

27. ETHNIC IDENTITY IN BIBLICAL EDMON, ISRAEL, AND MIDIAN: SOME INSIGHTS FROM MORTUARY CONTEXTS IN THE LOWLANDS OF EDMON

by *Thomas E. Levy*

CONFLICT with and resistance to other ethnic groups can be one of the primary catalysts for the formation and maintenance of ethnic identity. In this short contribution, it is suggested that the crystallization of Edomite identity occurred in the crucible of conflict with neighboring tribal groups, such as the Israelites and Midianites. The data for testing this hypothesis come from the recent excavations of a tenth-century B.C.E. Iron Age cemetery in the region known historically as the lowlands of Edom in southern Jordan.

Introduction

In beginning this discussion of Edomite ethnogenesis, it is important to try to identify when in the Near Eastern historical sources it is possible to identify a geographical region known as Edom, and Edomites as the name of a people. It will then be possible to suggest a number of hypotheses that link our recent excavation of a tenth-century B.C.E. cemetery in southern Jordan with some suggestions concerning Edomite ethnogenesis. However, as we are especially interested in understanding the processes that led to ethnogenesis, we must look deeper in time, earlier than the sixth–seventh centuries B.C.E., when we know that an Edomite state, with its own script, palace architecture, and other accoutrements of the state were in place (Bienkowski 2002; Crowell 2004; Porter 2004).

The earliest reference to Edom comes from Egyptian sources dating to the late thirteenth century B.C.E., in particular, in Papyrus Anastasi VI. This document contains a report from an Egyptian frontier official who served during the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah (ca. 1224–1214 B.C.E.)—the same Merneptah whose stele discovered at Thebes by Sir Flinders Petrie in 1896 preserves the earliest mention of the ancient ethnic group known as “Israel” (Shanks et al. 1992). With regard to the region of Edom, Papyrus Anastasi VI states: “We have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the Fortress [of] Merne-ptah Hotep-hir-Maat—life, prosperity, health—which is (in) Tjeku, to the pools of Per-Atum . . . to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive.”

There are other fourteenth- to twelfth-century B.C.E. Egyptian sources that mention Edom, and also

Seir—another, perhaps earlier, name for Edom. For example, in one of the Late Bronze Age Amarna letters (mid-fourteenth century), King Abdi-heba of Jerusalem wrote to the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep III: “The land of the king is lost: there is war against us, as far as the lands of Seir (and) as far as Gath-Carmel!” (EA 288; see Pritchard 1969:488).

Recently, Yuval Goren, Israel Finkelstein, and Nadav Naʿaman (Goren et al. 2004:267) carried out a petrographic analysis of this Amarna tablet and demonstrated that it was a Jerusalem-made tablet from the central hill country. This early fourteenth-century B.C.E. reference to Seir provides extrabiblical textual confirmation that the name Seir was in use in the eastern Mediterranean region even before the biblical sources.

During the mid-twelfth century B.C.E., there is additional proof that Seir remained a geographical location well known to the ancient Egyptians. For example, in Papyrus Harris I, Ramesses III (1193–1162 B.C.E.) claims: “I have destroyed the people of Seir among the Shosu tribes. I have laid waste their tents, with their people, their belongings, and likewise their cattle without number” (see Albright 1944: 229; Givon 1971:134–37).

While these early Egyptian historical sources tell us that the inhabitants of Seir/Edom were “Shosu/Shasu,” a nomadic people, they do not tell us what the people of Seir/Edom actually called themselves. According to Ward (1972:56–59), “Shasu” probably derives either from a Northwest Semitic root meaning “plunderers” or an Egyptian word meaning “wanderers.” The term appears only in Egyptian sources dating to the period 1500–1100 B.C.E. It refers to both a people and a territory and thus did not designate an ethnic group but rather a social class (Ward 1992: 1165). Thus, Shasu is similar to the generic Arabic term Bedouin or “pastoral nomad.” However, these Egyptian documents offer a rich contribution to historical reconstruction because they confirm that the Northwest Semitic term “Edom” (Avishur 1996) was already in use in the region during the late thirteenth century B.C.E. and that the social-subsistence base of the inhabitants of this desert region was rooted in pastoral nomadism. But the problem remains—when do the people, the Edomites, appear in the historical records?

Background: The Hebrew Bible and Early Edom

Unlike neighboring Moab, which produced at least one historical source, the Moabite Stone (Harrison and Barlow 2005; Routledge 2004), there are no extant historical records from ancient Edom. Thus, without historical sources of their own, the Edomites, as a separate ethnic group, appear earliest in the Hebrew Bible. As Bartlett (1992:288) points out, some information may be gleaned from Genesis 36 concerning the early inhabitants of Edom, but in its current form the information comes from a rather late Israelite editor of the sixth century B.C.E. In the Biblical accounts about the eponym “Esau who is Edom” (Gen. 36:1), the Edomites are related to the Hebrews because Esau was the grandson of Abraham the Hebrew and was the son of Isaac. As the twin brother of Jacob-Israel, the relationship between the two peoples was close but antagonistic. According to Avishur (1996:370) it is possible to distinguish earlier and later elements in the ethnic composition of Edom. Thus, in the Deuteronomistic tradition about the ancient settlers of Edom before the advent of the Hebrews, it is asserted: “Seir was formerly inhabited by the Horites; but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them, wiping them out and settling in their place” (Deut. 2:12).

According to E. A. Knauf (1992:288), this so-called displacement of the local Horite population by the Edomites mirrors the Israelite displacement or conquest of the Canaanites presented by the Deuteronomistic school in the Book of Joshua. Gen. 14:6 assumes that there is no difference between the regions of Edom and Seir, something that Knauf disagrees with. Knauf argues that it is important to distinguish “Edom” and “Seir” as separate areas in southern Transjordan, with the “sons of Esau” inhabiting Edom, which he locates on the agricultural land of the Transjordanian plateau, and the Horites occupying the wooded mountain slopes. By taking this position, however, Knauf ignores the possibility of multiple models of “Edomite settlement,” just as there is a range of models that can be used to explain “Israelite settlement” (Shanks et al. 1992) based on the different narratives of Israel’s relations with the Canaanites as portrayed in Joshua and Judges. However, as the extrabiblical Egyptian sources noted earlier, Seir and Edom are indeed terms for the same general region of southern Transjordan and occasionally, parts of the Negev (Kitchen 1992). Thus, Knauf’s idea that “Edom” and “Seir” were different “microzones” in southern Jordan loses credence. In addition, by locating Seir on the “wooded slope” of the Edomite plateau, the lowlands of

Edom—the copper-rich Faynan district—are left out of Knauf’s model.

According to Avishur (1996:372), Genesis 36 indicates that prior to Edom’s conquest by David, two periods can be distinguished: the “period of the chiefs” and the “period of the kings.” This parallels the division of Israelite history into the “period of the judges” and the “period of the monarchy.” If we focus on the “period of the chiefs” (Heb. *ʿallufim*), the tribal structure of Edom also parallels that of Israel during the “period of the judges,” as well as nomadic pastoral chiefdoms in general (Sahlins 1968). While Genesis 36 mentions only 11 chiefs of Edom, Avishur (ibid.) points out that a twelfth name is found in the Septuagint, but left out of the Masoretic text. Marshall Sahlins (ibid, p. 24), a noted cultural anthropologist, has used the conical clan model, based on the Polynesian type of complex chiefdom, to describe a wide range of complex chiefdom-level societies, including the ancient Israelites, societies in Central Asia and parts of Africa, as well as the Celtic peoples. The twelve-fold chiefdom organization of conical clans is characteristic of a number of ethnic groups known from the Hebrew Bible, namely, the Nahorites (Gen. 22:20–24), the Ishmaelites (Gen. 25:13–15), the Israelites, and the Edomites. This conical clan social organization is typical of Near Eastern nomadic societies both in the ethnographic (Barfield 1993; Musil 1927) and historical record (Faust 2006; Levy and Holl 2002), and provided it the primary crucible in which Edomite and Israelite ethnogenesis crystallized.

Anthropology and Ethnic Identity

Now that we have outlined the tribal nature of Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age social organization in northwestern Arabia and southern Jordan, it is necessary to define what is meant by ethnic identity. For anthropologist George De Vos (1995), ethnicity refers to the “self-perceived inclusion of those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with whom they are in contact.” Some of these traditions include: “folk” religious beliefs and practices, language, aesthetic cultural patterns (such as tastes in food, dance tradition, styles of clothing, and definitions of physical beauty), a shared sense of historical continuity, common ancestry or place of origin, territoriality, and economic specialization. Many of these variables have an archaeological signature and will be touched on in relation to the Iron Age cemetery at Wadi Fidan 40 in southern Jordan.

Operating with this understanding of ethnicity, we can now look at ethnogenesis, the process by which

ethnic groups are formed. According to the *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology* (Seymour-Smith 1986), ethnogenesis refers to “the construction of group identity and resuscitation or persistence of cultural features of a people undergoing rapid and radical change. It may also be used to refer to a new ethnic system emerging out of an amalgamation of other groups.” Underlying this concept of ethnic formation in the context of rapid cultural change is the notion of resistance to “the other”—whatever the level of social organization (band, tribe, chiefdom, state). One of the most recent examples of ethnogenesis may be the crystallization of Palestinian ethnic identity in the early 1960s following their resistance to Zionism. When the Zionist project began in Palestine during the late nineteenth century, the local Arab inhabitants viewed themselves as “Arabs” and as part of the greater Arab people. It took over sixty years of resistance to and conflict with the neighboring Jewish population before the local Arab population defined themselves as a separate ethnic group. Thus, as shown in A. Faust’s (2006) study of ancient Israelite ethnogenesis, resistance is indeed a key factor that promotes ethnogenesis.

Ethnic Diversity in the Iron Age Southern Levant

As indicated above, during the Late Bronze to early Iron Age, the Hebrew Bible and other ancient texts refer to a wide range of ethnic groups in the southern Levant. These include Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Egyptians, Perizzites, Hivites, Horites, Israelites, Jebusites, Amalekites, Midianites, Philistines, and Shasu. By the tenth–eighth centuries B.C.E., many of these ethnic groups evolved into secondary “ethnic” mini-states such as Aram, Phoenicia, Philistia, Judah, Israel, Ammon, Moab, and Edom. The timing and processes that led to the emergence of each of these mini-states are contentious issues (Joffe 2002; Levy and Higham 2005; Routledge 2004) that are beyond the scope of this paper. However, as noted above, we must look deeper in time, earlier than the sixth and seventh centuries B.C.E. when we know that an Edomite state, with its own script, palace architecture, and other accoutrements of the state were in place.

There are a number of reasons why the best place to begin investigating Edomite ethnogenesis is the Iron Age cemetery at Wadi Fidan 40 (WFD 40). First, the closest that archaeologists, historians, bioanthropologists, and molecular scientists can get to the actual people who lived in a historic region are the human skeletal remains found in mortuary contexts (Pearson 2000). Following the 2004 excavations

in this cemetery, 235 individuals were recovered from 172 distinct burial contexts (Levy, Najjar, Muniz et al. 2005:473). Second, a new suite of radiocarbon dates from the WFD 40 cemetery securely place it in the tenth century B.C.E., close in time to some of the Egyptian references to Edom/Seir (Kitchen 1992), as well as the earliest poems in the Hebrew Bible (Freedman 1980) that relate to this region such as the “Song of the Sea” (Exodus 15) and the “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5). Third, as the anthropological record indicates that the notion of “territoriality” among social groups is marked by their establishment of separate cemeteries in the landscape (Chapman et al. 1981), the large Iron Age cemetery at WFD 40 provides an ideal locale to investigate the growth of the buried population’s control of this part of Edom. And, fourth, any grave offerings found in the WFD 40 cemetery can provide important clues about the socioreligious beliefs and identity of the buried population. Taken together, these factors indicate the great potential of this cemetery for investigating the nature of ethnogenesis in Iron Age Edom (although the present paper should be viewed as a prelude to a more in-depth study).¹

Significance of the WFD 40 Cemetery Excavations

Among the most notable aspects of the Iron Age cemetery at Wadi Fidan 40 are the stylistic differences of this mortuary site (linked to pastoral nomads) and contemporary tombs in Judah, Ammon, and other neighboring regions (Bloch-Smith 1992; Faust 2004; Tubb et al. 1997; Yassine 1983). Earlier studies explain in detail the archaeological correlates that connect this cemetery to a pastoral nomadic community and its probable links to the Shasu nomads (Levy, Adams, and Muniz 2004; Levy, Adams, and Shafiq 1999). To date, WFD 40 may be the most comprehensively excavated Iron Age pastoral nomad cemetery in northwestern Arabia and southern Jordan. Thus, it provides a stepping stone for examining the formation of the pastoral nomadic population in this part of Jordan.

The WFD 40 cemetery was initially probed by R. B. Adams (1991), who linked the cemetery to the Early Bronze Age village of Wadi Fidan 4 located on the opposite bank of the Wadi Fidan (Adams and Genz 1995; Levy, Adams, and Najjar 1999). The first large-scale excavations at WFD 40 were carried out

¹ My student Marc Beherec is using the mortuary data from the UCSD–Department of Antiquities of Jordan Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery excavations for his doctoral research on this topic at the University of California, San Diego.

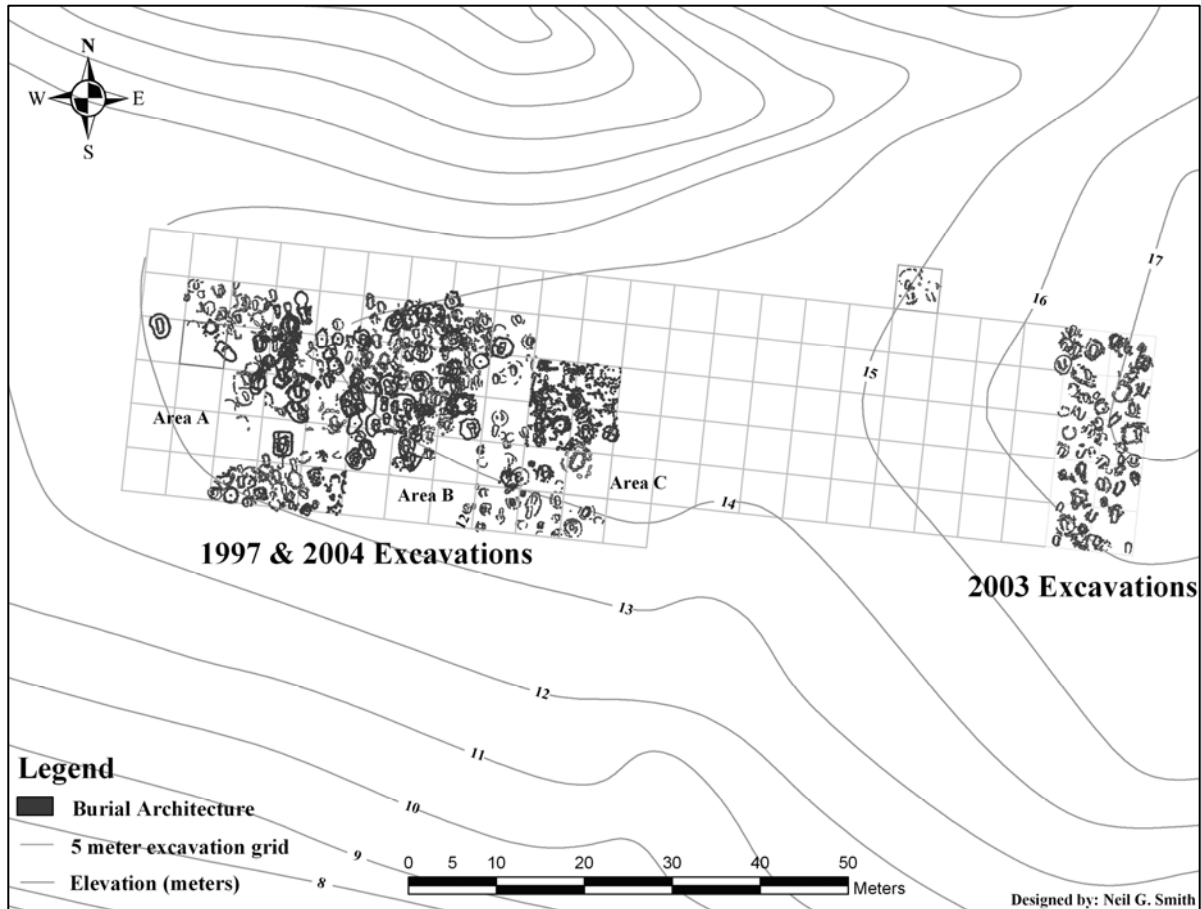


Figure 1. Plan of the excavated tombs in the Wadi Fidan 40 Iron Age cemetery

by T. E. Levy and Adams in 1997, when 62 circular tombs were excavated (Levy, Adams, and Shafiq 1999) and the site was subsequently dated to the Iron Age. Jewelry, other burial goods, and a single radiocarbon date taken from a pomegranate found buried in Tomb 92 (Beta-111366; 2800 ± 70 B.P., 1 sigma cal. 1015–845 B.C.E.; 2 sigma cal. 1130–815 B.C.E.) placed the cemetery in the Iron Age. In 2003 and 2004, Levy and M. Najjar directed emergency excavations at the site under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan that brought the total number of graves excavated in the cemetery to 287.

The tombs typically have a stone circle ca. 1.0–1.8 m in diameter situated ca. 0.80–1.0 m above a well-built stone-lined cist tomb large enough for an extended burial (figures 1 and 2). In many cases, elaborate mortuary structures were built on the site surface among the cemetery tombs, consisting of pavements, rectangular structures, concentric circles with standing stones (figure 5), and other structures. While the western sector of the cemetery and eastern extremity of the cemetery have been extensively sampled, a

large portion of the eastern half remains to be investigated (figure 1). In order to date the cemetery more adequately, a series of eight additional high-precision radiocarbon dates were obtained from pomegranates found in tombs exposed in the 2004 excavations. Seven of these dates were from different pomegranate offerings found in a single tomb (no. 59) and at the 95.4% probability level produced an average date of 1010–920 B.C.E. (Levy, Najjar, Muniz, et al. 2005). While more radiocarbon dates are certainly needed, the fact that a corpus of radiocarbon dates was obtained from three different tombs spread over different parts of the cemetery—and all are from stylistically similar tombs characteristic of the entire cemetery sample—suggests that the main use-period of the cemetery was during the tenth century B.C.E. This was confirmed by an Egyptian stamp seal found as a grave offering in Tomb 91 in Area A. According to Stefan Munger (in Levy et al. 2005a:470–71), this type of seal is typical of the transition between Iron Age IB and Iron IIA. In Egyptian terms, this correlates primarily with Dynasty 21 (ca. 1075–945

B.C.E.), with examples found at Tell Abu Hawam, Gezer, Tell el Farah (South), Megiddo, and other sites. The temporal correlation between the Tomb 91 seal and the radiocarbon dates from the cemetery is remarkable and indicates that the majority of burial activities took place during the late Iron I to Iron IIA periods. Extensive surveys within a 5 km radius of Wadi Fidan 40 failed to find any villages or habitation sites in the area and strengthen the interpretation that this cemetery was an important territorial marker for the nomadic inhabitants of the lowlands of Edom.

Summary and Interpretations

The present paper should be viewed as a work in progress because archaeological research on Iron Age Edom is still in its infancy. However, what is becoming increasingly clear from our work in the lowlands of Edom is the importance of conceptualizing the Edomites as one of a number of tribal peoples who emerged out of the ethnic melting pot of northwestern Arabia and southern Jordan toward the end of the Late Bronze Age. This certainly included the Israel-

ites, Edomites, and Midianites. As noted above, the close links between “Esau who is Edom” (Gen. 36:1) and his twin brother Jacob/Israel are well known. The links between the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age Israelites and the Midianites, whose core territory was situated in the northern Hijaz (Bawden 1983; Parr 1982; Rothenberg 1998; Rothenberg and Glass 1983), were both consanguineous and acrimonious, as were the links between the Israelites and Edomites (Halpern 2001; 2005). In Frank Moore Cross’s (1988:55) article “Reuben, First-Born of Jacob,” a case is made for close relations between the Israelites and Midianites based on the tradition that Moses married a Midianite woman and tended the flocks of the priest of Midian (Exod. 2:21; 3:13–15), and based on the central role played by the Midianites at Mount Sinai, where the priest of Midian offered sacrifices to Yahweh and instituted a juridical system (Exodus 18). For a variety of reasons, including the fact that the distinctively decorated “Midianite” pottery (also referred to as Hijaz or Qurayyah Ware) is not found in the Sinai Peninsula but is found radiating from the Midianite center at Qurayyah in



Figure 2. Overview of excavations in the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery (view to north)

Photograph by T. E. Levy



Figure 3. Overview of Tomb 92 found during the 1997 excavations in the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery

One of the pomegranates found in this tomb produced a radiocarbon date spanning the late eleventh–late ninth centuries B.C.E. (Beta-111366; 2800 ± 70 B.P., 1σ cal. 1015–845 B.C.E.; 2σ cal. 1130–815 B.C.E.)

Photograph by T. E. Levy



Figure 5. Stone circle burial monument with standing stone found in 2004 (Area C, Grave 712)

Photograph by T. E. Levy

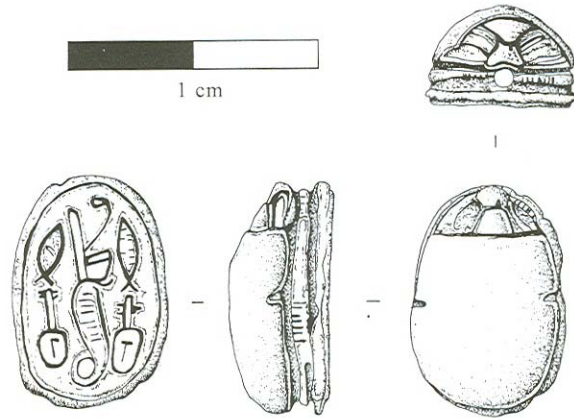


Figure 4. Scarab found in Grave 92, B. 2152

(from Levy, Adams, and Shafiq 1999)

Uraeus with red crown (MB IIB, ca. 1640–1500 B.C.E.).
Parallels: Tell el-Ajjul, Lachish, Megiddo Tombs.



Figure 6. Anthropomorphic standing stone found in 2004 (EDM no. 70337, Area A, Basket 3233)

Photograph courtesy of UCSD Levantine Archaeology Laboratory



Figure 7. Egyptian stamp seal with loop handle (Grave 91, Area A)

Photographs courtesy of the UCSD Levantine Archaeology Laboratory

northwestern Saudi Arabia, and throughout southern Jordan and at Timna in southern Israel, Cross argues that Mount Sinai (Horeb) must be sought in southern Edom or northern Midian, not in the Sinai Peninsula.

Our own excavations at Khirbat en-Nahas, some 50 km south of the Dead Sea, provide the northernmost evidence of “Midianite” pottery (figure 8) in the Wadi Araba region that separates modern Israel and Jordan (Levy, Adams, Najjar, et al. 2004). Bearing in mind the problems of linking pottery with distinct ethnic groups, if the known distribution of Midianite pottery is coupled with the biblical traditions associating Yahweh with Edom/Seir, as in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:4), which proclaims that Yahweh marched from the region of Edom, the case for Mount Sinai being in Edom or the region of Midian makes sense. The idea that the Yahweh tradition is rooted in Edom can be supported by the Late Bronze Age Egyptian records that link the god *yhw* = *Yahweh* with the Shasu nomads of Edom (Giveon 1971; Levy, Adams, and Muniz 2004; Rainey 1995; Ward 1992). This is important for our study of Edomite ethnogenesis because it brings together some of the archaeological, biblical, and extrabiblical data which indicate that these three chiefdom-level societies—Israel, Edom, and Midian—interacted in meaningful and profound ways in the cauldron of northwestern Arabia and Jordan in the Late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. Thus, competition, conflict, and resistance between these three groups, for reasons not yet elucidated, led to the process of fission so typical of tribal societies, and sparked both Edomite and Israelite ethnogenesis. The Israelite section moved out of Jordan and northwestern Arabia into Canaan (Faust 2006; Shanks et al. 1992), while the Edomite section displaced the local populations (Horites?) of Seir and established their hold on the lowlands of Edom in the

vicinity of the copper-rich Faynan district of southern Jordan.

The intensified use of the Iron Age cemetery of Wadi Fidan 40 in the lowlands of Edom during the tenth century B.C.E. can be seen as a major expression of territoriality among this nomadic population following the processes of fission that affected the tribal confederations of northwest Arabia and Jordan earlier in the Late Bronze and early Iron Age. The recent excavations and studies of the radiocarbon dates from

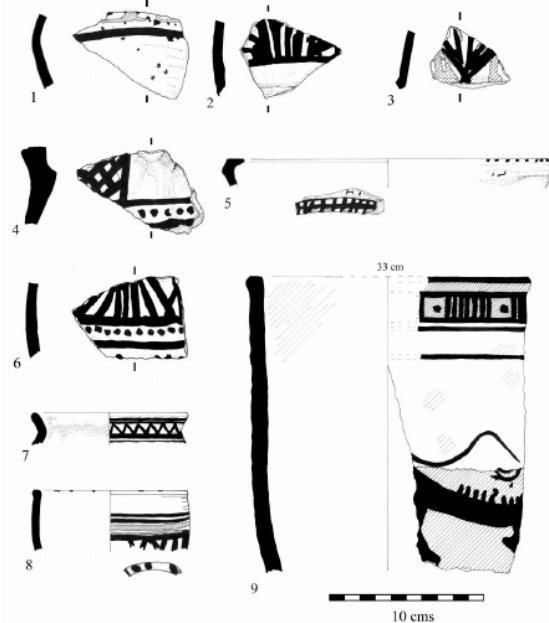


Figure 8. Selection of “Midianite” pottery from Areas A (1–4, 6–8) and S (5, 7, 7), Khirbat en-Nahas.

Figure 8. “Midianite” pottery from Khirbat en-Nahas, Jordan (from Levy et al. 2004:876)

the stratified Iron Age site of Khirbat en-Nahas, located some 5 km northeast of WFD 40, illustrate that there is a deep-time Iron Age history in Edom that spans at least the twelfth–ninth centuries B.C.E. (Higham et al. 2005; Levy, Najjar, van der Plicht et al. 2005). At Khirbat en-Nahas, the Qurayya or “Midianite” ware, scarabs, Cypro-Phoenician ceramics, and black burnished juglets may indicate oscillations in interaction throughout this period between Edomites, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Israelites, and Midianites.² Excavations in the WFD 40 Cemetery suggest that by the tenth century B.C.E. there was a large nomadic population in the lowlands with its own ethnic markers such as circular mortuary monuments, cist graves (figures 1–3), and burial practices. Some of these rituals included placement of the deceased in leather shrouds (Levy et al. 1999), special burial offerings using pomegranates, and the placement of highly abstract anthropomorphic standing stones (Heb. *maṣṣēbbôt*) with stylized nose and ear features (figure 6). In the absence of clearly defined ranking of burial monuments or grave offerings (figure 1), the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery seems to reflect the same type of segmentary social organization, perhaps according to a conical-clan level of social integration as implied in the “Song of the Sea,” which states that chiefs ruled in Edom (Exod. 15:15) at the end of the Late Bronze Age—an organizational pattern that may have extended into the tenth century B.C.E. The Egyptian scarabs and stamp seal found at Khirbat en-Nahas and the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery indicate that nomads had connections with Egypt from the late fifteenth century (see figure 4) to the tenth century B.C.E., providing archaeological evidence for the “tribes” or Shasu nomads known from Papyrus Harris, Papyrus Anastasi, and other extrabiblical sources alluded to above.

In conclusion, twelfth- to ninth-century B.C.E. Edomite identity was shaped by local peer-polity

interaction and processes of resistance to neighboring related societies such as the Israelites and Midianites, and social groups linked together through blood and marriage ties. This relationship extended back in time to the period when the only name we can link to the inhabitants of Seir/Edom and northwest Arabia is the Egyptian term “Shasu.” By the time the sixth-century B.C.E. biblical editors compiled the Hebrew Bible (Friedman 1988), the various competing northwest Arabian ethnic groups were known as Midianites, Edomites, Israelites and the relationships among them were understood in terms of kinship, marriage, history, and myth. Perhaps the latest development in Edomite ethnogenesis occurred during the seventh–sixth century B.C.E., when the Edomite script developed for use amongst elite groups in their society (DiVito 1993; Porter 2004). The new archaeological data from the lowlands of Edom briefly touched on here, coupled with the biblical and Egyptian texts, suggest that for most of their history, the Edomite social organization remained rooted in tribal social structure (LaBianca 1999; LaBianca and Younker 1995). Much more work needs to be done to clarify the nature of seventh–sixth century B.C.E. social organization in Edom, when monumental palatial architecture was established in the highlands at sites such as Busayra (Bienkowski 2002) and the region was subservient to the Assyrian core civilization. We do know that the tension and resistance between the two related societies, Israel and Edom, continued to be strong at this time and fueled the processes of Edomite and Israelite ethnogenesis.

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² The topic of “Midianite” and Qurayya ware during the early Iron Age is being investigated by my student Sarah Malena in her doctoral dissertation dealing with “Trade in the Biblical Texts and Levantine Societies” at the University of California, San Diego.

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