

The Impact of Long-Distance Trade on the Pastoral-Nomadic Populations of Southern Jordan and Northwestern Arabia During the Iron Age

Introduction

It has long been accepted by most scholars that southern Jordan and northwestern Arabia during the Iron Age were home to wandering tribes of desert Bedouin who facilitated the development of long-distance trade between Arabia and the Levant (Albright 1953; Montgomery 1969: 175; Eph'al 1982: 12; De Maigret 1998: 223). Yet, despite this long-held sentiment that both the Arabian trade and "Arab" nomads had a large part to play in the socio-economic world of the Iron Age, few have tried to understand the exact nature of nomadic participation. To put it bluntly, most have been content to assume that the trade simply "happened" and that it in some way was "driven" by the camel nomads of northern Arabia.

This paper, while briefly reviewing the range of historical and archaeological evidence that has been used to connect these regions with ancient nomads and Arabian trade, will argue that both our archaeological and historical perspectives on the trade have been too narrow, focusing only on the most visible and accessible remains of the trade's northern outlets and nodal points. While it is argued that recent interpretive models based on ethnographic and ethnohistoric analogies have dramatically improved our understanding of the mechanics and social dynamics of Arabian trade, we are still lacking direct evidence for the participation of the "driving" mechanism — the ancient desert nomad.

Ultimately, what is needed is a broader archaeological perspective of long-distance trade that incorporates not only evidence from end-points and nodal points but also the very regions the trade traversed, no matter how barren or desolate. These were the areas where the trade was an everyday reality, where the caravans rested and camped, and where, most importantly, nomadic groups were

brought into the fold of larger exchange networks.

Historical and Archaeological Background

There is, for certain, a good deal of historical evidence to suggest the trade routes from Arabia to the Levant were growing in importance throughout the Iron Age. We have, for instance, the early biblical traditions of nomadic Midianite/Kenite traders (Schloen 1993), the steadily increasing occurrence of "Arabs" from the Syro-Arabian desert in the annals of the Neo-Assyrian kings (Macdonald 1995: 1364-1367), and now the much cited Suhu inscription which details the sacking of a joint Sabaeen-Taymanite camel caravan in the Middle Euphrates region around the mid eighth century (Liverani 1992). When we add to this the generally accepted view that the camel was domesticated as a pack and riding animal ca. 1200 (Kohler-Rollefson 1993: 183-184), that we have our first glimpses of a historical Sabaeen kingdom in South Arabia by the mid-Iron Age (Breton 1999: 31-44), and the possibility of a historical Queen of Sheba (Kitchen 1997), most scholars have come to see the Arabian trade as the driving force behind Iron Age state and imperial economies (Eph'al 1982; Byrne 2003).

While very little archaeological evidence has been found to directly substantiate the existence of the Arabian trade (Stern 2001: 297-300), finds from a number of sites in southern Jordan, the Negev, and northwestern Arabia have allowed many to draw conclusions (often contentious) about the trade. The site of Qurayya and the distribution of its famous painted pottery (Parr 1988), along with the presumed development of other Northwest Arabian "oases" (notably Taymā', al-'Ulā, and al-Jawf) (Macdonald 1995: 1360-1362) have often been attributed to the first development of the Arabian trade. Exceptional and smaller "out-of-

the-way” sites in these regions have often been interpreted as caravanserais, way-stations, or shrines (Hadley 1993; Finkelstein 1992) while the “ethnically” mixed ceramic assemblages of several major sites in the Negev, the Arabah, and the Edomite highlands have been used to evidence the diverse populations who took part in and benefited from the trade (Singer-Avitz 1999). At a broader historical level, the growth of major population centers and tribal-kingdoms in Jordan and Palestine (Bienkowski 1992: 8, but see n. 7), as well as the occurrence of Assyrian-inspired architecture at capital sites and key nodal points (Stern 2001: 21), has been attributed to the wealth of the Arabian trade or, at least, the desire of the Assyrian kings to control its northern outlets.

Slightly more complicated is the issue of nomadic involvement in the trade. For a variety of geographic, historic, and ethnographic reasons, scholars have assumed the pastoral-nomadic inhabitants of the southern regions were closely involved with the trade in some way (Eph’al 1982: 12; Stern 2001: 295; Hoyland 2001: 60). To evidence this point, it has often been sufficient simply to equate the regions the trade passed through with pastoral-nomadic populations or, at least, a non-sedentary, non-agricultural lifestyle (Eph’al 1982: 12-13). Thus, the nomadic Shasu groups that dominated Late Bronze Age southern Jordan and northwestern Arabia are seen as continuing into the Iron Age (Levy, Adams, and Muniz 2004: 67), eventually transforming into the various “Arab” or “Arab-like” tribes recorded in Neo-Assyrian sources. While the socio-economic nature of “Arabs” in this period can be debated, most scholars have seen them as tent-dwelling camel nomads inhabiting a range of locales within the Syro-Arabian desert. Their mastery of the camel and their knowledge of desert water sources made them both invaluable resources and elusive targets for the Assyrian armies (Macdonald 1995: 1357). Most importantly for our discussion here, however, is the fact that such “Arabs” are regularly mentioned in connection with camels, spices, and other exotic items that could only have been secured via their participation in or protection of the Arabian trade.

Unfortunately, little archaeological evidence for the presence of Iron Age nomadic-groups has surfaced. Depictions of Shasu in Egyptian reliefs, as well as the famous Shihān and Bālū’a steles from

Jordan suggest that pastoral-nomadic groups may have occupied large portions of this region ca. 1200 (Kitchen 1992: 26-29). The slightly later phenomenon of Negebite pottery (Meshel 2002) and the new findings from the Wādī Fidān cemetery (Levy, Adams, and Shafiq 1999) also suggest a large pastoral-nomadic population in the southern regions during this period. Some have argued that the numerous early Iron Age enclosures of the Negev highlands and central Jordan represent the sedentarization of nomadic groups, perhaps settling down to take advantage of the Arabian trade (Finkelstein 1988: 248). The large number of rock drawings and inscriptions found throughout southern Jordan and northern Arabia may evidence nomadic participation in trade, perhaps even during the Iron Age, but unfortunately, these are notoriously difficult to date (Betts 2001: 790-792). Finally, deposits of camel bones at Tall Jimma (Wapnish 1981) and the mining site of Timna/Wādī al-Munayī’ (Grigson In Press) have been interpreted as signs of nomadic involvement at those sites.

The Traditional Focus

It is a commonly held assumption that the Arabian trade was so lucrative and so profitable that it became one of the major forces driving the territorial ambitions and luxury economies of Iron Age kingdoms and empires. One need only look at recent historical and archaeological syntheses on the Iron Age of the southern Levant to see how central the idea of Arabian trade is to our current economic and political reconstructions for the period (Bienkowski and Van Der Steen 2001; Byrne 2003). In particular, it has become very common to hear that the various conquering individuals and powers of the Iron Age Near East, whether Shishak the Egyptian (Ahlstrom 1993), David and Solomon of Judah (Miller and Hayes 1986: 211-212; Finkelstein 1988: 250-251) or, more typically, the kings of the Assyrian Empire (Eph’al 1982; Stern 2001: 295-296; Hoyland 2001: 60-61), all desired to bring the wealth of the Arabian trade — and by extension, those involved in it — under their control. Although many of these syntheses and interpretations are valuable in their own right and do make the best and most convincing use of the available evidence, they have an inherently top-down view of the trade and its importance. The trade is seen as occurring on a map of the entire Iron Age Near East, in which

long routes through vast and unknown desert expanses connect key points in more fertile areas, these being controlled or influenced by state or imperial powers. Ultimately, our perspective on the Arabian trade has become so big that the crucial issues of the trade's mechanics and social-dynamics have largely been neglected in favor of addressing larger questions of economic and political importance.

This top-down approach is likewise mirrored in our archaeological investigations and interpretations. Investigations into the Arabian trade have largely been limited to end points or nodal points through which the trade passed, with the intervening areas assumed to be the territory of "invisible" nomadic groups. Thus, most of our current archaeological perspectives on the trade come from major settlement sites or oases (perhaps "gateways"), such as Tall al-Khalifa, Beersheba (Bir as-Sabi'), Qurayya, and Taymā', special function sites, such as Timna and Wādī Fidān, or "exceptional" sites (interpreted as way-stations or shrines) in more remote desert regions, such as Kuntillat 'Ajrūd, En Haseva, and Horvat Qitmit. Moreover, while surveys undertaken in the desert regions of the southern Levant (Jobling 1993; Meshel 2000) and northern Arabia (Parr, Harding, and Dayton 1970; Adams *et al.* 1977; Ingraham *et al.* 1981) during the past three decades have tried to fill in our knowledge of the vast "in-between" areas, their goals, methodologies, and massive survey areas often allowed them to investigate only the most obtrusive remains and well-trodden paths of the regions they explored. But, it is exactly the data from these sites and surveys that are often used to substantiate broad sweeping generalizations about the origins of the trade, its local and regional importance, and even the role of local nomadic groups in its maintenance and operation (Finkelstein 1988; Schloen 1993; De Maigret 1998; Jasmin 2003). Again, many of these interpretive studies have their own merits but their explanatory power is inherently limited because we are still lacking any real knowledge of the nomadic elements that were driving the trade.

New Directions

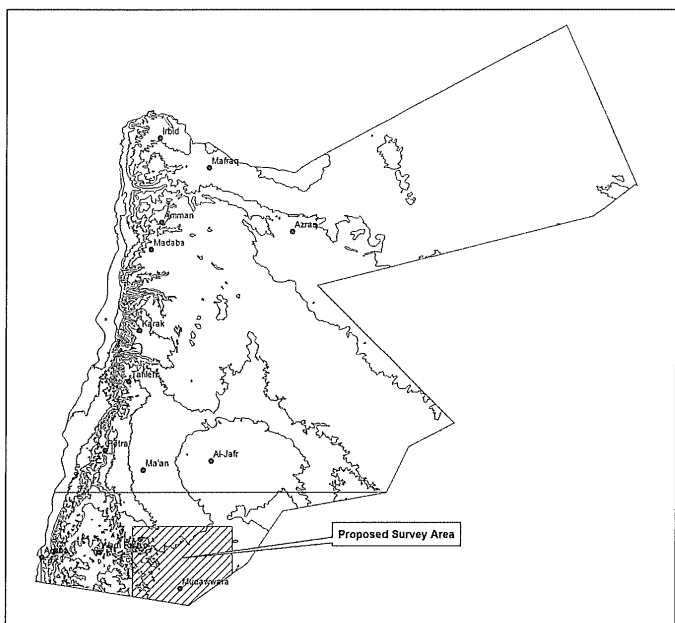
A recent article by Bienkowski and Van Der Steen (Bienkowski and Van Der Steen 2001) attempted to take our interpretations one step further by trying to understand exactly how the Arabian trade affected (and was affected by) the nomadic tribal

groups of the southern Levant in the late Iron Age. Their model for the available Iron Age archaeological data was based on ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts for the same regions during the 19th century. The better-documented 19th century nomadic tribal groups provided a sound base for understanding how and why such groups participate in trade, how they relate both to each other and to overarching powers, and how trade is conducted from point to point. Although such methods are not entirely new to modern archaeological practice in the Near East (Adams 1974), they have rarely been applied to issues of nomadic participation in long-distance trade and, until now, never to the Arabian trade specifically.

The development of models rooted in ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and ethnoarchaeological research is essential for moving our understanding of the Arabian trade forward. When ethnographic accounts are used carefully, with a concern for detecting "recurring" socio-economic and political phenomena between different cultures, they can be incredibly valuable tools for interpreting the activities and behaviors that resulted in the silent and often ambiguous archaeological record that we see in the ground (London 2000). Ultimately, such models tell us much more about the mechanics and dynamics of Arabian trade than any map of "Iron Age Trade Routes" ever will. By focusing on the motivations and choices of the trade's participants, rather than on its ultimate economic and political consequences, such models shift our perspective toward the everyday reality of the trade and how individual groups, kingdoms, and even empires became involved in its regular maintenance and operation.

Despite these interpretive advances, however, we are still currently forced to rely upon existing archaeological data that, as argued above, have come largely from the end points and nodal points of the trade. Such interpretive models will only be of so much use unless we begin to investigate the vast desert regions between the known points — in other words, the "forgotten" areas the trade caravans actually traversed and the "invisible" nomadic populations that were so essential to the trade's operation.

It is just such an approach that forms the basis of my own research in the Southern Desert Basin of southern Jordan (FIG. 1). In both a historical and topographical sense, this shallow drainage ba-

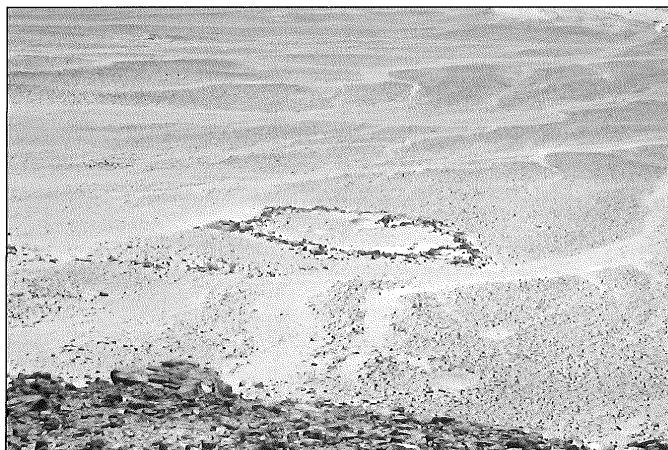


1. Map of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan with proposed survey area highlighted.

sin, which stretches from the Rās an-Naqab ridge to the Tabūk area of Saudi Arabia, forms a natural corridor linking northwestern Arabia with Greater Syria. Most any map of the Iron Age Near East shows a major route going through this region and, indeed, the later Darb al-Ḥajj ash-Shāmī (Petersen 1989) and the al-Ḥijāz railway (Daher 1995: 342-343) passed right through it.

I believe that an intensive archaeological survey of this basin would help discover some of the “forgotten” elements of the Iron Age Arabian trade. A comprehensive, multi-season investigation of this large but geographically contained feature would be able to record and analyze the full breadth of possible archaeological sites within the basin, from prominent *khirbat(s)* and *rujum(s)* to rock art and epigraphic remains to the smallest sherd scatters (FIGS. 2 and 3). By studying each site’s location (both in relation to other sites and surrounding resources), its probable function, and the date and distribution of its surface artifacts, it is likely that a good deal more data could be generated concerning the interaction between nomadic populations and interregional trading networks. When these broader classes of data are then interpreted in light of ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts of nomadic participation in long-distance trade, we will ultimately be able to say much more about the mechanics and social-dynamics of such networks in ancient times.

Given the ongoing debate concerning the vi-



2. Stone enclosure site located just east of Ma‘ān — Mudawwara highway.



3. Stone wall enclosing the ancient Bir al-Mudawwara.

ability of “nomad” archaeology (Chang and Koster 1986; Finkelstein and Perevolotsky 1990; Cribb 1991; Rosen 1992; Frendo 1996), this approach may be optimistic and even a tad naïve but, if we want to achieve a more holistic understanding of the Arabian trade and its consequences, it is an approach that I believe is very much necessary.

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