

I am Mesha, King of Moab, or: Economic Organization in the Iron Age II

I am Mesha, son of Kemosh[yat], king of Moab, the Dibonite.

My father ruled over Moab thirty years, and I ruled after my father.

Although the Iron II period may easily be called the most extensively excavated era of ancient Palestine, not much is known of the economic background of its societies. Most scholarly surveys are content to rely on the picture presented in the biblical sources, which depict king Solomon as a wealthy ruler, head of a well organised state, he himself heavily engaged in economic activities.¹ These stories are supposed to 'explain' the economic base of his government and those of his successors as well. Even recent works find it hard to abandon this approach completely.²

My interest in ancient economy stems from a workshop I have held with graduate students. We decided to concentrate on the economy of the ninth and eighth centuries BC, the period for which some reliable historical sources exist, but before the Assyrian usurpation of the country. Our research ranged from the domestic mode of production to the Samaria ostraca, and from the organisation of pottery production to the possible occurrence of gateway communities.³ By analysing excavation reports we tried to gain some insight into the economy of ancient Israel and its neighbours, trying to discover not only what was produced but more importantly how this production was organized; not only the distribution of goods, but the hows and whys of it.

Our aim was to find answers to such simple questions

as: when a farmer was in need for a new iron axe, where did he go: to his neighbour, to the next village, the city? And how did he pay for it? Did local markets exist, were there traveling traders? How did the king get the copious meal he desired on his table? Did he have his own lands, did he receive gifts, or taxes, and how was that organized? And what about the many loom weights found in domestic contexts? Were the ladies of the house weaving clothes for their own families only, were they working to sell items on the local markets, or was the material meant for the elite? And who made the exquisite fabrics the Assyrians demanded as tribute from the kings of Israel?⁴

It turned out that it was very difficult to obtain answers to these questions from excavation reports, as the archaeological record is often biased, incomplete, and not quantified. Worse still is that much of the material has not, or not yet, been published.

However, suddenly King Mesha stepped forward to assist us. The inscription on the stele that bears his name is well-known and needs no further introduction here.⁵ When we first analysed this inscription there seemed disappointingly little economic information in the text: none on taxes, trade routes, import commodities and the like. But Mesha is very insistent on some points: he is a king, his father was a king, he is a war lord, he is a builder.

It is possible to approach this text with the model of the Early State as developed by Claessen, Skalnik and others on the basis of empirical studies of more than 20 societies all over the world.⁶ Claessen and Skalnik are

¹ See for instance E. Neufeld, The Emergence of a Royal-Urban Society in Ancient Israel. *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960), and M. Silver, *Prophets and Markets: the Political Economy of Ancient Israel*. Hingham (1983).

² J. S. Holladay, The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Political and Economic Centralization in the Iron IIA-B (ca. 1000 - 750 BCE). In T. E. Levy (ed.), *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*. London (1995).

³ See for introductions to these subjects: M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*. London (1974); I. T. Kaufman, The Samaria Ostraca. An Early Witness to Hebrew Writing. *BA* (1982), 229 ff.; S. van der

Leeuw, Towards a Study of the Economics of Pottery Making. Pp. 68-76 in B. L. Van Beek, R. W. Brandt and W. Groenman-van Wateringen (eds.), *Ex Horreo*. Amsterdam (1977); K. G. Wirth, Inter-regional Trade and the Formation of Prehistoric Gateway Communities. *American Antiquities* 43 (1978), 35-45.

⁴ See J. Kah-jin Kuan, *Neo-Assyrian Historical Inscriptions and Syria-Palestine*. Hong Kong (1995).

⁵ A. Dearman (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*. Atlanta (1989).

⁶ H. J. M. Claessen and P. Skalnik (eds.), *The Early State*. The Hague (1978).

cultural anthropologists, not archaeologists, and they used mostly historically recent or still existing societies to build their model. When they compared these societies, who were experiencing statehood for the first time in their history, they found that early states reveal some typical characteristics. For these characteristics I quote Claessen:⁷

- * Early states have a definite territory, but their outer boundaries are very loosely marked. They are politically independent.
- * The ruler is military commander in-chief foremost, more than supreme law maker and judge.
- * State ideology is important, and the ruler has to legitimize himself.
- * As in all states, early states have monopoly of force. According to Tainter⁸ this is what sets states apart from chiefdoms or less complex societies in general. This means that the ruler has the authority to mobilize resources and draft personnel for war or work, levy and collect taxes, and decree and enforce laws.
- * The early state comprises two classes at least: the ruling elite (the sovereign, his clan, his court, the administration, and some specialist functionaries such as priests or scribes) and the ruled, the people living in the old communities (be they described as villages or clans of kinships), who are economically autonomous.
- * Early states have a definite administrative apparatus. This, however, is small, especially in the beginning of the early state.
- * Neither literacy nor urbanization are a necessary condition for an early state, but both develop in the course of time.
- * In most cases the sovereign has a capital where his court resides, although in the earlier stages he may have no fixed court and will have travelled around the country to live of tribute or tributary gifts.
- * The ruler has temples and irrigation works built, and roads constructed.
- * Prestige goods, obtained by long-distance trade, are in great demand by the ruler and his court, and function to enhance and legitimate their status.

If we search for these characteristics in the stele of king Mesha, we find remarkable similarities. Mesha legitimates himself, is a war leader foremost, and builds quite considerably: mention is made of fortifications, temples, irrigation works and the road through the Arnon. More importantly, he has monopoly of force and is able to draft people for war and work. It seems acceptable to infer that his Moab was not a chiefdom, but an Early State.

Lately, it has been questioned whether Moab reached statehood at any time during the Iron Age,⁹ but Mesha's stele indicates otherwise. Please note that Claessen and Skalnik, who provided this list of characteristics, did not know this inscription, and did not use any examples from the Levant.

I am aware of the pitfalls of taking this inscription at face value. But, for whatever reasons Mesha wrote his text,¹⁰ he could not possibly make up the characteristics of a society more complex than the one he was living in. He may have exaggerated his accomplishments and made himself larger than he was, the very fact that he was able to erect a stele proclaiming his deeds is an indication that he was the head of an (early) state.

Concentrating now on the economic aspects of the model of the Early State we are able to learn from Claessen and Skalnik that the influence of the ruler on the ruled is not extensive; the local communities are required to pay some form of tax or tribute on irregular basis and may be summoned up to supply labour for the building projects of the sovereign and for the army. The interest of the ruler in economic matters is small; the state concerns itself foremost with political and ideological matters, not with economic exploitation.

Systematic tax paying by the communities is not usual. In the earlier stages tribute is levied on 'voluntary' irregular basis, and only if the ruling class needs it. Later on, taxes have to be paid on a more regular basis, but real economic exploitation of the productive communities is scarce. Redistribution is an important function of early states, but is ordinarily limited to the distribution of surplus to the (small) administration and to the furnishing of sacrifices. The ruler receives food and labour, while his returns are in the ideological sphere: he 'guarantees' fertility, peace and prosperity. The amounts of goods distributed in these early states are limited.

The local communities make a living by agriculture combined with the part-time practicing of crafts and trade. They are more or less self-sufficient. Land ownership is communal; private land ownership is rare and occurs only in the latest phase of the early state. The sovereign (and the ruling class) live off tribute/ tributary gifts and the returns of their own land. This land is cultivated by members of their families or by tenants. The state has a direct interest in the returns from inter-regional long-distance trade which served the growing demand for luxury objects. In most cases, however, the state did not organize this trade, but restricted itself to the taxation of traders and merchants. Local trade is commonly practiced, markets are commonly found, but pro-

⁷ H. J. Claessen, *The Early State: A Structural Approach*. In Claessen and Skalnik 1978 (see note 6), chapter 25, pp. 533-597.

⁸ J. A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge (1988).

⁹ R. W. Younker, *Moabite Social Structure*. *BA* (1997), 237-248.

¹⁰ See for instance J. F. Drinkard, *The Literary Genre of the MI*. In Dearman 1989 (note 5).

fessional traders were not a common characteristic and neither was the use of money.

It seems that in early states, and thus also in Moab, we can expect that two economic zones or circuits have existed side by side. However, the tendency evidenced in many studies¹¹ to create a dichotomy between towns, where the elite was housed and industries would be practiced, and countryside, dependent on these towns for its basic needs and exploited by them, seems not to do justice to the actual situation. These societies were not urbanized or urban-based as other, more fully developed states were.

I propose a different classification of these two zones. The first one consists of the royal economy. The king and the small elite lived off the returns of their own lands, of irregular taxation of the local communities and the taxation of inter-regional trade. The king held court in his capital, probably a fortified town, where specialized crafts as ivory and gold working and the production of luxury pottery were concentrated. Here one can expect to find palaces and temples, but no large-scale storage facilities, nor an extensive bureaucratic apparatus creating a lot of economic texts, nor a king actively involved in industries and trade.

The other economic zone is made up of the local communities, be they farmers or pastoralists. These people, if farmers, lived in villages or small towns, which may also have been fortified. Here we can also expect workshops

for pottery and metal working, and the local markets.

The interaction between these two circuits would have been limited as taxes were levied on irregular basis and the local communities had their own industries and markets. There was not so much a deep split between 'town' and 'countryside', but rather a relative difference between the towns, lands and crafts of the local communities on the one hand, and the towns, lands and crafts of the elite on the other hand, whereby those of the elite, of course, were richer, larger and more luxurious. Towns did function as a place for living and working for both elite and rural people — 'real' cities were non-existent — and agriculture was the main source of income for all.

To apply this model to the archaeological record of the small Iron Age states in the southern Levant will be the next step in our research. But what about the questions I asked in the beginning: where did a farmer go if he needed a new axe? How did the king get his copious meals on the table? And was weaving done for the household only, for the elite, or as tribute for the Assyrians?

In all probability we can say that:

- the farmer went to the nearest market and paid with a bottle of his best wine;
- the king had his own lands which provided him with whatever he wanted;
- weaving in the villages was done mostly for the household.

¹¹ See for instance Neufeld 1960 (note 1) and D. Hopkins, *Bare Bones: Putting Flesh on the Economics of Ancient Israel*. In V.

Fritz and P. R. Davies (eds.), *The Origin of the Ancient Israelite State*. Sheffield (1996).