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## Between the Plateau and the Rocks Edomite Economic and Social Structure

Visitors of what once had been Edom cannot be but fascinated by the view which opens from the edge of the plateau down to Wādī 'Arabah: behind them, an undulating highland provides a strip of secondary or tertiary agricultural terrain which becomes narrower and more scarce the further one penetrates south, and gradually declines towards the Syro-Arabian desert, scattered by recent settlements and the remnants of their ancient predecessors, the tulūl and the khirab; the view in front of them is a labyrinthine mass of rocks and gorges towards Wādī 'Arabah. It is this basic dichotomy of the Edomite landscape that we abbreviate by "the plateau and the rocks" (FIG. 1).

That both environments once were integrated into the texture of Edomite society and economy has very recently been elucidated. The archaeology of Edom was constituted by its pioneers, from N. Glueck to C.-M. Bennett and S. Hart, as the archaeology of the Edomite Plateau, with only occasional and perplexing outposts in the "wilderness" of the rocks, like Umm al-Biyāra, or down in Wādī 'Arabah (notably in the copper-mining district of Faynan see Bienkowski 1992a: 5-7 and 1992b). It can now confidently be stated that Umm al-Biyāra was by no means a phenomenon.

Surveys of the Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Nürnberg, directed by M. Lindner, have provided a number of "mountain strongholds" in the Greater Petra Area (Lindner 1986; 1992; Lindner and Farajat 1987. Lindner, Farajat and Zeitler 1988; Lindner *et al.* 1990; 1996):

Ba'ja III (1984/86)

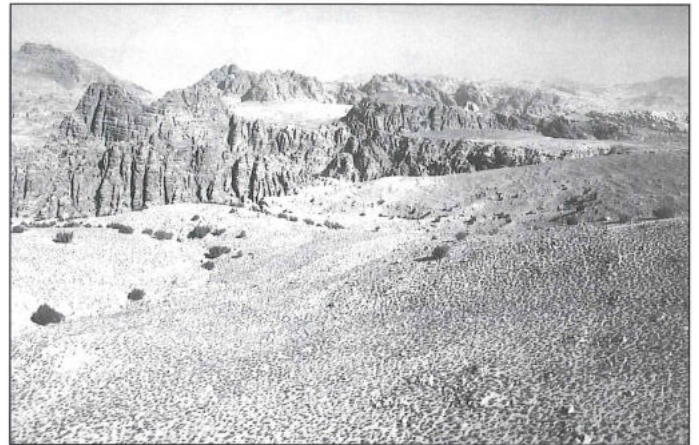
Umm al-'Alā (1987/88)

Jabal al-Qṣeir (1992)

Jabal al-Khubtha (1994, 1995) (FIG. 2).

The four sites and Umm al-Biyāra have a number of features in common:

- a- Situated outside the Edomite plateau, in an environment which does not encourage permanent settlement or facilitates stone architecture, which is nevertheless attested;
- b- Restricted accessibility, experienced by everybody who ever climbed Umm al-Biyāra (Ba'ja III, invisible from the Jabu plain, but dominating it, characterizes this clearly);

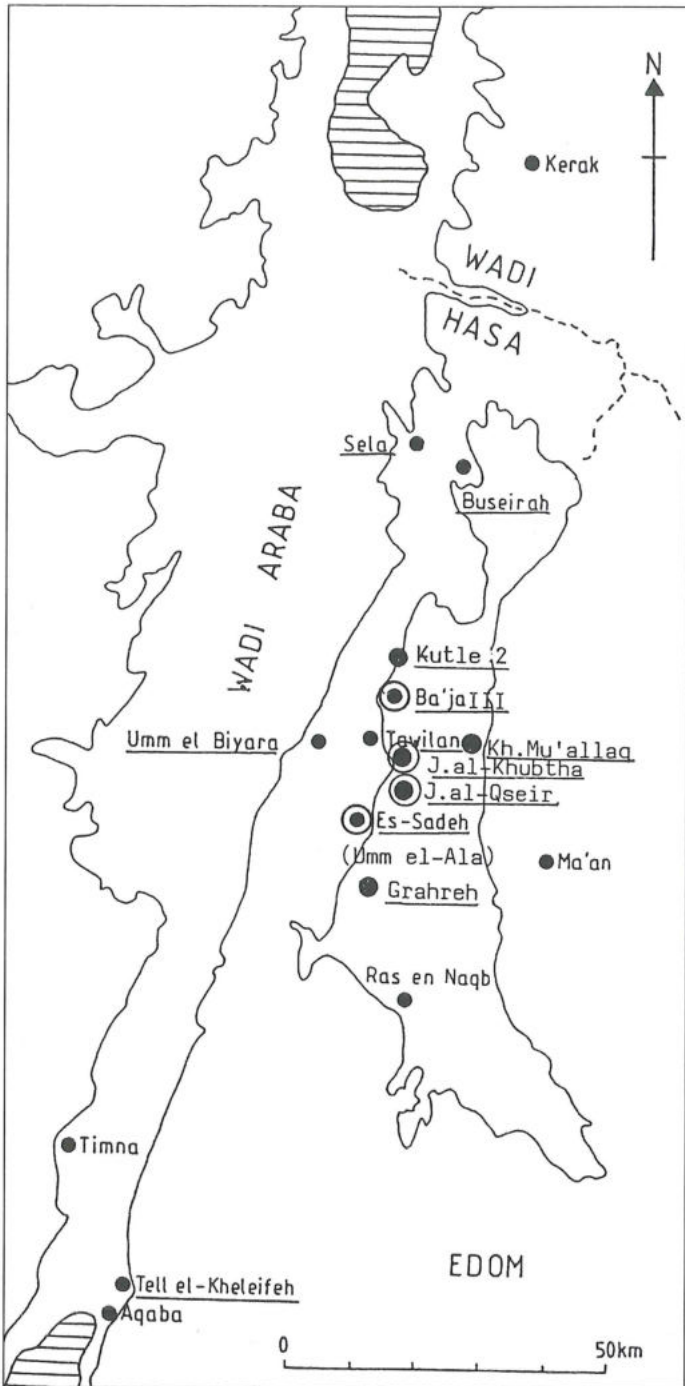


1. View from the Edomite plateau (Jibāl ash-Sharā) down to the sandstone rocks of Petra.

- c- Storage facilities for agricultural products ("longhouses" as found at Umm al-'Alā, Jabal al-Qṣeir; at all the sites, sherds from coarse storage jars predominate - on Jabal al-Khubtha, one hardly finds anything else);
- d- Pockets — or even stretches — of agriculturally and/or horticulturally useful land in close vicinity;
- e- A total or nearly total absence of "fine ware". Es-Silc (es-Selac), visited and described several times as a "natural refuge" (Hart 1986a; Lindner 1992), may be added to the five sites mentioned.

One may now confidently state that the "rocks" formed part of the Edomite economic and social landscape. Which was, however, the relationship between the — Edomites "higher up", on the plateau, and those "lower down", in the rocks? What made the Edomites — or some Edomites — choose sites for settlement which seem to be more suited for goats? If the archaeological evidence now available is far from providing all the answers, it does pose some questions worth pondering.

Should one look for a diachronic or for a synchronic explanation? As the subtitle of this contribution suggests, we opt for the latter. Theoretically, one may try to establish an historical sequence: from the rocks to the plateau, or vice versa. Practically, this would lead to questions of factual history and neglect the representation of a past state of society and economy which is better gleaned from



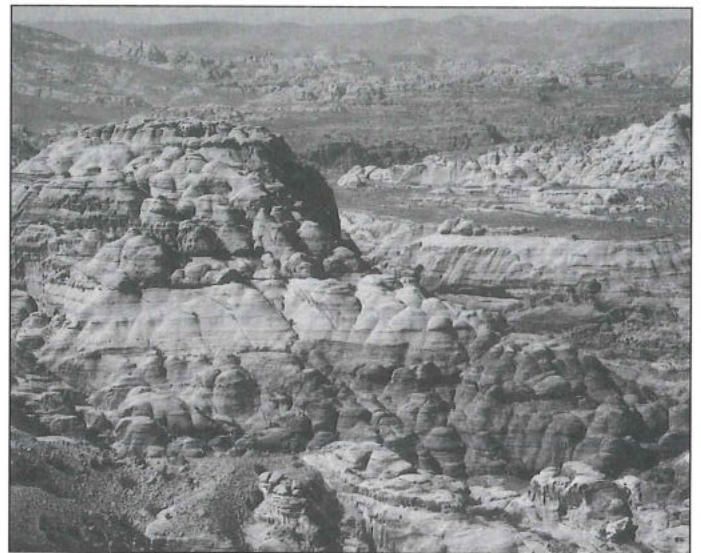
2. Sketch map of Southern Jordan (ancient Edom) with important Iron II sites. Mountain strongholds lately identified by Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Nürnberg are encircled.

archaeological facts. The more so in Edomite archaeology: to distinguish between "early" and "late" Edomite is impossible at present and will, in all probability, remain impossible for the future, given the extremely short-lived floruit of Edomite settled (and pottery-producing) culture. The Edomite civilization may not have commenced until the beginning of the seventh century BC, and it may not

have survived very long or vigorously after the middle of the sixth century.

Choosing a diachronic approach does not mean, however, that the relationship between the plateau and the rocks could not have been different at the beginning, the height and the end of Edomite cultural history, a possibility which will be considered in due course.

It is highly questionable whether the sites served a permanent population. Jabal al-Qseir, at least, exhibits numerous rock-cut foundations but with no architectural remains. In all probability, these foundations were intended for temporary dwellings such as tents or huts. Temporary use of the sites would partially mitigate the inconvenience of getting there (FIG. 3).



3. Jabal al-Qseir, an Edomite mountain stronghold south of Petra. J4.

The main feature that all the sites provide is security, guaranteed by the geographical setting rather than by military architecture. The sites served, then, a population more experienced in mountain climbing than in fortress building, though minimal fortification works are attested (a watch tower at Umm al-'Alā, a strategically placed curtain wall at Jabal al-Qseir). It has been suggested - with some probability - that Edomite monumental architecture on the plateau was influenced, and probably constructed with some technical assistance, by the Assyrians. In this case, it is in the rocks that we may observe "indigenous Edomite" architecture - the architectural heritage of a somewhat peripheral culture as compared to the urban civilisation in its western and northern vicinity.<sup>1</sup>

It is a matter of speculation to decide against whom the Edomite rock-dwellers wanted to protect themselves. Given the basically tribal nature of Edomite society, it can by no means be excluded that the people of the rocks sought refuge against the power of the nascent state on the

<sup>1</sup> The Neo-Babylonian relief and inscription recently reported from as-Sila' (probably depicting Nabonidus and recording his conquest of Edom in 552 BC) does not necessarily contradict our evaluation of the nature of Edomite settlement

in this region, as the choice of this site may simply be due to the existence of a convenient and not too inaccessible rock surface; cf. for a parallel the inscriptions and reliefs of Naḥr al-Kalb, cf. Winckler 1909.

plateau (Knauf 1992). It has to be noted, however, that in spite of a possible political/ethnic divide between the plateau and the rocks, both areas complemented each other within the framework of regional economy and ecology. Some interaction between the two areas is clearly attested by the seal of "Qausgabbar, King of Edom" found at Umm al-Biyāra (Bartlett 1989: 213), although the question of how it got there remains unsettled: as the property of the local royal official, or as precious booty? The record of a delivery of oil, probably sent from Umm al-Biyāra rather than to the site (Bartlett 1989: 215) indicates, however, that at least at certain periods the "rock of Petra" had been integrated into the economic and administrative network of the Edomite state. Dependence of the "mountain strongholds" on the agricultural potential of the plateau, limited as the latter was, is indirectly attested by the large amount of storage jars at all sites investigated, which can hardly have contained a commodity other than grain, impossible to procure locally in sufficient amounts, and also attested by the few pieces of Edomite "fine ware" which was produced on the plateau. Agricultural land is situated at the feet of Umm al-Biyāra and of Ba'ja III; otherwise, the limited extent of agricultural pockets makes only horticulture feasible. The oil-delivery receipt mentioned above and the abundance of traces of Nabataean viticulture in the area surrounding Ba'ja III lead to the suspicion that the main commodity produced even at the two agriculturally most favoured sites was not grain.

The most obvious product of the rocky precipice must have been, if present patterns of land-use allow any prediction of ancient economic structures, an abundance of goats. The area of Jabal al-Qšeir is presently inhabited by one extended family (which reoperates several Nabataean cisterns and storage facilities) with ca. 200 goats. Goods not produced by this household are bought at aṭ-Ṭayyiba (at a fair distance). Even on the plateau, agriculture is precarious (Hart 1986b). Edomite agricultural colonisation in the seventh century BC in an area which, before and after, was wisely left to husbandry can only be explained by a desperate struggle for the increase of food production. Given the irreconcilable conflict between goats and agriculture (Köhler-Rollefson 1988), the herds formerly husbanded on the plateau would have had to look for other grazing grounds. Under these circumstances, it was only natural to relegate goat-herding from the plateau to agriculturally even more marginal districts, that is the rocks. The tribes of this area, whatever their political outlook towards the state on the plateau was, became integrated into Edomite economy due to economic expansion initiated by an increase of demand for combustibles. That dispersed bands – or clans – of pastoralists (and, probably, of arbo- and viticulturalists) needed central storage and distribution facilities for imported grain (and other goods) is obvious; that they chose to install these facilities within their own territory instead of on the

edge of the plateau, and that they chose them as inaccessible as possible, provides a glimpse at the fragmentation of Edomite society, and probably also a glimpse on intra-Edomite "tribal" conflicts (cf. also Mittmann 1973 and Knauf 1989 41 n. 185; 71 with n. 356).

The increased demand for agricultural products in Southern Jordan during the seventh century is, of course, in turn a consequence of Edom's integration into the Assyrian dominated world economy (Knauf 1994: 142-145). Edom participated eagerly in the Arabian trade, which had just commenced, and competed with Cyprus as copper producer. No major Edomite trade route can be suspected to have run through the Petra region, the centre of the Edomite state being situated further north at Buṣayra; and, the "mountain strongholds" are, by their very nature, everything else but trade stations (one may think of robbers' nests, but nothing can be detected in their immediate vicinity worth robbing). In a rather general, or "structural" way, however, trade was the primary *raison d'être* of Edomite economic development and hence, also of Edomite economic expansion into the area of the rocks as attested by the "mountain strongholds".

We saw that these installations can be perfectly explained as "central places" of a predominantly non-sedentary population. In addition to being opposed to the culture of the agricultural area, however, they must also have served as interface between the rocks and the plateau. This is not only attested by the epigraphic evidence from Umm al-Biyāra (see supra), but also by their spatial distribution immediately under, or close to, the edge of the plateau. Furthermore, the "mountain strongholds" seem to have had "counterparts" on the plateau, which served in turn as interface from the plateau to the rocks. as-Sil' is as clearly orientated towards the Edomite capital Bozrah/Buṣayra as Jabal al-Qšeir must have been dependant, in antiquity as today, on aṭ-Ṭayyiba (the Edomite settlement at the latter site has not yet been located, though Edomite sherd scatters within or near the village have been reported; it is inconceivable that the Edomites, who settled much less promising sites, were not attracted by its abundant spring). Al-Khubtha (where the Edomite settlement is more extensive than previously suspected) and Umm al-Biyāra were evidently satellites of the extended farmstead, or village of Ṭawilān; and Ba'ja III, situated halfway between Ṭawilān and Kutleh II, an Edomite village on a veritable "outpost" of the plateau (Jabal as-Suffha) north of Petra (discovered in 1994), is overlooked by an Edomite fortress on Jabal ash-Shdeifeh, a spur butressing from the plateau (discovered in 1995). State intervention in the interaction between the plateau and the rocks is also attested by the Edomite fortress of Khirbat al-Mu'allaq, situated between Petra and aṭ-Ṭayyiba on the very edge of the plateau (excavated by the Naturhistorische Gesellschaft Nürnberg under the direction of M. Lindner between 1991 and 1994).

It is not inconceivable, and indeed likely, that, due to

their history as centres of interaction between the plateau and the rocks, the "mountain strongholds" served also as points of refuge for the Edomite population of the plateau during or after the fall of the Edomite state in 552 BC when the major threat to the remaining settlers was posed by the bedouin-the rocks are no terrain for camels. After another economic collapse on the Edomite plateau in the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, settled life did continue in Southern Jordan (if mostly unobserved) in various sheltered places in the same area (discovered by the NHG survey in the course of the past ten years). But the function which the "mountain strongholds" held then was not the function that caused their construction (FIG. 4).



4. The spur of Umm al-'Ala above the valley of as-Sadah with long-houses and a tower.

The ideas presented here are only preliminary. Processing of the data furnished by the sites which we have mentioned has just begun. Attention is, however, directed at least to an aspect of Edomite, and probably not only Edomite, culture invisible from the trodden path.

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