

THE RETURN OF THE NOMAD: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESS OF NOMADIZATION IN JORDAN

by
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Introduction

While the process of sedentarization of pastoral nomads has received a great deal of attention among Middle Eastern anthropologists in recent years, relatively little is known about the opposite process of nomadization whereby a regional food system shifts from an emphasis on crop production by settled villagers to one emphasizing stock production by pastoral nomads. This paper examines the process of nomadization in Jordan during the Iron II/Hellenistic, Late Byzantine/Umayyad, and Late Mamlūk/Ottoman periods in the light of ethnoarchaeological, historical and archaeological evidence uncovered by the Andrews University Heshbon Expedition.

Highland Region

The highland region which is located to the east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea has, since Antiquity, been a frontier region which has experienced great temporal variability in patterns of human settlement and landuse. Archaeological excavations at Tell Hesban and the findings of surface surveys carried out within a ten kilometre radius of this site have convincingly confirmed the impressions of earlier scholars who noted the instability of sedentary occupation in this region since ancient times.¹

In our continuing attempts to understand the shifting patterns of human settlement and landuse over time in this region,

we have begun to focus our inquiries on the role of two complementary processes which, we believe, represent fundamental cultural processes in this region. These are the processes of sedentarization, on the one hand, and nomadization on the other. While much attention has already been devoted to the process of sedentarization, whereby nomadic groups of herdsmen abandon their migratory existence in favour of settled livelihoods in villages and towns,² much less is known about the complementary process of nomadization, whereby populations abandon their settled ways in favour of various types of nomadic livelihoods.

One reason for the neglect of this topic is, no doubt, the fact that sedentarization is presently an ubiquitous phenomena throughout much of the contemporary Middle East, whereas bedouinization is a phenomena that, although it continues to occur as well (for example, in the case of displaced Palestinians who, because they have been forced to leave their traditional lands, have reverted to living in tents and raising sheep and goats in Jordan), has for various reasons received much less attention. Certainly, it is a much less ubiquitous process today and one which may also be more subtle. Given the diachronic patterns afforded by archaeological research, however, the process of nomadization emerges as a phenomena equally as fundamental and important as that of sedentarization to any comprehensive understanding of the trans-

¹ N. Glueck, *The Other Side of the Jordan*, New Haven, 1940; W. Caskel, *The Bedouinization of Arabia*, In *Studies in Islamic Cultural History*, *American Anthropologist*, 56 (1954), p. 45.

² F. Barth, *Nomads of South Persia*, Boston, 1961; D. G. Bates, *The Role of the State in Peasant-Nomad Mutualism*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 44 (1971) p. 109-131; D. G. Bates, *Nomads and*

Farmers: A Study of the Yoruk of Southeastern Turkey, Ann Arbor, 1973; A. R. George, *Processes of Sedentarization of Nomads in Egypt, Israel and Syria: A Comparison*, *Geography* 58 (1973) p. 167-169; D. Chatty, *The Current Situation of the Bedouin in Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia and their Prospects for the Future*, Amman, 1978; W. Lancaster, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, Cambridge, 1981.

formations being investigated here. In this paper my aim is to suggest the pertinence of the concept of nomadization to generating hypotheses about why and how settlement and landuse patterns east of Jordan reverted from sedentary agriculture to pastoral nomadism at different periods in time.

Neither "nomadization" nor the less appropriate but related concept of "bedouinization" are terms which are in common usage in the published literature dealing with socio-cultural aspects of the Middle East. By contrast, the term "sedentarization" is frequently encountered,³ a fact which highlights the greater interest to date in the latter process among students of Middle Eastern societies.

Thus far, only one article has come to this researcher's attention which specifically refers to "bedouinization." Written in 1954 by Werner Caskel, who was at the time a Professor of Oriental Philology at the University of Cologne, the article is of particular relevance to the present study because it makes specific reference to the fact that in Arabia and the countries of the Fertile Crescent "the processes of de-Bedouinization can be traced fairly exactly." Indeed, Caskel even notes that "in Transjordan these processes can even be proved by archaeological evidence."⁴ The French appear to be the principle users of

the term "nomadization".⁵

But while the terms themselves have not been used much in the English literature, the processes to which they refer have, however, been noted by a number of English-speaking anthropologists.⁶ For example, Haaland⁷ has suggested that one reason why people return to nomadic pastoralism is the fact that it is notably responsible to inputs of labour, thus making it an attractive alternative when sedentary agriculture becomes more difficult. This economic advantage of pastoralist production has also been noted by Barth.⁸

Regarding the origin of nomadic pastoralism, Lees and Bates⁹ have suggested that specialized nomadic pastoralism was a consequence of agricultural expansion into arid regions, resulting in increasing numbers of households turning to full-time herding to find adequate food for their animals. This view represents a refinement of earlier proposals by Robert Adams.¹⁰

To these economic perspectives on why people become nomads must be added views emphasizing the political dimensions. Historians, for example, are inclined to view the rise and fall of nomadic societies as a direct consequence of the strengthening or weakening of the administrative grasp and military power of state governments.¹¹ Anthropologists like

³ Barth, *ibid.*; E. Marx, *Bedouin of the Negev*, Manchester, 1967; George, *ibid.*; C. Nelson, ed. *The Desert and the Sown*, Berkeley, 1973; D. G. Bates and A. Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, New Jersey, 1983.

⁴ Caskel, *ibid.*

⁵ F. Aubin, *Anthropologie du Nomadisme*, *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 56 (1974) p. 79-90; P. Bonce, *Atlas of Agrarian Structures South of Sahara*, *Etudes Rurales*, 1975 p. 117-118.

⁶ P. C. Salzman, The Study of 'Complex Society' in the Middle East: A Review Essay, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 9 (1978) p. 539-557.

⁷ G. Haaland *Economic Determinants in Ethnic Process*, in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Boston, 1969.

⁸ F. Barth, A General Perspective on Nomad-Sedentary Relations in the Middle East, in *The Desert and the Sown*, Berkeley, 1973.

⁹ Bates, The Role, *Ibid.*; Bates, *ibid.*, Nomads.

¹⁰ R. M. Adams, The Mesopotamian Social Landscape: A View from the Frontier, in *Reconstructing Complex Societies*, MIT, 1972; R. M. Adams, Strategies of Maximization, Stability, and Resilience in Mesopotamian Society, Settlement, and Agriculture, *Proceedings of the American Philological Society*, 122 (1978) p. 329-335.

¹¹ Caskel, *ibid.*; W. Hütteroth, The Patterns of Settlement in Palestine in the Sixteenth Century, in *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period*, Jerusalem, 1975; P. Mayerson, The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine (A.D. 633-634), *American Philological Association Transactions*, 95 (1964) p. 155-199; A. Reifenberg, *The Struggle between the Desert and the Sown*, Jerusalem, 1955; M. Rowton, Enclosed Nomadism, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 17 (1974) p. 1-30; M. Sharon, The Political Role of the Bedouins in Palestine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, in *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period*, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 11-30.

Irons,¹² on the other hand, have argued that nomadism can be viewed as a defensive adaptation to the state machinery, as in the case of the Yomut Turkmen.

Pastoral Nomadism

The first proposal which I would like to make, with reference to the situation in Jordan, is that pastoral nomadism has played a role of one sort or another on the socio-political stage of this region during all of the cultural periods investigated so far by the Heshbon Expedition. Until now this would take us back to the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 B.C.). Not only is this proposal readily supportable by historical sources dealing with the cultural history of this region,¹³ but this state of affairs is reflected in numerous ways in the archaeological evidence from Tell Hesban and vicinity, as has been discussed elsewhere.¹⁴

A second proposal which can be supported by the evidence on hand is that various types of coexisting pastoral nomadic strategies may emerge as the end product of the process of bedouinization in this region. This is particularly apparent during the latter part of the Ottoman or Turkish period in Jordan (ca. A.D. 1880-1917), when the region located within a ten kilometre radius of Hesban was exploited by means of at least three different pastoralist strategies:

Camel and horse breeding Beni Sakhr bedouin visited the highland region to the south and east of Hesban during the spring and summer. Having gradually pushed

their way northward over the past three hundred years from their traditional home territories in the Arabian desert, this group was described by Tristram¹⁵ as being the "suzerains" of this highland area. Although they themselves avoided tilling the fertile soils of this plateau, their slaves, the Abu Endi, did so for them in exchange for protection.

In contrast to the horizontal migration pattern followed by the Beni Sakhr, the Adwan tribesmen and the various tribal entities attached to them followed a vertical or transhumant pattern of migration, grazing their herds of sheep, goats, and cattle on the hills and slopes to the north and west of Hesban. During the fall and winter they returned to their cultivated fields in the Jordan Valley.

A similar pattern was followed by the Hamideh tribesmen along the slopes leading down from the highland plateau to the shores of the Dead Sea. But unlike both the camel and horse breeding Beni Sakhr and the cattle and sheep breeding Adwan, the Hamideh Arabs herded a particular breed of small, black cattle¹⁶ and donkeys. There was also a position of subservience to the Beni Sakhr.

A third proposal, and one which echoes the views of numerous historians concerned with this region, is that the process of nomadization appears to gain increasing momentum during periods of weakening military and administrative control by state governments.

This was the case during the sixth century B.C., when the Babylonian invasion of the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab,

¹² W. Irons, Nomadism as a Political Adaptation: The Case of the Yomut Turken, *American Ethnologist*, 1 (1974) p. 635-638; and, Variation in Political Stratification Among the Yomut Turkmen, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 44 (1971) p. 143-156.

¹³ Rowton, *ibid.*; and, M. E. Kirk, An Outline of the Ancient Cultural History of Transjordan, *PEQ*, 76 (1944) p. 180-198.

¹⁴ Ø. S. LaBianca, Agricultural Production of Hesban's Hinterland in the Iron Age, ASOR Annual Meetings, 1979; and, Agricultural Production on Hesban's Hinterland, 198 B.C.-A.D. 969, AIA Meetings, 1979; and, Aspects of a Central Jordanian Food System: An Investigation

of Interrelated Changes in Settlement, Landuse, Operational Facilities and Diet at Hesban and Vicinity, Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1984, unpublished; and, Temporal Variability in Nomad-Sedentary Relations in Central Transjordan, American Anthropological Meetings, 1979; and, Temporal Visibility in Nomad-Sedentary Relations in Central Transjordan during the Islamic Era, MESA Meetings, 1979; and, L. T. Geraty and Ø. S. LaBianca, The Local Environment and Human Food-Procurring Strategies in Jordan, Andrews University, unpublished, 1983.

¹⁵ H. B. Tristram, *The Land of Moab*, New York, 1873, p. 247.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

and Edom brought an end to these local Transjordanian governments.¹⁷ Over the ensuing centuries, a process of nomadization occurred, which appears to have led to the establishment in this region during early Hellenistic times (332-200 B.C.) of a group of nomads practicing vertical or transhumant pastoralism.

The basis for this suggestion is the fact that the political boundaries established by the Hellenistic overloads during this period ran along the highland region of the Transjordanian plateau rather than down along the Jordan-Dead Sea basin.¹⁸ Given the dearth of settlements along the highland region during this period, and given the semi-sedentary ways of transhumants, making them more amenable to government control, this seemingly arbitrary location of the border is understandable after all. Furthermore, as Caskel¹⁹ has noted regarding the bedouins which inhabited northern Arabia during this period, they were literate peoples whose "thamudenic" inscriptions and drawings were numerous, and whose "gods and rites were borrowed from the city dwellers."

While the process of nomadization which followed the withdrawal of Byzantine military defences east of the Jordan and the Dead Sea during the sixth century A.D.²⁰ again attests to the importance of the political dimension in accounting for return of the bedouin, the outcome of the process differs somewhat. Instead of the establishment of a predominantly vertical or transhumant form of pastoralism in this region, a horizontal type of nomadism appears to have emerged involving horses and camels and commitments to the ways of desert tribesmen.²¹

This appears also to have been the case following the demise of the brief

'Ayyūbid-Mamlūk (A.D. 1260-1400) occupation of this area, as has been shown by several recent studies of the Ottoman or Turkish period in Palestine.²² Indeed, according to Ottoman tax records from the sixteenth century, the horse and camel breeding Beni Sakhr may already have established themselves in Transjordan by this time.²³

To these proposals could be added others regarding the rate at which the process of bedouinization occurs and regarding the reasons for the different outcomes of these processes at various points in time. Indeed, in offering the proposals summarized above, my main aim has not been to convince of the process of nomadization in Jordan. As should by now be apparent, we have very little direct archaeological evidence to base any of our proposals on. We have relied heavily on pertinent ethnoarchaeological information and literary sources for much of our discussion.

What I wish to emphasize instead is that, first, we know very little about the process of nomadization compared to what we know about the process of sedentarization; and that, second, archaeological methods may offer an as yet largely untapped source of data for investigating this process. Only when we return to the field with an explicit concern with the problem--nomadization--can we hope to test proposals about the origins of, and reasons for, the persistence and change of pastoral nomadism which have already been suggested by our cultural anthropologist colleagues.

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¹⁷ Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *Archaeology of Jordan*, Amman, 1978.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Professor Geraty for pointing this out to me.

¹⁹ Caskel, *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁰ Mayerson, *ibid.*

²¹ Caskel, *ibid.*; Mayerson, *ibid.*; and, D. R. Hill, *The Role of the Camel and the Horse in Early Arab Conquests*, in *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East*, Oxford, 1975.

²² Hütteroth, *ibid.*; Sharon, *ibid.*

²³ Hütteroth, *ibid.*