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Literary and Archaeological Evidence of Trade and Travel on the Karak Plateau

In a recent article in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Nadav Na'aman (2007) draws attention to a variety of cultural topics reflected in the "Suhu Inscriptions," a large collection of eighth century BC texts from the Middle Euphrates region. For example, one text describes a governor's raid on a large Arabian caravan (with 200 camels) that was trying to avoid payment of fees as it bypassed Suhu's border. This inscription mentions the Arab tribes engaged in trade and the products they transported – e.g., blue-purple wool, iron, and possibly alabaster. Since some of the goods seized in this raid did not originate in the Arabian peninsula, the caravaneers must have acquired them en route to central Mesopotamia. Na'aman suggests that "caravans would travel along buying and selling goods, thus varying their merchandise". Na'aman also points out that Arabian caravans reached Palestine and Egypt by way of the Beersheba Valley. In general terms, this explains how a cylinder seal from Suhu, dedicated by Rimut-ilani to the deity Apla-Adad, ended up at Tel Beersheba in the Negev, though we have no way of knowing by what roundabout route the seal reached this particular site (2007: 111-112).

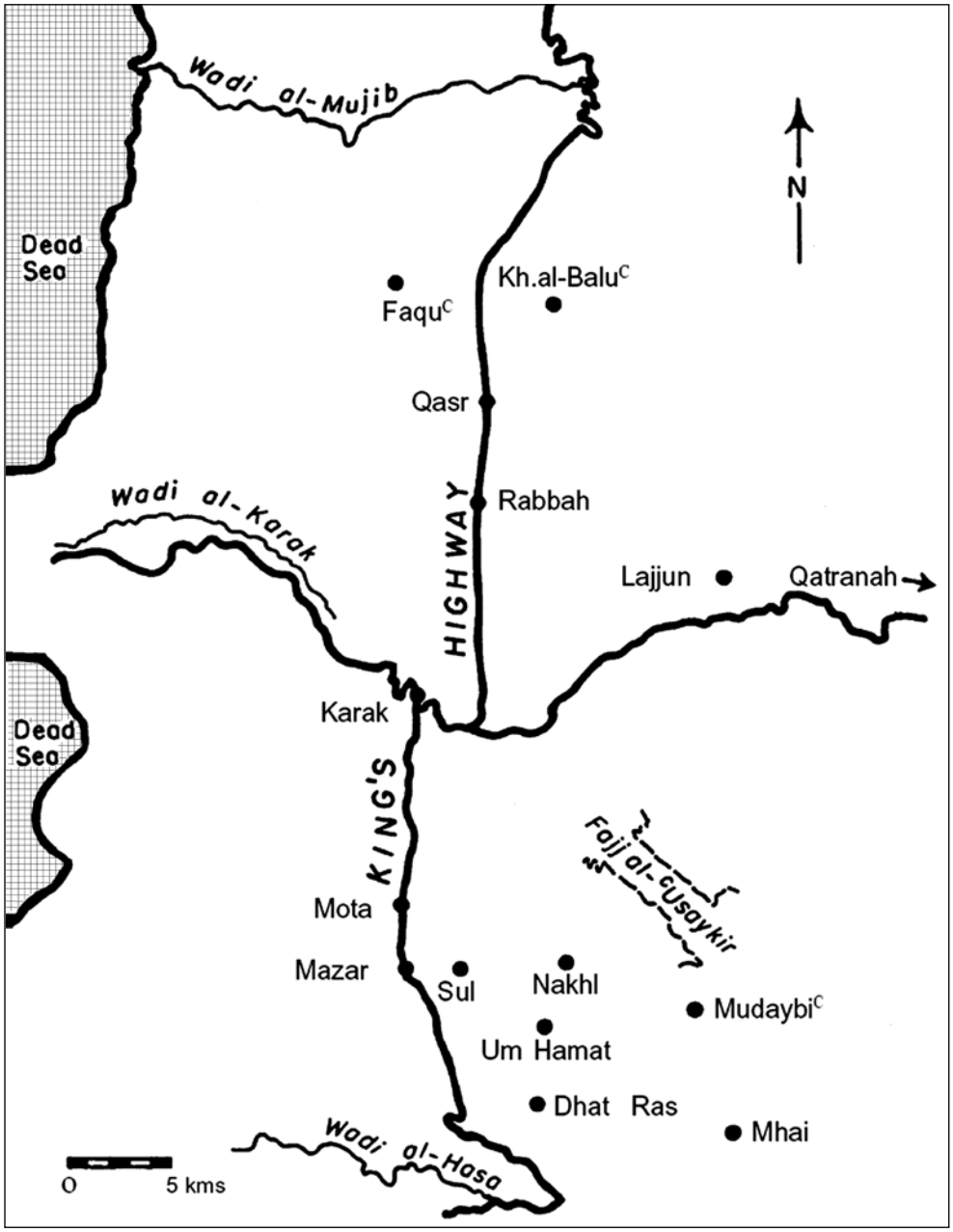
Na'aman's reference to this seal illustrates the sometimes convoluted nature of trade routes and the mixed nature of caravan inventories, and points to one of the most fascinating – and often frustrating – areas of research into ancient cultures (viz, trades items and transport routes). In this presentation, I mention several recent studies on economic theory and trade as it applied to Syria-Palestine in particular and consider ways by which we can use this approach to understand developments in the mechanisms of trade on central Jordan's Karak plateau (FIG. 1) – insofar as the routes of trade and travel are known and reports on excavated sites provide the necessary data. [For a preliminary study of raw materials and artifacts from Khirbat al-Muḍaybīʿ that reflect long-distance trade, see my forthcoming essay in the Fawzi Zayadine Festschrift.]

To begin with, we must distinguish between influences (direct or indirect) that flowed between regions and settlements and the actual objects of trade, either raw materials or finished products. For the Karak region, for instance, it is easy to compile a long list of architectural features that reflect influences from beyond the plateau – e.g., Khirbat at-Tannūr (Nabataean temple), al-Lajjūn (Roman legionary camp), al-Karak (castle from the Crusader period with more recent modifications), and Khirbat al-Muḍaybī‘ (fortress plan and monumental gateway, with fine proto-Ionic/volute capitals). Of course, pottery styles, weapons and tools, coins, and seals, and other artifactual evidence also reflect international – or interregional – influences and trade. Such influences and exchange reflect various economic, political, and military relationships, but – given the scarcity of documentary information on Karak – it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to identify the specific means by which ideas were exchanged (i.e., to show how parallels from outside Karak were transmitted).

As mentioned above, we must also distinguish between interregional and intraregional transport and trade – i.e., the local trade of food, livestock, raw materials, and implements within the Karak region (settlement to settlement by means of local routes). While such intraregional exchange was vital, this study focuses on interregional connections, primarily long-distance trade. The reconstruction of a regional economic network – its development and changes over time – calls for a consideration of many factors (e.g., the role of Assyrian expansion and control in the economic development of neighboring states). As noted above, the scarcity of

written texts means that much remains speculative and exploratory – at least for the time being, but the subject deserves attention and cries out for comparison with neighboring regions. As for now, few scholars have examined the topic.

In 1973, T. W. Beale noted that model-building required for a regional study quickly moves beyond the process of documenting examples of trade, though that is where the study begins. Ultimately, our goal is to understand the system by asking pivotal questions about the actual mechanisms involved in a large exchange network. For example, Colin Renfrew's 1975 analysis of the integration and communication required in large-scale trade networks identified ten different systems by which objects pass from one source to another, an approach that has value for studying the Middle East over its long history – viz. (1) direct access to commodities; (2) home-base reciprocity; (3) boundary reciprocity; (4) down-the-line trade; (5) central-place redistribution; (6) central-place exchange; (7) middleman trading; (8) emissary trading; (9) colonial enclave; and (10) port of trade. This detailed "trade mechanics" perspective focuses on the available routes by which materials and products moved from one place to another, the number of



1. Map of the Karak Plateau.

times these items changed hands along the way, and the various sociopolitical circumstances and relationships that facilitated or hindered these exchanges.

For the study of trade within and beyond the Karak plateau, Beale's simple typology of trade networks remains especially useful, viz. (1) trickle trade (small quantities of materials and/or products move from distant sources and exchange hands numerous times over short distances); (2) local redistributive trade (goods move to the center of a sociopolitical network and then move out again); (3) regional organized trade (goods move directly from regional distribution centers over medium distances along natural trade routes); and (4) long-distance organized trade (a genuine "internationalization" of goods with direct trade over greater distances, from one resource area to another by means of established routes).

The title of Peter Gubser's popular 1983 book, Jordan – Crossroads of Middle Eastern Events, does not exaggerate the place of Transjordan in the larger region's historical-cultural development. The territory east of the Jordan provided space for all kinds of transactions to occur throughout history, whether the interactions required north-south or east-west movement – and allowed for contact and exchange between Syria-Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Arabia.

Nobody has compiled a history of the Karak district's internal road network, but the plateau's surface alternates between gently-rolling countryside and frequent wadi systems that promoted and, sometimes, hindered movement (cf. Mattingly 1996; Roll 2005). Internally, some well established roads and many smaller tracks connected the region's subdivisions, while significant routes also entered the plateau from all directions. Topography minimized easy movement in and out of the Karak plateau – on at least the northern, southern, and eastern sides, but this region was never really isolated, as Karak's rich history reflects so clearly. Many writers have described the network of roads that allowed Karak's inhabitants access to interregional and long-distance exchange.

Everyone is familiar with discussions on the nature of the so-called "King's Highway" (derek hammelek) and its relation to Trajan's *Via Nova*, the *Ṭarīq as-Sulṭānī*, and the modern motor road that crosses the Karak plateau and major wadis to the north and south (i.e., the al-Mūjib and the Ḥasā). The other major north-south route, the so-called "Desert Highway," provided Karak with significant contact beyond its borders. Also known as the "Ḥajj route" and Darb ash-Shāmī ("Northern Way"), the desert route skirted along the eastern edge of the Karak plateau's agricultural zone and enabled travelers to avoid the great canyons that bounded the Karak district on the north and south (i.e., Wādī al-Mūjib and Wādī al-Ḥasā, respectively) (Kennedy and Peterson 2004: 12; Tschanz 2004: 5, 7, 9). While the King's Highway, the main north-south line of travel, linked well known sites in the Karak region – towns like al-Qaṣr, ar-Rabbah, al-Karak, Mu'ta, and al-Mazār – the Desert Highway stretched from Arabia to Syria, connecting distant points like Damascus and Mecca. It skirted along the eastern edge of the plateau and provided relatively easy access into the Karak region.

In the ninth century BC King Mesha had special interest in the road that crossed the Arnon/al-Mūjib, south of the city of Dibon, as indicated in line 27 of the Moabite Stone. Dearman (1997) and other scholars have discussed the Iron Age routes that negotiated the Arnon canyon. In a recent paper, Kloner and Ben-David described a pre-Roman stretch of road that provided passage through the Mujib's tributaries in this same vicinity (2003). [Cf. Ben-David's study in this conference volume.].

Less known are the routes followed by travelers and traders on the al-Karak plateau's western and eastern borders. Surveys by Jacobs, Mittmann, Worschech, and others have identified lines of sites along the large wadis that dissect the plateau's western escarpment and provided access between the Rift Valley and the highlands. In another paper at SHAJ X, Joseph A. Greene examined the role of seafaring on the Dead Sea from the Early Bronze Age through Ottoman times, thus demonstrating that this body of water has not represented an insurmountable barrier to trade and travel. The recent volume, *Crossing the Rift: Resources, Routes, Settlement Patterns and Interaction in the Wadi Arabah* (2006), edited by Bienkowski and Galor, also proves that the Rift served as much as a thoroughfare as it did as a boundary. Indeed, in his opening essay, Bienkowski invokes language from the phenomenology of perception to explain why most people still think of the Arabah as a border – especially because of the 1922 League of Nations division between Palestine and Transjordan.

Among the routes that entered the Karak dis-

trict on the east, we might mention the well known Karak-Qatrana road and, further south, the lesser known but important Fajj al-ʿUsaykir. The latter, a wide and flat valley – a Graben related to the Dead Sea fault system – allowed for easy passage between the Desert Highway and the central part of the Karak plateau – to the town of Karak itself, its neighboring settlements, and the Wādī al-Karak, which – in turn – gave access to the Dead Sea and territory beyond. Fajj al-ʿUsaykir offered an appealing line of movement as it intersected with the Desert Highway at a point just beyond the upper reaches of the Ḥasā canyon. The usefulness of this natural corridor was clearly recognized in Iron Age II and during the Roman and Islamic periods, as attested by the presence of numerous sites along the Fajj rims, including the large Iron II fortress of Khirbat al-Muḍaybī‘.

The Karak Resources Project has conducted three seasons of excavation at al-Muḍaybi‘ (in 1997, 1999, and 2001); this site, located on the western rim of the Fajj ca. 21km southeast of Karak, was occupied sporadically from late Iron II until Late Islamic times (Mattingly and Pace 2007). The fort measures ca. 83 X 89m and was protected by thick walls, corner and interval towers, and a massive monumental gateway (14.5m E-W x 19.7m N-S) – whose entryway was decorated with large volute capitals. At the time of its construction, perhaps late in the eighth century BC, Muḍaybī‘ played a role in securing the Moabite frontier against marauding tribes from the eastern desert. Designed to impress and defend, the fort certainly provided a safe haven for travelers and traders who passed through the Fajj – thereby suggesting that its original function was military, political, and commercial. In terms of economic geography, we might refer to Muḍaybī‘ as a “gateway community” (cf. Singer-Avitz 1999). Local, domestic economic activity at the site is reflected in pottery, *ṭābūn*(s), food processing implements, loom weights, and animal bones and carbonized seeds. The pottery assemblage from this excavation contains no obvious examples of imported wares, though archaeological survey in the Fajj has recovered Eastern Sigillata A and Nabataean Cream Ware from later times (Ayer 2006: 56; cf. numerous relevant publications by S. T. Parker). Builders of the Iron Age II gate complex probably obtained their cypress beams from the mountains in Edom. And a small number of coins, glass fragments, and some of the food remains from the Late Byzantine-Early Islamic period reflect contacts that range even further afield. Though Karak possesses an abundance of vesicular basalt, there is evidence that some ground stone tools were made of basalt from outside of Karak and brought to the plateau through normal channels of exchange. Zooarchaeological evidence from the Byzantine and Islamic periods indicates that occupants of Muḍaybī‘ participated in a trade network that gave them access to parrot fish, from the Family Scaridae, probably from the Red Sea. Parker has suggested that occupants of Roman Aila/‘Aqaba obtained wheat from the Karak plateau, which was known for its cereal crops. From an earlier period, the Mesha Inscription notes that this Moabite presided over a territory famous for sheep, which were used as payment of tribute to Israel (cf. II Kings 3:4). It is not difficult to imagine the mechanism by which grain and dried or salted fish moved between the Red Sea’s northern coast and Karak – as a way to supplement the food available through farming and large-scale pastoral activities.

Though most of the artifacts and ecofacts recovered from Muḍaybī‘ and regional survey sites were of local origin and served utilitarian functions, there is tantalizing evidence of trade in even more exotic materials and luxury products – reflecting the presence of an elite class that participated in a cultural sphere that reached well beyond the Karak area:

(1) Carnelian beads from loci dated to the Iron II, Byzantine, and Islamic periods (excavated).
(2) Mother of pearl pendants and cowrie shell beads, also from Islamic contexts (excavated).
(3) Octagonal, bronze weight in the “double keg” form that weights 30 grams, reflecting trade in valuable commodities – probably in the Early Islamic and later periods (excavated).
(4) Rectangular (10.9cm x 7-to-8cm per side) block of banded calcite/calcium carbonate that weights 1.5kg (surface find from Muraygha, located at the north end of the Fajj) – a highly-prized raw material in “preform”, “blank”, or “dummy” form as it came from the quarry.
(5) Fragments of steatite vessels (platters, bowls, or boxes) (surface finds at Khirbat al-ʿAskar, located at the south end of the Fajj, immediately west of the Desert Highway).

Such objects and materials recovered from Muḍaybī‘ and other sites in the Karak region illustrate long-distance trade, at both the trickle and long-distance trade levels (cf. Steiner 2001). Some

items, like Egyptian scarabs from Bālū‘, could reflect the presence of Egyptians or trade connections with that distant region – as references to Moab in itineraries of Thutmosis III and Rameses II might indicate (cf. Worschech 1990). On the other hand, scarabs and other valuable items or raw materials could have found their way to the Karak plateau by the same kind of roundabout route that Na’aman suggested for the Suhu seal that made its way to Beersheba. The current inventory of items obtained through trade by the Iron Age Moabites might not account for some of the tribute that the Neo-Assyrians demanded from Moab (e.g., horses, building materials, and gold), though Moabites could have provided certain kinds of building materials. Once again, the Moabites could have obtained some of the products and materials for tribute payments through trade with neighboring regions, whatever it took to satisfy Neo-Assyrian demands (Chamaza 2005: 61-132).

In 2006, Eggler and Keel published a sumptuous volume on seals, impressions, and amulets from Jordan; it presents a collection of 719 objects and includes artifacts from sites in – or immediately adjacent to – the Karak region (Bālū‘, Dhībān, al-Karak, al-Lāhūn, Rabbat-Moab). Most of the seals date to Iron Age II and were fashioned from semi-precious or raw materials not found around Karak (e.g., agate, carnelian, steatite). Once again, we should conclude that raw materials for some of these seals came from distant sources through a number of exchanges before artisans in al-Karak inscribed them with local names, human or divine.

In addition to Muḍaybī‘, some of the other excavated sites in the Karak district have yielded other items that were obtained through long-distance trade. The list of sites includes:

(1) Adir, excavated by Albright and Head.
(2) Khirbat al-Bālūʿ, excavated by Crowfoot and Worschech (ivory “Eye of Horus” amulet).
(3) Dhāt Rās / Shuqayrah, Nabataean tomb excavated by Zayadine.
(4) Khirbat Fāris, excavated by Johns and McQuitty (coins, glass, and imported Islamic pottery).
(5) Al-Karak, study of pottery from the castle by Brown (includes imported Mamluke pottery from Syria-Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China).
(6) al-Lajjūn (Roman), excavated by Parker (numerous imported small finds, including fragments of bowls made of schist from the Arabian peninsula).
(7) al-Lajjūn (Early Bronze), soundings by Chesson (no reported imported items).
(8) Khirbat al-Mu‘ammariyah, excavated by Ninow.
(9) al-Maṣna‘, soundings by Worschech.
(10) Khirbat al-Minsaḥlāt, soundings by Chesson (no reported imported items).
(11) Khirbat al-Muḍaybī‘, excavated by Mattingly and Pace.
(12) Khirbat al-Mudayna al-Āliyah, excavated by Routledge.
(13) Khirbat al-Mudayna al-Mu‘rrajah, excavated by Olávarri.
(14) Nakhl, excavated by Mutah University.
(15) Khirbat ath-Thamāyil and related sites, soundings by Routledge.

For a more thorough examination of the economic context, we can include sites from adjacent regions (e.g., ʿArāʿir, Dhībān, al-Lāhūn, Khirbat at-Tannūr).

The next step in this study is the compilation of a more complete inventory of objects and materials that reached sites in the Karak district through trade (beyond the general, initial impressions mentioned above). This might well reveal more discernible patterns of exchange – in terms of routes and prized objects and materials in particular periods; this database can expand with additional discoveries from future seasons at Khirbat al-Muḍaybī‘ and other sites in this fascinating region. Further research on this subject will require careful examination of publications from excavated sites, correspondence/interviews with the excavators, and examination of select objects in Amman and other locations. Meanwhile, we can hope that texts – like the cuneiform table from Ṭawīlān (Ṭuwaylān), in ancient Edom – will turn up in future excavations and provide more specific details concerning the Karak region’s long-distance trade relations (Dalley 1983).

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