

Great and Little Traditions: A Framework for Studying Cultural Interaction through the Ages in Jordan¹

Abstract

The paper updates our current efforts to devise a more comprehensive theoretical framework for explaining the occurrence of long-term cycles of food system intensification and abatement at Ḥisbān in particular and throughout Transjordan and the Southern Levant in general. Building on previous research by Redfield (1955, 1960), von Grunebaum (1955), Marriott (1955), Bodley (2000) and Odner (2000), a series of ‘great’ and ‘little traditions’ are posited as a means to explain how and why cultures in different times and places are constructed, constituted and represented. Examples of great traditions include the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Arabian, Canaanite, Greek/Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and Modern Capitalist. Examples of little traditions include local-level water management, mixed agro-pastoralism, fluid shared commons, residential flexibility, hospitality, honor and tribalism. The paper also discusses ways to avoid essentialist thinking in connection with the line of research proposed here.

Introduction

Past efforts by the Mādabā Plains Project to devise a framework for studying long-term cultural interactions in Transjordan have centered on the food system concept and related notions such as intensification and abatement and sedentarization and nomadization (LaBianca 1990). While these concepts have been found to be quite useful as means

to reconstruct long-term changes in the agricultural landscape and daily life routines of successive generations of occupants of the Mādabā Plains, they have proven insufficient in several important respects.

For example, a serious short-coming of analysis focused solely on reconstruction of food system cycles is that it tends to minimize attention to culture-historical contexts, thus leaving the impression that daily life in a rural village such as Ḥisbān during Iron II was very similar to that during Late Roman and Mamluk times. While to a certain extent, this was true — especially with regard to how people provided for their food — we can be quite certain that different languages were spoken, that the sorts of things that could be bought in local markets, and that the “news from abroad” would have been substantially different during each period.

Another problem with the food system perspective is that it does not go far enough in helping us understand why, over the centuries and millennia peaks and valleys occur in the intensity levels of the local food system. For example, periods when the system reaches peak levels in the Ḥisbān area are Early Bronze, Late Iron, Early Roman, Byzantine and Mamluk. Low points — valleys — occur during Middle and Late Bronze, Early Iron, Persian-Hellenistic, Late Roman, Abbasid, and Ottoman.

It is as a means to address such short-comings of the food systems approach that the search for a more comprehensive theoretical framework has

¹ The ideas developed in this paper were incubated during April and May 2004 while I was a guest researcher at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bergen in Bergen, Norway. I am especially grateful for comments and suggestions offered by colleagues at the University of Bergen, including Leif Manger, Nils Anfinset, Terje Oestigaard, and Ove Stoknes. Jordanian colleagues with whom I had the privilege of discussing the paper include Adeib Abu Shmeis and Sabah Abu Hudeib of the Depart-

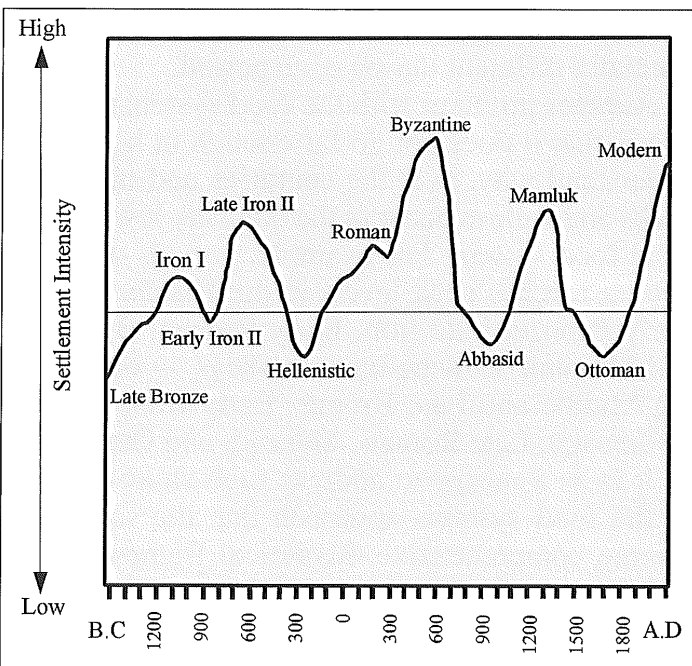
ment of Antiquities. Colleagues here in North America who have offered helpful suggestions include Bethany Walker, Bert deVries, Larry Herr, Bob Bates, Paul Ray and Randall Younker. A special thanks also to Fawwaz al-Khreyshah, Director General of the Department of Antiquities in Jordan, for the invitation to participate and present an earlier version of this paper to the 9th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan: “Cultural Interaction through the Ages”. Petra, Jordan. May 24-28, 2004.

gotten underway. I am not abandoning the food systems approach — I am still convinced that it has a great deal to contribute to the process of making sense out of what is found in and on the ground — instead, what I have been looking for is a complementary framework that might somehow help make up for its short-comings, (FIG. 1).

In this paper I introduce the “structure of traditions” framework as a candidate for filling this need. I begin by providing a brief overview of this framework, including several reasons why I have chosen it. Next I introduce nine great traditions and seven little traditions that are crucial to explaining cultural interactions in Jordan through the ages. The paper addresses possible objections to this proposal, in particular the problem of essentialism.

The Structure of Traditions

Anthropological discussions of the concept of ‘tradition’ have been dominated by the ‘structure of traditions’ approach developed by Robert Redfield and his students (Redfield 1947, 1962; Marriott 1955). Essentially the approach involves studying the interactions between elite cultural traditions at the center of complex civilized societies and local level village communities (folk society). A key distinction is that between the ‘lettered’ traditions of a ‘learned elite’ and the ‘unlettered’ traditions of



1. Graph tracing long-term patterns of intensification and abatement in the food system of Ḥiṣbān. A short-coming of analysis focused solely on reconstruction of food system cycles is that it tends to minimize attention to culture-historical contexts.

‘common folk’. The former represent a societies’ ‘great traditions’ whereas the latter its ‘little traditions’.

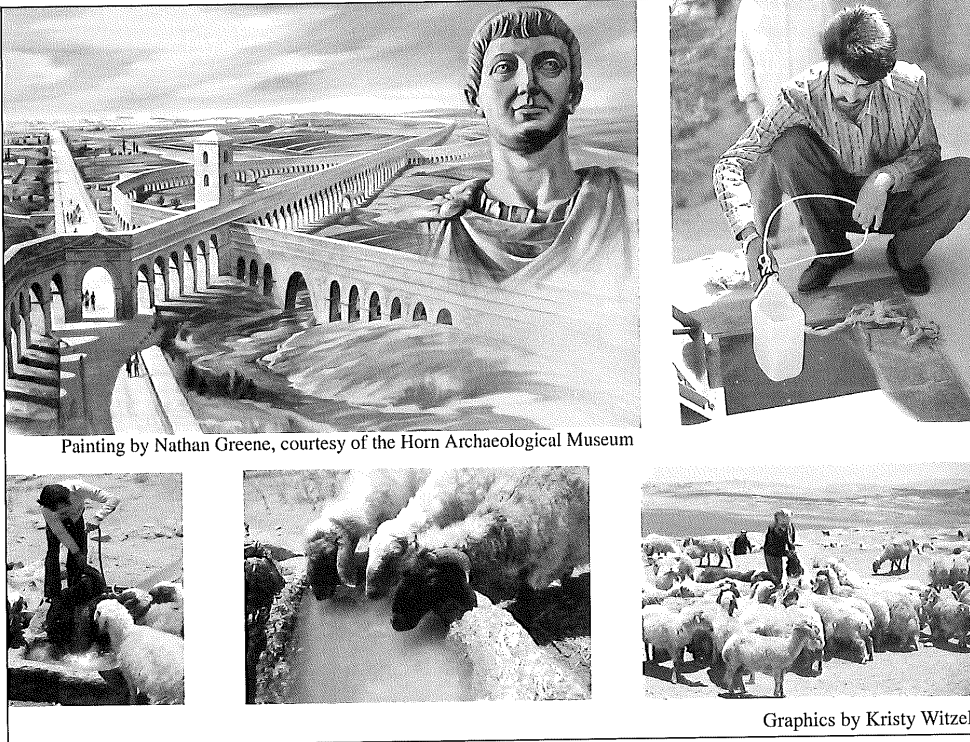
According to McKim Marriott (1955), a student of Redfield, a great tradition owes its existence to two processes. The primary process is *universalization*, by which Marriot meant “the carrying forward of the material which is already present in the little traditions in the villages to a body which “universalized” the knowledge into a great tradition. The second process is *parochialization* or the “downward spread” to the villages of the great tradition. Both *universalization* and *parochialization* are characterized by transformations, and there are gaps in communication which the communities fill at their own discretion” (Marriott 1955 as cited in Odner 2000: 34). Whereas little traditions can persist and change without reliance on the process of universalization, great traditions depend on a network of transmission centers in order to persist and change (FIG. 2).

Redfield’s framework has been famously applied to the study of Middle Eastern society by Gustave von Grunebaum (1955). In *Unity and Variety in Muslim Civilization* he uses it to examine the interaction between *dar al-Islam*, the “genuine” great tradition, and local culture patterns (1955: 27-29). Even though this particular application has been widely criticized (Lukens-Bull 1999), the framework continues to be used and adapted by anthropologists as a means to study interactions between elite cultural traditions and the cultural patterns of commoners (Odner 2000; Bodley 2000).

There are several good reasons why Redfield’s structure of traditions framework holds promise — indeed, why it is preferable when compared with competing frameworks—for the study of long-term cultural interactions in Jordan.

First is that it is especially suited to the study interactions of cultural entities at the level of civilizations, for this is what it was designed to do originally (Redfield 1962: 392-401). As Jordan is situated between and betwixt more than a dozen great civilizations — some pristine, others secondary — its proper study requires a framework that takes into full account the cultural influences exerted by multiple civilization level actors on its cultural history.

Second, to the extent that it is concerned with elite cultural traditions, it goes beyond the narrow focus on economic interactions that is the hallmark of more recent world systems approaches (LaBian-



2. Great and little traditions for managing water. The construction and maintenance of aqueducts requires labor and organization on a scale that only an elite ruling class can provide. Cisterns can be constructed and maintained at the household level without orchestration by an elite ruling class. Whereas great traditions involve universalized collective heritage and knowledge, little traditions are based solely on localized indigenous heritage and knowledge.

ca and Scham 2005), thus providing archaeologists with a much wider range of options when it comes to what to focus on — from art, architecture and artisanry to ritual centers, temples and weapons.

Third, its concomitant focus on little traditions assures that the local level dimension of civilizations is examined right along with that of the elite dimension — a definite advantage when compared, for example, to the French *Annales* approach, which tends to overlook the local level in its quest to understand long-term environmental constraints and shorter-term economic and political events (Braudel 1992; Bintliff 1991; Levy 1995).

Fourth is its emphasis on the interaction between the local and the global through study of the processes whereby little traditions become great traditions — universalization—and the processes whereby great traditions trickle down and influence local level practices—parochialization. Critics who complain that the structure of tradition fails to examine the interactions between great and little traditions forget this important dynamic aspect of the framework (cf. Lukens-Bull 1999).

Finally, and very important, is the clarion call for cooperation between various specialists which this approach mandates. To adequately study the interaction between great and little traditions, archaeologists must team up with historians and epigraphers who can help establish linkages between distant epicenters of elite cultural traditions

and local level cultural patterns. No single scholar can possibly do justice to all the sources that have to be studied to fully assess the influences and contributions of various great traditions on his-her particular archaeological site.

For the purposes of this study, we will define great traditions simply as *universalized collective heritage and knowledge*; and little tradition as *localized indigenous heritage and knowledge*. Defined thus, the concepts are sufficiently broad to accommodate research not only on the ideological aspects (literate vs. illiterate) of civilizations, but also on their material aspects (e.g. food systems).

The Geographical Context

As a background for understanding the role of great and little traditions in shaping oscillation over time in Jordan's settlement history and food system, four notable geographical characteristics of the Southern Levant must be reckoned with:

First is the region's geographic position astride an *intercontinental land bridge* linking together the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia. Having served since prehistoric times as a vital corridor of communication, migration, and trade, the Southern Levant has long been a coveted piece of real estate over which rival dynasties in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Greece, Rome and Western Europe have sought to exert control and domination.

Second is its *proximity to the Arabian steppes*

For multiple millennia, this steppe has served not only as the desert headquarters of long-distance caravan trade, but also as a wellspring of Bedouin culture and aspirations. Since earliest antiquity Bedouin tribes from the Arabian steppe have infiltrated the fertile highlands of both Transjordan and Cis-Jordan, replenishing its population while emboldening it in its resistance to foreign domination and control.

Third is the *Mediterranean Sea* that connects the Southern Levant to ports of call all around the Mediterranean and beyond. Coastal cities such as Tyre and Sidon, Ashkelon and Caesarea are examples of harbours through which trade goods could be channelled from inland cities and towns to distant ports of call and vice versa. At various points in time this same coastline has also served as a point of access to the region by seafaring invaders such as the Philistines, the Greeks, the Romans and the Crusaders (FIG. 3).

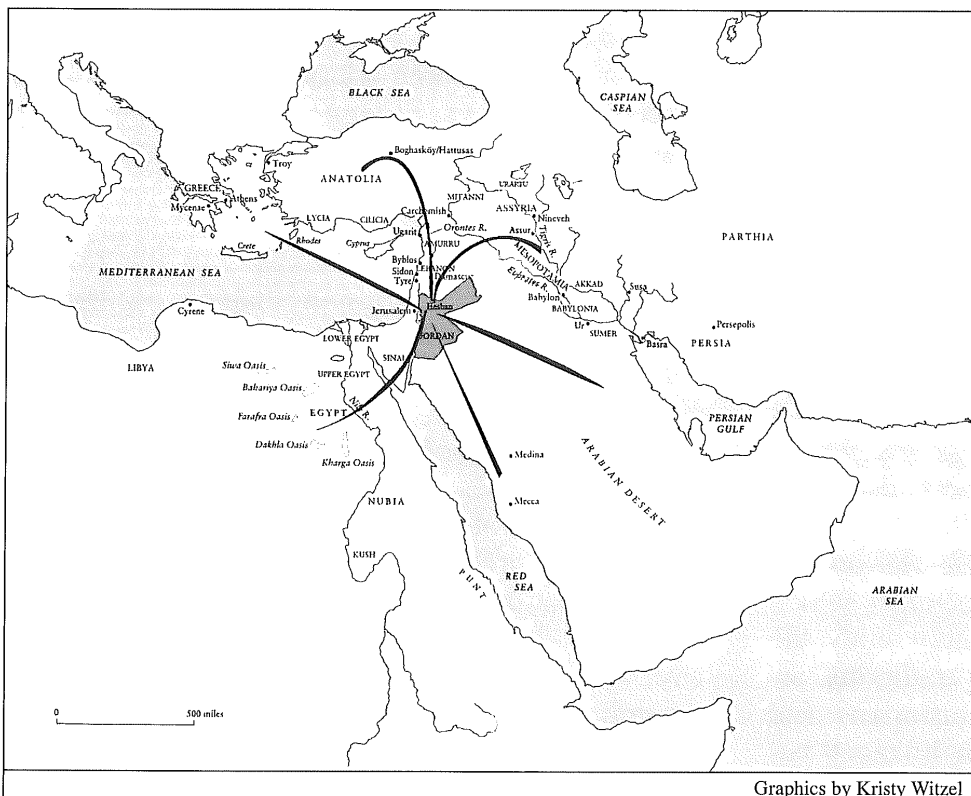
And fourth is its natural endowment of which availability of water is the single most important factor impacting human livelihoods. As a general rule, rainfall is most plentiful in highland regions, especially as one moves northward and westward across Transjordan and the Southern Levant. Sedentary agriculture is thus most sustainable in the well-watered highlands of both sides of the Rift Valley and along the slopes of river valleys and wadis that

drain eastward and westward from these parallel highlands. In these drainages natural springs and man-made cisterns, dams and terraces make water available year-around in this otherwise semi-arid landscape. These four factors combine to make the Southern Levant cross-roads of civilizations and a point of often violent conjuncture of great and little traditions.

Great Traditions

As stated earlier, great traditions are the universalized collective heritage and knowledge that, through the processes of universalization and parochialization end up impacting how life is lived in particular localities and times. At this preliminary stage of inquiry into what these traditions are, at least nine can be isolated as having played a significant role in shaping changes over time in local food systems of Transjordan. These include the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Arabian, Canaanite, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, and Modern Capitalist great traditions, each of which could, of course, be further subdivided into lesser strands of influences and traditions.

We shall limit ourselves here to providing a brief overview of each of these nine great traditions, attempting in the process to identify core components that help distinguish each. Highlighted with respect to each tradition will be the geographical region in



3. The Southern Levant is a cross road of civilizations and a point of often violent conjuncture of great and little traditions. Jordan is a frontier region on the edge of the great Arabian desert.

which they originated; aspects of their modes of agricultural production that set them apart, and selected other features. The goal here is not at all to be exhaustive in describing each (after all, whole disciplines have evolved around the study of each great tradition), but rather to posit — as a basis for future research and validation--core components of each in so far as this might help us understand cultural interactions through the ages in Jordan.

The Egyptian Great Tradition developed in the Nile Basin in response to the annual gentle flooding of the Nile River (Butzer 1976). Hypothesized core components include: 1) production of wheat, barley, pulse and flax by village farmers in naturally irrigated flood basins located along both banks of the Nile, in the Fayyum Depression and in the Delta (Butzer 1976; Wetterstrom and Murry 2001); 2) centralized regulation of the agricultural calendar by a religious elite with the pharaoh at the top (Robins 1995: 1811-1812); 3) diversion of agricultural labour to public works such as pyramid construction during flooding season (Mendelssohn; 1974); 4) on-again off-again control of provinces or *nomes* by central governments (Eyre 1995: 186; Leprohon 1995: 273-287) and 5) reliance on hieroglyphics as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition.²

Interactions between Egypt and the Southern Levant go back to at least the fourth millennium BC — to the Chalcolithic Period (van den Brink and Levy 2002). The development of writing during Old Kingdom times facilitated not only market exchange between the two regions, but also expansionary dynamics involving ideology and power (Algaze 1993). During Middle Kingdom times maritime relations between Lebanon and Egypt were established, and inland trade routes connecting the Southern Levant with Egypt were opened up (Manley 1996). During New Kingdom times Thutmose III, and later his son, Amernhotep II, invaded Palestine in order to further secure Egypt's commercial interests and authority in the region (Redford 1982). The invasion of the Sea People during Late New Kingdom times threatened to undo Egypt's strong hegemony over the Southern

Levant. However, another military campaign, this one presided over by Shoshenk I, assured continued Egyptian authority over the vital trade routes with Palestine throughout the remainder of the Late New Kingdom (Manley 1996).

The Mesopotamian Great Tradition developed in Southern Mesopotamia in response to annual--often violent--late spring flooding of the Euphrates and especially the Tigris rivers (Adams 1965, 1981; Lamberg-Karlovsky and Sabloff 1995: 139-181; Wittfogel 1955). Hypothesized core elements include: 1) irrigation of cereal fields and pastures by means of networks of man-made canals transporting water from the main channels of these two rivers (Postgate 1990); 2) application of various social technologies--for example, priestly regulation of the agricultural calendar--as a means to ensure elite control of agricultural production (Eyre 1995); 3) protection and centralized control of agricultural villages and canals by means of city-states (Adams 1981) and 4) reliance on cuneiform script as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition.³

The source of the Mesopotamian Great Tradition was Ancient Sumer (Kramer 1963; Woolley 1965). Crucial to the progress of this great tradition was the Sumerian language and script — cuneiform — which not only facilitated routine administrative activities of the Mesopotamian city-states, it also served as an important medium for dissemination of sacred temple literature, epic poetry, and royal decrees. Like its Egyptian counter part, the Sumerian Great Tradition shaped the elite cultural traditions of a succession of dynasties and empires in the Mesopotamian heartland and beyond, starting ca. 3500BC and ending ca. 500BC.

While interactions with the Southern Levant go back as far as the Old Babylonian Period, during the times of the Amorites (see Canaan below), it is especially during the Late Babylonian period that Mesopotamian influence reaches its peak — thanks in particular to the military campaigns of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III ca. 728BC (Routledge 2004). This Mesopotamian hegemony in the Southern Levant continues nearly unabated for ap-

² Other components could no doubt be added to this list. For example, throughout much of Egyptian history it was the pharaoh who ultimately controlled the economy and political unity or disunity of Egypt as a state-level polity. As stated earlier, our project here is more to be suggestive than to be exhaustive.

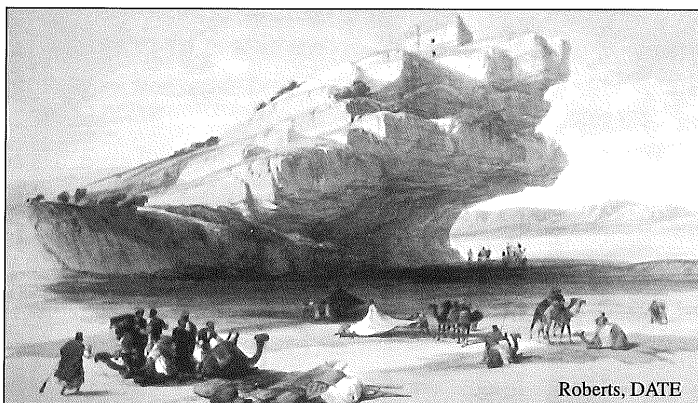
³ Again, this is by no means intended as an exhaustive list, but as a point of departure on the road to a more comprehensive one. This applies to all the rest of the great traditions discussed below as well.

proximately two centuries, until ca. 539BC when the Achaemenid Persians took over control (Lipschits 2004).

The Arabian Great Tradition developed in the desert oasis and arid steppe of the Arabian Peninsula (von Soden 1994: 23-24). Hypothesized core components include: 1) adaptation to arid desert conditions by means of migratory production of sheep and goats (Eph'al 1982: 12-17); 2) symbiotic, often predatory, interactions with agricultural populations along the Fertile Crescent; 3) reliance on kin-based or tribal social organization as a means to protect rangelands, watering places and households (Guillaume 1954: 2-5) and 4) reliance on a group of Semitic language and scripts, such as Thamudic, Safaitic and Old South Arabic, as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition (FIG. 4), (Eph'al 1982; Zurayk 1949).

The Arabian Great Tradition is closely tied to the history of Semitic peoples in general. The Semites were among the earliest peoples of the Ancient Near East who can be identified from inscribed monuments and written tradition (Huehnergard 1995; Gragg 1997). The most enduring influence of the Arabian Great Tradition is in having bequeathed to the world the religion of Islam.

The Canaanite Great Tradition developed in response to the ecological conditions along the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular the fertile highlands of coastal and southern inland Syria

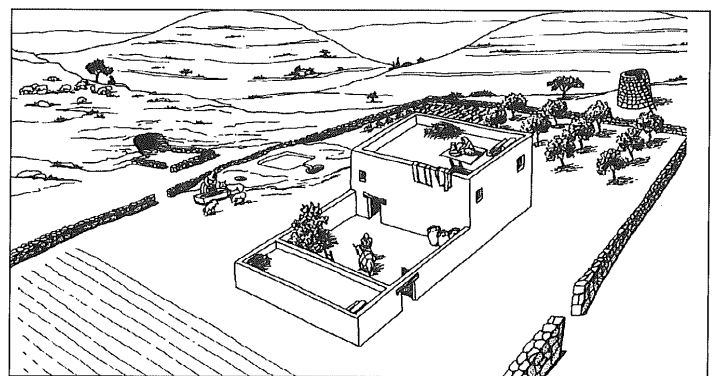


4. Arab tribesmen camping in the desert. The Arabian Great Tradition developed in the desert oasis and arid steppe of the Arabian Peninsula. Its most enduring influence is in having bequeathed to the world the religion of Islam.

(including Lebanon), Israel, Palestine and Jordan FIG. 5 (Tubb 1998: 13). Hypothesized core components include: 1) local-level collection of rainwater on fertile slopes by means of terracing, diversion dams and cisterns; 2) agriculture emphasizing dry-farming of cereals and terrace-based production of olives and grapes (Hopkins 1985); 3) significant capacity for sedentarization and nomadization as a means to manage risks and respond to new opportunities and threats (LaBianca 1997); reliance on extended family networks, a temple-based religious cult, and at times tribal kings, as a means to organize production and protect against enemies (LaBianca and Younker 1995; cf. Ahlstrom 1995: 587-631); and 4) reliance on a specific Northwest Semitic language and script (Amorite, Ammonite, Edomite, Hebrew, Moabite) as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition (Gray 1964; Gragg 1997: 516-527).

A point of view shared by many biblical scholars is that the people we know in the Bible as Israelites were originally Canaanites (Mendenhall 1973; Lemche 1991; Tubb 1998). From an archaeological standpoint, however, a problem with the Canaanites, especially when compared with the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, is that they are very difficult to identify from their material culture remains.

*The Greek/Hellenistic Great Tradition*⁴ resembles to some degree that of the Canaanites. Hypothe-



5. Ammonite farmstead excavated and reconstructed by the Mādabā Plains Project. The Canaanite Great Tradition developed in response to the ecological conditions along the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular the fertile highlands of coastal and southern inland Syria (including Lebanon), Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

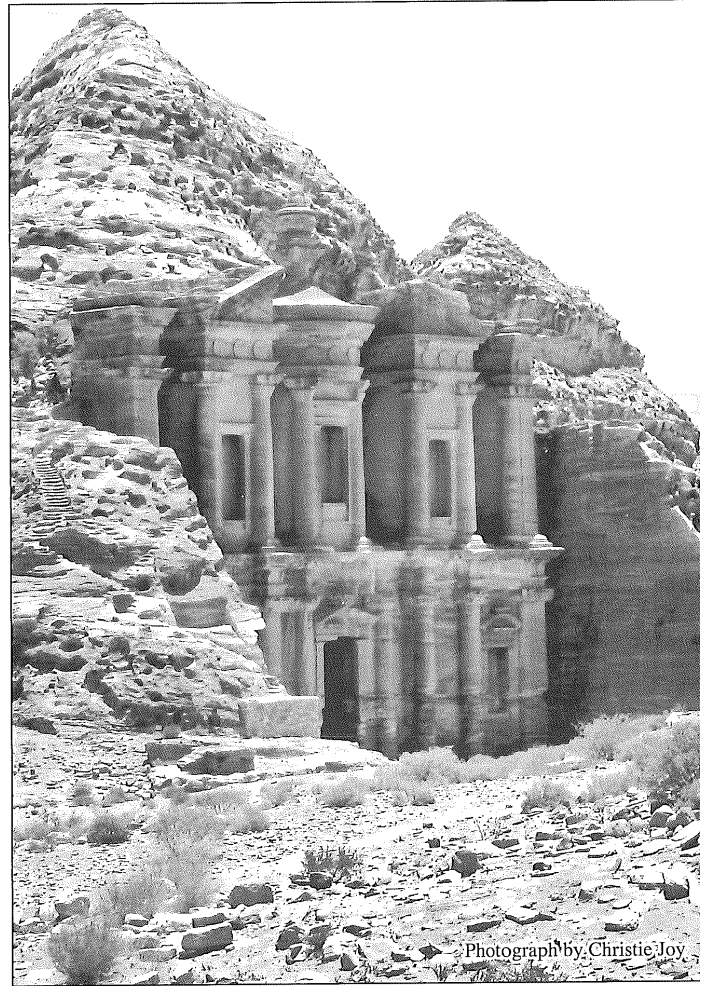
⁴ An argument could be made for calling this the Indo-European Great Tradition, which would include the Hittites, Hurrians, Greeks (Myceneans and Hellenistic), and, to a lesser extent, the

Romans, culminating in the Byzantines. At this writing, I prefer to leave it as it is until a more compelling case can be made for broadening the designation.

sized core components include: 1) local-level collection of rainwater in fertile valleys and slopes by means of terracing, diversion dams and cisterns; 2) production of cereals by means of dry farming on open plains and orchards planted to olives, figs and grapes on terraced hillsides; 3) transhumant production of sheep and goats on mountain pastures and stubble fields in cultivated areas (Hughes 1975: 68-82); 4) reliance on extended family networks as a means to organize production and protect against droughts and enemies and 5) use of the Greek language and script as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition (Gragg 1997: 516-527).

The influence of Greek/Hellenistic civilization on the Southern Levant increased rapidly in the wake of Alexander the Great's campaigns in the region. This influence has been preserved in archaeological remains of town planning, buildings, and dietary preferences (LaBianca 1990; Vyhmeister 1989; Tcherikover 1959). The textual basis for this tradition was the Greek language and theatre, along with its rich literary, philosophical and scientific corpus of learning (Aune 1997). Cities of the Southern Levant that show the influence of this Great Tradition include Philadelphia ('Ammān), Cesarea, Jerusalem, Jarash, Petra (FIG. 6) and many others (Mitchel 1992; Tcherikover 1959).

*The Roman Great Tradition*⁵--although greatly indebted to the Greek/Hellenistic Great Tradition and in so many ways a continuation of it--can nevertheless be distinguished from this earlier tradition because of its heavy emphasis on maximization of agricultural production and yield. Hypothesized core components include 1) maximization of water supply through addition of aqueducts for channelling water from distant streams and springs (FIG. 7); waterwheels and pumps for raising water to nearby fields; large underground cisterns and reservoirs for storing water, and drainage systems for managing runoff (Hughes 1975); 2) maximization of land area available for agricultural production through removal of forests and draining of swamps (White 1970: 146-172); 3) maximization of yield through application of green manure, fertilizers, and rotation of crops (White 1970: 86-172); 4) maximiza-



6. The Nabatean Arabs of Petra adopted Greek/Hellenistic traditions in their city planning and architecture.



7. Aqueduct supplying water to Cesarea. The Roman Great Tradition--although greatly indebted to the Greek/Hellenistic Great Tradition and in so many ways a continuation of it--can nevertheless be distinguished from this earlier tradition because of its heavy emphasis on maximization

⁵ In the version of this paper I presented at the ICHAJ conference in Petra, I lumped the Greek and Roman tradition into one — Greco-Roman Great Tradition. In researching the matter further, however, I have elected to keep the two separate — especially as

there is such a significant difference between the two tradition when it comes the emphasis on maximization. I do acknowledge however, that in most other respects, the Roman Great Tradition is a continuation of the Greek/Hellenistic.

tion of crop and stock yields through breeding and improved husbandry practices (White 1970: 173-331); 5) maximization of farm labour through increased use of slaves and hired personnel (White 1970: 332-383) and 6) use of the Latin language and script as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition.

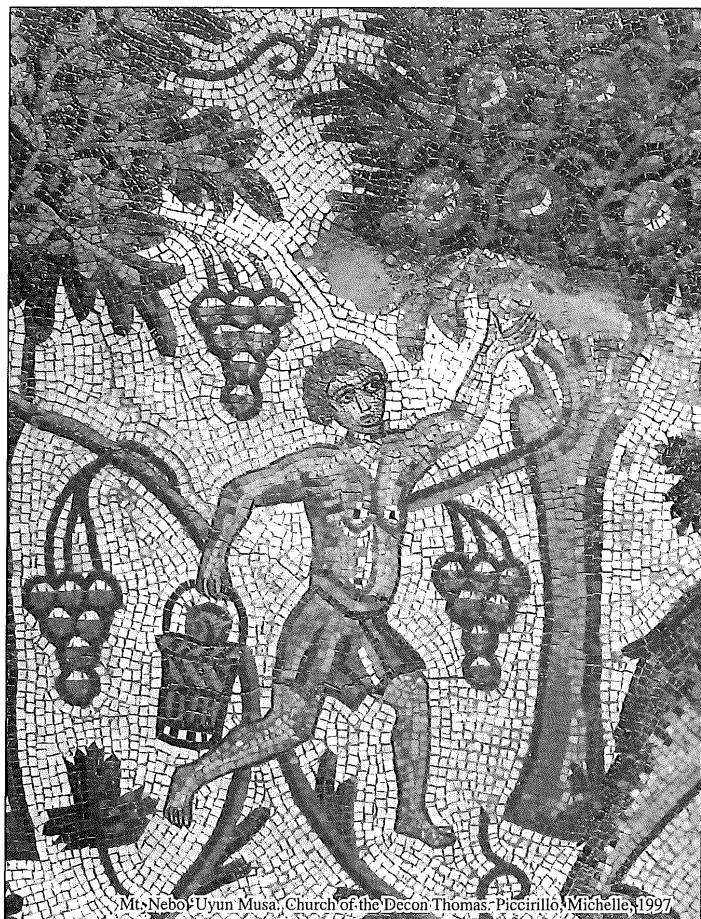
These efforts to maximize food system outputs were intimately linked to the growth and spread of cities throughout the Roman world. Modelled to a great extent on urban designs developed by the Greeks, and linked by paved highways, cities became the political centres of the Roman economy, exerting a powerful influence on their agricultural hinterlands (Foss 2002). Mandatory architectural components included the *forum* with its subsidiary buildings; the *temple* devoted to the state religion and the emperor cult, the *curia* where city councils were held, and the *basilica* or courthouse. Larger cities also included an amphitheatre, temples built for various divinities; fountains, and triumphal arches.

To these changes in rural and urban landscapes introduced by the Romans must be added their devotion to law, order and discipline — their “unwavering adherence to the idea of a controlled life, subject not to this or that individual, but to a system embodying the principle of justice and fair dealing” (Hamilton 1993: 129-130). In the end, this ideal ended up favouring the settled farmer over the nomad; the strong over the weak and the landowner over the farm hand.

*The Byzantine Great Tradition*⁶ continued to a significant extent the emphasis on maximization introduced by the Romans, but with modifications attributable in great measure to the rise of Byzantine Christianity, centered in Constantinople. Hypothesized core components include 1) continuation, and in certain locations, expansion of Roman system for maximizing water supply (Evenari, Shanan and Tadmor 1971; Patrich 1995: 483; Reifenberg 1955); 2) addition of monasteries and estate farms as centers of agricultural production and distribution (Foss 2002: 95); 3) intensification of cash crop production of olives and grapes (FIG. 8) (Foss 2002:

92); and 4) increased hierarchical organization of production due to increased concentration of political power in the hands of bishops at the expense of city endowments and private citizens (Foss 2002: 71) and 5) use of the Greek language and script as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition. At the apex of this new world of Byzantine Christendom sat the emperor — head of both the church and the state — a polity referred to by some scholars as caesaropapism (Margoulias 1970: 1-16).

As in the case of the Roman great tradition, that of the Byzantines was essential to life in towns and cities. And every town, every city had its own church, or churches — often constructed of reused remains of destroyed Roman temples. Even the rural landscape took on a new character as monaster-



8. Mosaic from Mount Nebo depicting harvest scene. The Byzantine Great Tradition continued to a significant extent the emphasis on maximization introduced by the Romans, but with modifications attributable in great measure to the rise of Byzantine Christianity, centered in Constantinople.

⁶ A case could probably be made for referring to this as being part of a broader Judeo-Christian Great Tradition — which would include Judaism and the two streams of Christianity — the eastern stream or Byzantine Christianity, and the Western stream, or Ro-

man Catholicism. Again, I prefer to leave it as it is as most of the published sources I have come across so far treat the two streams as separate.

ies and shrines were inserted in the midst of olive groves and along highways and paths linking cities and towns (Foss 2002: 74).

The Islamic Great Tradition originated during the sixth century AD among caravaneers and desert tribesmen of the Saudi Arabian desert (Tritton 1951: 9-22). As stated earlier, its roots are to be found in the Arabian Great Tradition. From its beginnings in Mecca and Medina it spread rapidly to the great population centers of Late Antiquity — to Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem — to become the dominant religion of the Arabs throughout all the lands of the Middle East and far beyond (Guillaume 1954: 78-87). Hypothesized core components include 1) irrigation agriculture in the great river basins of Egypt and Mesopotamia; 2) dry-farming of cereals in the mountainous regions of the Levant and Northern Syria; 3) pastoral nomadism in the deserts of Arabia and North Africa; 4) extensive inter-regional trade and exchange in foodstuffs and other goods facilitated by caravaneers and universal Islam; 5) a world view and elite culture anchored in the teachings of the Holy Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad (Guillaume 1954: 20-54) and 6) use of the Arabic language and script as a means to codify knowledge and practices essential to the maintenance of the tradition.

More than any other, the Islamic Great Tradition, which draws its inspiration from the Holy Qur'ān and the Arabic language, continues to shape the lives of people in the Southern Levant (Guillaume 1954: 155-199). Among its salient features is a global network of believers whose common core of shared religious attitudes, beliefs and practices have fostered and facilitated the development of networks of cooperation, trade and political domination which have surpassed any before them, and which continue to imbue Islam with vitality and power vis-a-vis the rest of the world. For over thirteen centuries, Islam has prevailed as a dominant force in the lives of both elites and commoners within its sphere — starting with the Umayyads, and continuing through the Abbasids, the Seljuks, the Ayyubids, the Mamluks, the Ottomans, and most recently, the Wahabis (Waldman 1987).

The Modern Capitalist Great Tradition. Born of the “great transformations” which took place in Europe during the 16th-18th centuries — including the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and the

scientific and industrial revolutions — the Modern Capitalist Great Tradition has had enormous consequences for how food is produced, stored, distributed, prepared and consumed around the world (Braudel 1995; Wolf 1997). What sets this new tradition apart is its reliance on fossil fuels, fertilizers, mechanization, and international markets. Under this new system, food is produced by means of factory farming methods for the sake of profit (Bodley 2000: 308-309). As was the case with the Roman great tradition, the goal is maximization — but this time not only by means of application of technology, but also by expansion of demand through globalization.

Encounters between the Modern Capitalist Great Tradition and the Middle East began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, and has since continued unabated through the instrumentalities of colonialism, imperialism, trans-national corporate activity, multi-national political and economic organizations, factory farming, tourism, and commerce (Bodley 2000). Through these processes it has brought into existence a global food system that is rapidly rendering traditional farming and dietary practices obsolete. Its impact is ubiquitous throughout the world, not the least in the Southern Levant, where the many encounters between “The Lexus and the Olive Tree” (Friedman 2000) continue to challenge daily survival for many.

Little Traditions

As was stated earlier, little traditions are localized indigenous heritage and knowledge. What sets little traditions apart from great traditions is their essentially localized and indigenous character. Thus, little traditions are under the domain and control of local actors who do not rely on the process of universalization and centers of transmission in order to persist or change. In this section I focus attention on seven such little traditions whose persistence is due largely to the perceptions of local actors that these are crucial practices for assuring food and livelihood security at the level of households and local communities. These practices and traditions have come to light as a result of archaeological and ethnographical research by the Mādabā Plains Project in Jordan.

Elsewhere (LaBianca 1997) I have referred to them as “indigenous hardiness structures” in order to emphasize their derivation among local residents (indigenous); their function in fortifying against

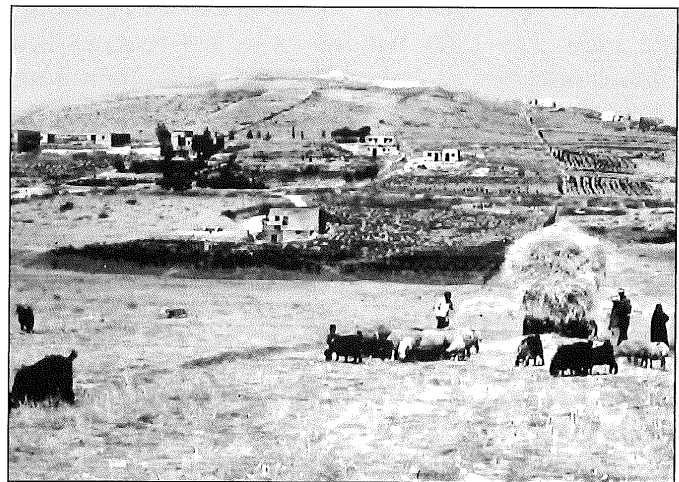
hunger and famine (hardiness); and their persistence as cultural practices (structures). They include the following: local-level water management, mixed agro-pastoralism, fluid shared commons, residential flexibility, hospitality, honor and tribalism (see End Notes for examples of encounters with each of these little traditions in Tristram 1873).

*Local-level water management*⁷ refers to the practice of relying on natural springs and man-made cisterns for water to meet household and farming needs. Knowing the location of natural springs, even those that flow only intermittently, is crucial for survival of some households, especially where access to other sources of water is minimal. Additional sources of water are the “family cistern” and the “agricultural cistern” (cf. Wåhlin 1997). Typically, these are pear shaped installations, hewn out of the soft bedrock, into which rainfall is directed during the rainy season via a settling basin and a small ground-level opening. Cisterns may vary in size from as small as 1 cubic meter up to 20 cubic meters. Many, if not most, were originally constructed by ancients, especially the Romans, although a few have more recent origins. Whether ancient or new, cisterns, along with the catchments that feed them, require regular maintenance. In the case of household cisterns, which are typically located adjacent or underneath dwellings, catchments consist of rooftops of houses, while agricultural cistern, which are typically located nearby cereal fields or orchards, have earthen catchments. Compared with large scale systems for collecting, transporting and storing water, such as dams, aqueducts, and reservoirs — which are difficult to construct, require a great deal of labour to maintain, and are vulnerable targets in times of conflict — natural springs and cisterns represent a comparably low-risk approach to water management.

*Mixed agro-pastoralism*⁸ refers generally to the practice of combining crop cultivation with animal husbandry. Although a wide range of “mixes” are possible, the classic pattern in the Eastern Mediterranean is cereal production combined with sheep/goat production. The advantage of this practice is that after the fields have been harvested, the small stock can graze on the stubble while dropping

fertilizing dung on the ground. Where conditions permit, this practice may be combined with production of legumes or the cultivation of olives and grapes on slopes and terraces. In some cases, pigs and poultry may also be added to the mix. Transhumance is also a common practice in the Southern Levant. It involves people moving with their mixed herds from lowland to highland regions on an annual basis in order to maximize productivity of both lands and herds. The bottom line is that the ordinary farmer “knows how” to do produce a range of different crops and animals. This, in turn, allows him to respond to different economic, political or environmental opportunities or threats by adjusting the mix in terms of emphasis: cereals, legumes, olives, grapes, other fruits, sheep, goats, pigs or poultry. In more recent times, wage labour has been added to this bundle of options for many local farmers (FIG. 9).

*Fluid shared commons*⁹ are pastures and crop lands to which no one family or household has exclusive use rights; instead, in any one year, or over a period of several year, the land may be used by a range of different families representing one or more folk communities or tribes. Furthermore, over a given period of time, the territory of such shared commons may shift as individual families or communities adjust their production strategy to emphasize herding or agriculture; thus the boundaries of shared commons are typically fluid. Such



9. Harvest scene at Ḥisbān. Mixed agro-pastoralism refers generally to the practice of combining crop cultivation with animal husbandry.

⁷ cf. Tristram 1873: 62, 115, 119.

⁸ cf. Tristram 1873: 83, 271, 238.

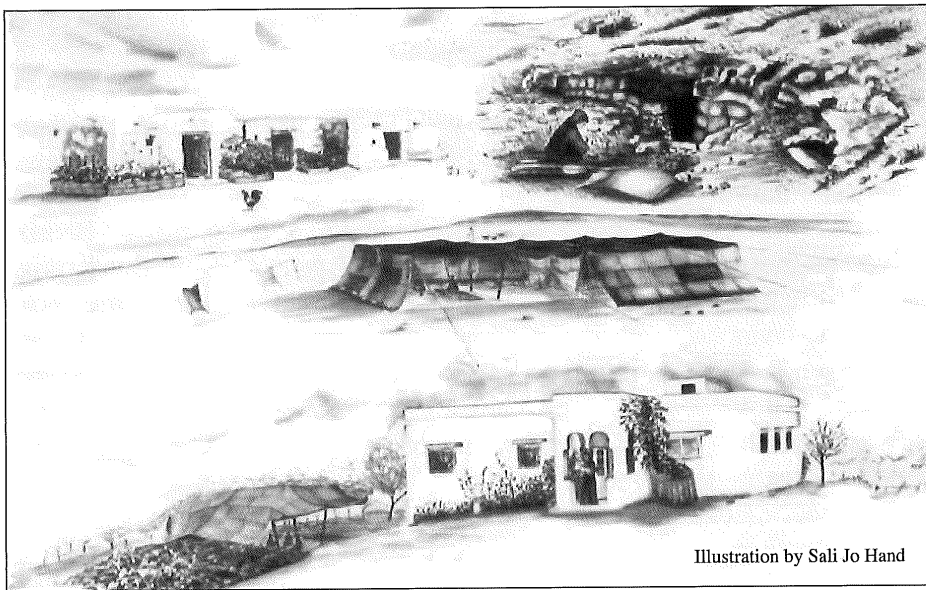
⁹ cf. Tristram 1865: 552.

fluid shared commons have certain advantages, and also certain disadvantages. An advantage is that it makes shifts in production emphasis easier in that it does not require purchase of new lands and/or bureaucratic hassle of any kind (although it may require negotiations with other locals using the same lands). Another advantage is that it gives producers a certain amount of flexibility in adjusting to differences from year to year in moisture conditions necessary for animal and/or crop production as homeland territories may be expanded to incorporate recently well-watered areas outside of last year's homeland territory. A disadvantage is that conflicts can also arise, and often do arise, as different producers attempt to exert control over disputed fields, pastures, and watering places.

*Residential flexibility*¹⁰ allows families to shift the location of their production activities from houses, to caves or to tents. In some cases, a given household may split up, with some members moving into tents to be closer to their herds, and others staying behind in the house to look after the crops. In other cases, households may live in tents during the warm months of the year, and move into caves or houses during the colder months. Here again, the bottom line is that people "know how" to make themselves comfortable in houses, tents and caves, thus greatly increasing their strategic options for producing food under a mixed agro-pastoral regime and also for protecting crops, herds and the products of both (FIG. 10).

*Hospitality*¹¹. The emphasis on hospitality for which the people of Jordan are deservedly well known has its roots in more than good manners. By means of this institution, individuals and households--sometime entire folk communities or tribes--accumulate generosity credits that can be cashed on a reciprocal basis when the need arises. Hospitality also facilitates the sharing of stories by traveling "story tellers" who hold forth before their hosts about matters of importance to preserving their honor, prestige and heritage. Visitors are also a good source of information about new opportunities and threats, thus providing news that benefits the conduct of livelihood activities by members of folk communities. Hospitality, therefore, played a crucial practical role in facilitating the transmission of information vital to group solidarity and survival.

*Honour and Shame*¹². The institution of honour informs men and women in various statuses and roles of ideal qualities and practices in the conduct of their private and public lives as members of a particular folk community or group (Eickelman 1989: 250-253). The related institution of shame serves as a means of assuring compliance with such shared ideals and practices. Honor can be increased through acts of valour and courage, and also through association with individuals and groups perceived to be more prestigious (FIG. 11). Shame is the opposite side of the coin in that it in-



10. Residential flexibility allows families to shift the location of their production activities from houses, to caves or to tents. In some cases, a given household may split up, with some members moving into tents to be closer to their herds, and others staying behind in the house to look after the crops.

¹⁰ cf. Tristram 1873: 114m 121m 189.

¹¹ cf. Tristram 1873: 37, 178.

¹² cf. Tristram 1873: 100, 206.



11. Party of armed men performing their duty as kinsmen. The institution of honour informs men and women in various statuses and roles of ideal qualities and practices in the conduct of their private and public lives as members of a particular folk community or group.

creases or decreases in proportion to acts of honor undertaken or omitted. Both work in tandem as a powerful means of social control that can--and usually does-- operate outside of a codified system of civil and/or criminal law.

*Tribalism*¹³ can be defined a flexible polity involving strong in-group loyalty based on variously fluid notions of common lineal descent. As I have discussed elsewhere (LaBianca 1993, 1997; Lancaster and Lancaster 1992), this type of polity provide tribal peoples with a highly flexible system of local level political organization by means of which small groups of kin have been able to adjust consistently and successfully to political and economic domination and change. Based as it is on the principle of claimed common lineal descent, it provides the enabling mechanism by means of which individual households and whole tribal sections have been able to shift back and forth between sedentary and nomadic ways of living.

Deeply embedded in the local food system, these indigenous hardiness structures represent “little traditions” that the local population has clung to over the centuries as a means to survival in a high-risk social, economic and natural environment. They have provided individuals, households and whole communities with a proven set of options for survival and resiliency in a region that has become legendary as a crossroads of commerce, contesting armies and civilizations.

Avoiding Essentialism

An issue which surely will arise in response to the line of research proposed here is the question of essentialism (Brown 1999; Eickelman 1989:258). Essentialism is “belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity” (Cliff 1996). Applied to our project here, the concern is that in seeking to identify “core components” of various great and little traditions, we risk assuming homogeneity and constancy where in actuality heterogeneity and change is the reality. This is an important concern to which I would offer the following response:

First, the risk of essentialism applies to all fields of inquiry where the goal is to identify analytically distinctive features of objects or events. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is the reason why scientists devise classification schemes in the first place — usually in order to deepen understanding of properties and patterns in a particular class of objects or events. Thus, by distinguishing nine distinct great traditions and seven distinct little traditions, our goal is to deepen understanding of the “whatness” of each of these, and to discover patterning with regard to their interactions. We fully anticipate as this line of research progresses that we will become aware of weaknesses and limitations with respect both to the terminology (Semitic, Canaanite, Islamic) used and the posited properties of each category of tradition. This will no doubt lead to changes and enhancements with respect to both.

Second, consideration should also be given to what would happen if our project here — to construct a framework that would apply to all historical periods in Jordan--was abandoned as a means to avoid essentialism. What would happen is obvious, i.e. existing divisions of labour would continue along traditional lines of scholarship — Bronze Age archaeology, Iron Age archaeology, Roman archaeology, and so on. An advantage of thus continuing the status quo is that as scholars with in-depth knowledge of their fields keep digging deeper and deeper they are less inclined to settle for overly simplified characterizations of their particular period of expertise. The down side of this approach to avoiding essentialism is that it reinforces the tendency among such experts to ignore the ways in which “their period” has been shaped by traditions

¹³ cf. Tristram 1873: 43, 237.

originating in much earlier periods. It is precisely in regards to this limitation that the structure of tradition framework is so valuable, for it sets up feedback loops between scholars working in different periods, thereby bringing to light streams of tradition that span multiple centuries and millennia.

Third, the best way to avoid essentialism, therefore, is to build feedback loops between scholars that assure continuing discourse about the “whatness” of various great and little traditions. To facilitate such discourse, a certain amount of simplifying is necessary — as for example the attempt in this paper to identify “core components” of great traditions — even if this risks suggesting constancy and unbrokenness about a given tradition that may not in fact exist. To the extent that this limitation is acknowledged by all, it avoids essentialism.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to do in this paper is to sketch the outlines of a more adequate theoretical framework for grasping the causes of cultural interactions through the ages in Transjordan. The categories I have posited as constituting various great traditions are well known by most scholars working in Jordan. The posited small traditions are common knowledge among the rural masses of the region, but not necessarily among scholars.

More research is needed 1) to expand and validate the salient features of each of the great and small traditions highlighted; 2) to delineate their influence and impact in terms of local food systems and 3) to understand their synergistic interactions in producing particular historical landscapes and societies throughout the region. To this end anthropological, archaeological and historical research must proceed hand in hand so that the full extent of regional variation and historical particularity that has existed in Jordan throughout the ages will come to light.

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