous.

7. There is limited evidence of Iron I pottery in sites on the plateau (Finkelstein 1992a), which most probably represents some ephemeral nomadic activities. As such, one can understand the difficulty of accepting it as a meaningful observation under the old paradigm, in which almost transparent nomads could not have constituted a significant part of the region’s history (see Bienkowski 1992a “on the beginning of the Iron Age in Edom”).

8. The essentially nomadic quality of the society represented by the early Iron Age remains in the Aravah Valley and the Negev Highlands is widely accepted, including by Finkelstein (2020).

Another important factor is related to the geopolitical situation. Changing circumstances can cause the appearance and disappearance of stone-built defensive elements (e.g., the walled sites in Timna; Ben-Yosef, et al. 2017), geographical markers, and other features that are directly related to the archaeological visibility of the nomadic tribes. In this light one can understand the phenomenon of the Negev Highlands sites, which is tied by recent evidence to the society of the Arava Valley (Martin, et al. 2013; Martin and Finkelstein 2013; Yahalom-Mack, et al. 2015). These sites have been strongly associated with nomads since early on in the research on the region (Rothenberg 1967: 88–92). However, instead of simply assuming that they represent a sedentarization process (e.g., Finkelstein 1984; 1995), we should probably see them as “permanent [structures] of transient dwellers” (Negev 1979: 34), which reflect a response to the need for delineating and protecting a trading zone in which contacts with people from the settled areas were quite frequent. This explains well the presence of the so-called “fortresses” or “enclosed compounds” (Cohen 1979), in which defensive elements are pronounced, as well as other observations regarding these sites (e.g., high frequency of northern pottery, absence of evidence of agriculture, and more; see discussion and further references in Ben-Yosef in press). In any case, a change in the geopolitical circumstances could easily have rendered the society in the Negev Highlands archaeologically inconspicuous again (movement along the nomadic–sedentary continuum is not restricted to one direction), without necessarily reflecting on its social complexity or political structure.

With this understanding, it is possible to reconstruct a nomadic polity that exerted control over the entire Arava Valley, the Negev Highlands, and the Edomite Plateau (cf. Ben-Yosef in press). The differences in the archaeological records between each of these regions are essentially the result of the skewed and fragmented archaeological mirror rather than any real “conflicting histories.” There is no reason to assume that the Edomite Plateau was depleted of nomads during the early Iron Age (cf. Finkelstein 1992a), and it is more likely than not that these nomads were incorporated into the socio-political system of the emerging polity, as part of its efforts to stabilize the region and support economic prosperity.⁹

9. In fact, these were probably, at least in part, *same* tribes that occupied the lowlands and highlands, migrating seasonally between the winter and summer grazing areas (vertical transhumance). This pattern is also relevant to the highlands to the west, where such migration is indicated by pottery with slag inclusions at the Negev Highlands sites (Martin, et al. 2013). In addition, the agricultural land along the narrow strip of Mediterranean climate at the edge of the Edomite Plateau contributed to the importance of this region to the emerging Edomite polity.

In a similar way, when the archaeologically pronounced Aravah copper industry came to an end in the late 9th century BCE, there was no “collapse” of this nomadic polity (contra, e.g., Finkelstein 2020), but rather a predictable transition into a less archaeologically visible phase. The change in the polity’s economy, which was the result of external forces (Ben-Yosef and Sergi 2018), was undoubtedly dramatic; however, it cannot be directly translated into socio-political transformations. Many factors could have made this economic shift smoother than the archaeological record ostensibly suggests, including early engagement of the Edomite polity in trade with southern Arabia (and beyond), an activity that was already taking place in parallel to copper production (Finkelstein 1988a; Gilboa and Namdar 2015). While it is impossible to estimate what was the relative contribution of this “invisible” practice to the overall early Edomite economy, it is likely that the forced economic shift resulted in its intensification, which in turn compensated to some degree for the loss of revenue from the copper industry. Incidentally, this process probably dictated the location of the main *sedentary* center of the Edomite polity (Bozrah), which emerged on the intersection between the King’s Highway and Naqeb Dahal, the principal road connecting the highlands with the Aravah, the Beer-sheba Valley, and beyond (Ben-Yosef, et al. 2014).

Sedentary settlements on the plateau first appeared only during the second half of the 8th century BCE (Bienkowski 1992b). They represent a gradual sedentarization process in which a certain portion of the polymorphous society settled in towns and small villages, while another portion, the extent of which is impossible to estimate, retained a nomadic way of life. It is likely that a non-sedentary component continued to exist throughout the history of the Edomite Kingdom,¹⁰ and accordingly the territorial boundaries of this kingdom could have included regions that lack positive archaeological evidence (the Aravah Valley and the Negev Highlands).

The above historical reconstruction for early Edom, which takes into account the differential quality of the archaeological record of nomads and avoids conflating oscillations in archaeological visibility with changing degrees of social complexity, resolves several interpretational difficulties of reconstructions that adhere to the archaeologically visible. For example, according to the current

10. It is possible that the later Iron Age “Edomite Strongholds” phenomenon (e.g., Lindner and Knauf 1997) indirectly supports the existence of agro-pastoralist nomadic population, if one considers these sites to be protected refuges also for tent-dwelling people (many of these sites are far from any permanent settlements).

reconstruction there was no political gap between the end of copper production in the late 9th century BCE and the beginning of sedentarization on the plateau more than half a century later (Fig. 1), a scenario that is in agreement with the early 8th-century BCE Assyrian description of an Edomite *kingdom* in the region (Millard 1992). Alternative interpretations that stick to positive *archaeological* evidence, such as the reconstruction of a collapse of the “desert copper polity” at the end of the 9th century BCE (e.g., Finkelstein 2020) and the emergence of a *new* polity (“Edom”) in the late 8th century BCE (e.g., Finkelstein 2005: 119), generate a discordance with the *historical* evidence. Incidentally, this ostensible gap is probably the main reason for the difficulty some scholars have with identifying the early Iron Age archaeology of the Arava Valley and the Negev Highlands with Edom. In this regard as well, however, socio-political continuity is a simpler interpretation than any that have to explain a sudden appearance of “Edomites” in the early 8th century BCE, and the relation of this to the population of the “collapsed” polity.

4. Early Moab: A “Snapshot” of a Nomadic Kingdom?

Similarly to previous scholarship on the emergence of the Edomite Kingdom (above), also in the case of early Moab research has been based on the fundamental assumption that a settled society is a prerequisite for the establishment of a kingdom (or, for that matter, any kind of historically impactful territorial polity). Accordingly, scholars have been “struggling” with the paucity of *archaeological* evidence in Moab for the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages (e.g., Dearman 1992; Mattingly 1992; Miller 1992). For example, J. Maxwell Miller concludes his survey of the available evidence in these words: “[...] I have challenged the notion of an early Iron I ‘Greater Moabite’ monarchy. Most of my challenge, admittedly, involves ‘argument from silence’. But that, after all, is the point – our sources of information are silent, or at least much more ambivalent than generally supposed” (Miller 1992: 88).

Even more critical of the “ambivalent” evidence regarding Late Bronze and early Iron Age Moab are Finkelstein and Lipschits (2011). They argue that the earliest securely dated sites in the region are from the late Iron Age I (the late 11th–10th centuries BCE by the low chronology they espouse), and accordingly the first “Moabite territorial entity” emerged only during that period. This entity was short-lived, ending in the late 10th century BCE with the abandonment of the late Iron Age I sites (Finkelstein and Lipschits 2011: 139). According to this historical

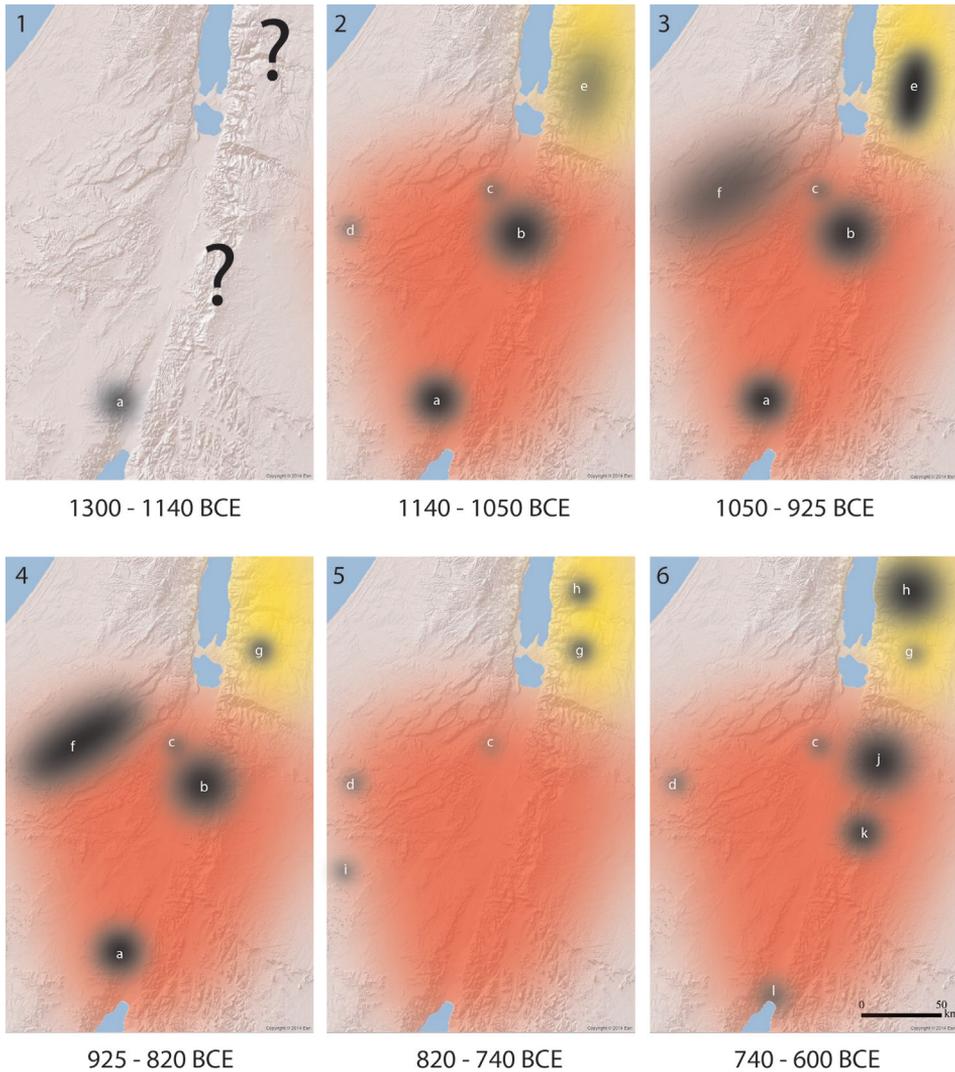


Fig. 1. A suggested reconstruction of the territorial extent of Edom (red) and Moab (yellow) during the Iron Age, plotted against changes in the distribution and intensity of archaeological remains (shades of black). It is based on treating the societies of these polities as polymorphous (i.e., consisting of varying proportions of nomadic and settled populations) and avoiding the common, simplistic conflation between oscillations in archaeological visibility and changing degrees of social complexity and/or variations in territorial boundaries. The complex archaeological picture, which includes ongoing discussions regarding the absolute dates of some of the sites, is simplified here in order to highlight the methodological argument of the current discussion (and evidently follows the author's view). It is impossible to know whether any substantial nomadic political organization already existed in the period when the Egyptians exploited copper at Timna (1); however, it is reasonable to assume that immediately after the Egyptian withdrawal from Canaan and the southern Arava, the local nomadic tribes took advantage of the rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances and created political entities that had a territorial claim (2). In the south, the copper production centers of Timna

and Faynan were operating together, with tribes of the greater region also playing a role in supporting a stable system of production and trade. Activities in border zones, which included hubs for commercial exchange and elements of demarcation and defense, resulted in distinct archaeological remains; first in southern Moab (2, 3) and then in northwestern Edom (the Negev Highlands) (3, 4) (cf. Finkelstein and Lipschits 2011). With the end of copper production and associated activities, the population of the Edomite polity became archaeologically invisible for a short period (5); noteworthy, this is exactly the time of the earliest non-biblical historical reference to an Edomite Kingdom. Sedentarization processes on the Edomite Plateau during the second half of the 8th century rendered some portion of the Edomite population visible in this specific region (6), probably in relation to the Assyrian involvement. An earlier beginning of sedentarization in Moab rendered some portion of the population there visible earlier in the Iron Age (4, 5, 6) (cf. LaBianca and Younker 1995). See the text for more detail. Key: (a) Timna Valley; (b) Wadi Faynan; (c) Ein Hatzeva; (d) Kadesh-Barnea; (e) the region of Balu'a and the "Mudayna" sites; (f) Negev Highlands (including Kadesh-Barnea); (g) Balu'a and its surroundings; (h) Karak and its surroundings; (i) Kuntillet Ajrud; (j) Bozrah and its surroundings; (k) Umm al-Biyara, Tawilan and their surroundings; (l) Tell el-Kheleifeh.

reconstruction, it took some time before another, different polity emerged around the time of Mesha in the second half of the 9th century BCE.¹¹

Regarding the methodological question at hand, it is highly illuminating to discuss the proposal of Finkelstein and Lipschits (2011) *vis-à-vis* a reconstruction that takes into account the new understanding that nomads could have created strong polities without leaving much in the archaeological record. It should be noted that although the former is far from being under scholarly consensus (see other treatments of early Moab in, e.g., Routledge 2004 and various chapters in Bienkowski 2009), it nevertheless encapsulates methodological issues that are common to all current approaches to the study of early Moab, and accordingly is brought here as an example of a wider, in fact all-encompassing, paradigmatic practice.¹² The point of departure of the alternative historical reconstruction (Fig. 1) builds on the widely accepted notion that, similarly to other Iron Age

11. Incidentally, it seems that the reconstruction of this later polity has more to do with the historical evidence (the Mesha Stela) than the problematic archaeological record for this period (Dearman 1989); or, in other words, without the historical information it would have been difficult to reconstruct a *kingdom* in the region based on the *existing interpretational paradigm* and the quality of the archaeological remains for this period.

12. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to elaborate on the contested archaeological evidence and the various historical reconstructions that have been suggested in research on early Moab. However, it is noteworthy that the methodological issues discussed here are prevalent; in *all* of the present reconstructions, the search for evidence of a sedentary occupation is intertwined with the attempts to identify the emergence of a polity, and accordingly, disagreements over the dating of such evidence is not detached from one's general approach to biblical archaeology (the more "critical" one purports to be, the lower the suggested dating is).

regional polities, Moab too had a nomadic, agro-pastoralist origin (e.g., LaBianca and Younker 1995). Based on the evidence from neighboring Edom, it is very well possible that the tribes of Moab consolidated into a territorial polity already during the early Iron Age I, in direct response to the changing geopolitical circumstances at the end of the Bronze Age (discussed above). Evidently, since it did not engage in copper production, the Moabite nomadic polity is much less archaeologically visible than the contemporaneous Edomite one. It is possible that the Balu'a Stela, which depicts a *Shasu* leader within an Egyptian or Egyptianized scenario, reflects this stage or even an earlier one (Dearman 1992; Routledge and Routledge 2009). Finkelstein and Lipschits (2011: 147) reject this possibility, making explicit their underlying assumption that a nomadic society could not have had any significant role in the history of the region (despite their acknowledgment of the “*Shasu*” identification):

Most scholars have dated the stele to the time of the 19th or 20th Dynasties [...] Yet, such dating *is impossible* in view of the absence of any evidence for sedentary activity in Moab in general and at Khirbet Balu'a in particular, at that time; the archaeological evidence from the region allows dating the stele no earlier than the 11th century BC. [emphasis mine]

They further propose to associate the stela with the 21st Dynasty and the short-lived late Iron Age I sites in southern Moab. These sites are indeed prominent in the archaeological landscape of the region; some were already reported by Nelson Glueck, and many have attracted excavation (see general discussions in Miller 1989; Ben-David 2017). They include the central site of Balu'a and several sites called “Mudayna,” and are mostly concentrated south of the Mujib. Many of them have very similar characteristics (topography, layout, architecture), and all of them have elements of defense, from casemate walls to carefully chosen locations on promontories. However, rather than representing the rise and fall of a “territorial entity” that existed briefly, these sites probably reflect a response of the nomadic population to the need for protection during a period of increased instability. A certain portion of the nomadic society indeed went through a brief and reversible sedentarization process, which is entirely associated with well-defended sites that could also have served as gathering places for a larger population at times of stress.¹³ The result is an “archaeological snapshot” of a territorial polity that

13. The interpretation of the sites as fortresses follows Glueck (e.g., 1940: 134–135) and many others (Ben-David 2017 and references therein); I agree with Finkelstein and Lipschits (2011:

existed well before and well after the time when certain circumstances temporarily increased the archaeological visibility of a polymorphous society.

It is possible that the period of increased archaeological visibility in Moab is related to the copper trade, and in particular to a dominance of the northern route (through the Kings' Highway) during that time (cf. Finkelstein and Lipschits 2011). According to this scenario, the archaeology reflects a need for delineating and protecting a trading zone in the southern part of Moab (on the border with Edom), where contacts with "foreign" people were quite frequent. This is similar to the situation in the northwestern part of Edom during the Iron Age IIA (above). The differences in the dating of the Moabite and Edomite "buffer-zone" sites (Fig. 1) might reflect a diversion of the main flow of copper towards the west following the campaign of Shoshenq I to the region ("925 BCE" in Fig. 1; cf. Fantalkin and Finkelstein 2006).

Similarly to the case of Edom, the Moabite society probably had a nomadic component of varying proportions throughout the Iron Age, although sedentarization processes started earlier there (e.g., LaBianca and Younker 1995). It is argued here that at least for the early phase of Moab, from the Balu'a Stela (or earlier) to the Mesha period, interpretations based on the new understanding of the nomads' political potential provide better and more coherent solutions than those based on the search for the settled and interpretations of their erratic archaeological record.

5. Early Israel: Have We Been Looking Under the Streetlight?

Adherence to the *archaeologically visible* is also the case for research on ancient Israel. As noted above, the nomadic tribal origin of the Israelites is widely accepted. Nonetheless, there is a tendency in the research to reconstruct an ultra-rapid sedentarization process and to identify the small, short-lived Iron Age I sites of the hill country with the *entire* early Israelite population (e.g., Finkelstein and Na'aman 1994). The other possibility, of a slow, multi-generation sedentarization process of a polymorphous society that had substantial nomadic components even during the early monarchic period,¹⁴ has never been seriously considered. This is the result of several factors, including the prevailing flat perception of nomads

146) that Routledge's (e.g., 2004) treatment of the sites as agricultural villages overlooks their fundamental features.

14. And most probably all through the Iron Age (in that regard, see the interesting case of the House of Rechab, e.g., Abramsky 1967).

discussed above, which contrasts nomadism with a monarchy (or, for that matter, any type of a polity). Another factor is related to the history of research. The discovery of these “Israelite” sites by Israeli archaeologists following the 1967 war was part of a wider search for a tangible past of the young nation of Israel. The excitement that accompanied this discovery, coupled with a natural aspiration to secure the role of archaeology within the discourse of biblical scholarship, resulted in the furtherance of an approach that stuck to the positive evidence; admitting that the lion’s share of the historical occurrences is beyond archaeology’s reach could not have been a stance of archaeologists who had been devoting academic careers to constructing historical narratives out of the shards, even those who acknowledged the complexity of the archaeology of polymorphous societies.

The assumption that the entire Israelite (or “proto-Israelite”) population is archaeologically visible starting in the early Iron Age I is the basis for demographic, economic, and political reconstructions (e.g., Finkelstein 1988b). It is also the basis for the use of monumentality and other features of the settled in the assessment of the historicity of the United Monarchy (cf. Ben-Yosef in press). However, the new understanding that nomads could have created strong polities without leaving much in the archaeological record, together with the possibility that large segments of the early Israelite population are archaeologically invisible,¹⁵ calls into question the current archaeology-based historical reconstructions. Evidently, the prevailing interpretational paradigm has an inherent bias in favor of the more “critical” school, as it does not take into account the possibility that archaeology does not (and cannot) reflect a substantial portion of the historical picture, and thus absence of evidence is inevitably considered as evidence of absence.

Examples of possibly distorted reconstructions are abundant. Finkelstein and Silberman’s (2002: 143) estimate of 5,000 people in 10th-century BCE Judah is the basis for their assessment that there was no great “United Monarchy,” as this number is too small to support a state. Similarly, a more pronounced archaeological record in the northern hill country, which probably reflects more than

15. The possibility that nomads were a substantial part of the population in the hill country and adjacent areas like the Shephelah even during the 10th and 9th centuries BCE is supported by the archaeological record itself. Based on demographic estimates published for Iron Age Judah, both Faust (2014) and Livni (2015) pointed out that the sharp increase in population size in the 8th century BCE cannot be explained by a natural growth of the earlier population. However, while Faust suggests the arrival of immigrants and Livni a methodological problem in the estimates provided for the 10th century BCE, the simplest explanation is that substantial components of the population were still nomads, and thus invisible in common archaeological research.

anything else a faster sedentarization process, gave rise to the *en vogue* notion that (northern) Israel was the first “real” state to have ever developed in the region (e.g., Finkelstein 2019), and that the northern entity had a regional superiority early on, even in the days of Saul (e.g., Finkelstein 2011). Many other historical reconstructions deserve reconsideration; in fact, all of the current interpretations, including those presented by the more “conservative” school (e.g., Garfinkel, et al. 2012), should be adjusted to factor in archaeologically invisible possibilities that we now know were part of the reality of the early Iron Age Southern Levant. This is beyond the scope of the present paper; here we make do with highlighting the prevailing methodological flaw, as a starting point for a new discussion on the emergence of ancient Israel in which the role of archaeology itself has to be readjusted, especially *vis-à-vis* biblical scholarship. It is crucial to recognize and be wary of the limitations of archaeology in historical reconstructions that involve societies with nomadic components, and to resist the allure of the positive and its ostensible objectivity.¹⁶

6. Conclusions

Constructing historical narratives based on the fragmentary and partial archaeological record is an extremely challenging and complex task.¹⁷ When nomads are involved, the archaeological record cannot be relied upon even for the identification of their mere presence (Finkelstein 1992b), and therefore their incorporation into such narratives has so far been predominantly based on ethnography of modern Bedouin societies. This constrained interpretational framework has dictated many aspects of research on early Iron Age Southern Levantine societies, and in particular those whose nomadic origin is widely accepted (ancient Israel, Ammon, Moab, and Edom).

However, it was recently demonstrated that the prevailing interpretational framework is not adequate for the treatment of biblical-era nomads, as early Iron

16. Incidentally, reconstructions of ancient Israel’s economy suffer from another pitfall of the positivist approach, which is the prevailing neglect of “invisible” economic components (cf. Ben-Yosef 2019b), such as profit from controlling trade of luxurious or high-value goods (e.g., McNutt 1999; Borowski 2003; Boer 2015; but see an exception in Holladay 2006). The growing evidence for the importance of such trade activities to the economy of the early Iron Age Southern Levant, including the trade in copper and commodities from southern Arabia discussed above, must also be factored in regarding the economy of ancient Israel, including during its early days (cf. Holladay and Klassen 2014).

17. Regarding biblical history, see in particular the illuminating criticism of Japhet (2001).

Age nomadic societies could have established strong political bodies that deviate substantially from the “Bedouin model” (Ben-Yosef 2019a). Based on this new understanding and a treatment of the societies of early Edom, Moab, and ancient Israel as polymorphous (i.e., consisting of varying proportions of nomads and settled), the present paper provides alternative historical reconstructions that avoid the common, simplistic conflation between oscillations in archaeological visibility and changing degrees of social complexity and/or variations in territorial boundaries. The methodological insights that are highlighted by these examples should be incorporated into any research that attempts to conjure history out of archaeological remains.

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