



Review

NOMADS, TRIBES, AND THE STATE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Jeffrey Szuchman, ed.
Oriental Institute Seminars 5
Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (2009)

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N*omads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East*, edited by Jeffrey Szuchman, brings together twelve papers—as well as a preliminary introduction and a concluding response—that were delivered at the fourth annual post-doctorate seminar of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, March 7–8, 2008.

The primary aim of the seminar was to examine the connections between pastoral nomadic groups and sedentary peoples in the ancient Near East, taking an integrated approach based in archaeological, historical, and anthropological perspectives. This raises the perennial problem of how textual, archaeological, and ethnographic methodologies can effectively interact with one another in a cross-disciplinary discourse. The issue is all the more problematic in the case of nomadic groups, who typically feature but little in the textual record—and when they do, almost always in a biased, negative light as recorded by urban elites. Furthermore, their presence in the archaeological record is difficult to locate, and ethnographic comparisons with modern pastoral nomads may be inappropriate and misleading.

The present volume is divided into three sections. The first has five papers addressing the integration of historical, archaeological, and ethnographic methodologies and the problems and limitations of each, and discussing the often loaded terminology involved (“tribe,” “nomad,” “state,” etc.). The second section has seven papers presenting various case studies of tribe-state interaction. The final section offers a summarizing response examining pastoral mobility as an adaptation.

The papers are quite diverse in their geographical and chronological interests, ranging across Libya, the Eastern Desert of Egypt, the Levant, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Iran, and spanning the period from Chalcolithic to the present day. However, as the volume’s title makes clear, the ancient Near East is the primary focus. Egyptologists will no doubt find much of interest and profit in all of the papers, but particular

attention might be given to the contributions of Hans Barnard, Robert Ritner, and Thomas E. Levy.

Barnard’s paper, “The Archaeology of Pastoral Nomads Between the Nile and the Red Sea,” examines the relationship between the historical notices of the Medjay and Blemmyes of the Eastern Desert and their association with the archaeological evidence in the form of Pan Graves and Eastern Desert Ware, along with ethnographic data from modern Beja people living in the same regions today. Barnard makes a very strong case for examining the historical evidence with caution, particularly when attempting to equate it with archaeological remains. Specifically, the evidence for the traditional equation of “Medjay = Blemmyes = Beja” is thin at best, and any number of other groups may have been involved. Likewise, according to Barnard, there is no convincing evidence to *immediately* identify the Medjay with the archaeologically attested Pan Grave culture or the Blemmyes with the makers of Eastern Desert Ware. For example, the Blemmyes are mentioned in historical texts well before and after the appearance of Eastern Desert Ware in the archaeological record (p. 20), while, according to Barnard, Pan Grave material culture could just as easily be connected with desert-dwelling groups other than the Medjay (p. 19).

In order to address these problems, Barnard argues that a specialized approach examining the archaeological remains of Eastern Desert inhabitants (such as campsites and low-density surface scatters) will need to be taken and “the inadequate links between material culture and historical terminology” severed to allow both archaeological and historical inquiry to “freely expand and interpret its own specific data set” (p. 23). Moreover, the prevailing notion that ancient inhabitants of the Eastern Desert were identical or very similar to the pastoral nomads in the desert today—denying the modern peoples of “at least 4,500 years of ethnic, cultural, and historical development” (p. 21)—must be set aside.

Ritner's contribution, "Egypt and the Vanishing Libyan: Institutional Responses to a Nomadic People," addresses a number of issues regarding Egypt's relations with her western neighbors. One of his chief arguments is that from the Predynastic Period to the New Kingdom, the pharaonic state was often unable to effectively comprehend, incorporate, or even maintain contact with Libyan peoples.² As Ritner points out, Libyans before the Ramesside Period were typically *not* presented in any significant manner, but rather referenced only briefly and non-specifically, and usually as iconographic representatives of the West in need of the controlling influence of the Egyptian state.³ This is why the representation of the "Libyan family" found at the pyramid complex of Sahure—itsself perhaps a copy of a now-lost earlier exemplar—is repeated by kings as late as Taharqo, demonstrating a "theo-political need for a detailed scene of absent Libyan enemies" (p. 45).

In contrast to the "missing" Libyans in Egyptian iconography, representations of pastoral cattle herders found in the central Saharan region of the Tadrart Acacus are cited as examples of contemporary evidence of Saharan peoples (i.e., "Libyans") that are similar in nature to Egyptian iconographic representations. (Further examples, not discussed by Ritner, could be cited for regions even further west, such as from the Tassili n'Ajjer and Ahaggar regions of Algeria.⁴)

Levy's article, "Pastoral Nomads and Iron Age Metal Production in Ancient Edom," focuses on pastoralists inhabiting southwestern Jordan (ancient Edom) during the Iron Age and their transition to a socioeconomically complex state (i.e., a "kingdom"), using the perspectives of archaeology, history, and anthropology.

After a methodological and theoretical overview that questions the prevailing notion that the Edomite kingdom formed in response to the Neo-Assyrian state, Levy discusses Khirbat el-Nahas, an important copper production site in the Faynan district of the southern Levant. He argues that archaeological evidence suggests copper was intensively mined in the area following the collapse of trade with Cyprus—the former chief supplier of copper in the Levant—at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Significantly, evidence for industrial activity during the tenth and ninth centuries BCE has been identified that suggests a much earlier period for the formation of an Edomite cultural identity.

This argument is bolstered by evidence from an unusually large Iron Age cemetery located nearby at the site of Wadi Fidan 40, where some seven thousand graves may be present. Interestingly, Levy suggests that the lack of ceramic grave goods and the absence of Iron Age habitation villages in close proximity to the cemetery (among other data) indicate the buried population was part of a nomadic community. Radiocarbon dating has demonstrated that it was in use from

the late eleventh through ninth centuries BCE, with usage peaking during the tenth century.

Levy identifies the people of the Edomite lowlands with the "Shasu," attested in Ramesside Egyptian texts as the inhabitants of the region (p. 157), and also perhaps biblical Edomites (p. 170). When the archaeological and historical data are taken together, it is evident that there was a large nomadic population in the lowlands of Edom during the tenth century BCE, part of which was involved in the exploitation of copper resources in the Faynan region. These resources may well have attracted the attention of a resurgent Egypt during the reign of Shoshenq I. Indeed, Levy attributes a major disruption in copper production at Khirbat el-Nahas towards the end of the tenth century BCE to Shoshenq's military activities in the Levant.⁵

While the other articles may not be of direct relevance to Egyptology, dealing with ancient Mesopotamia as well as modern Bedouin nomadism, they do offer important methodological critiques as to the relationships between archaeological, historical, and ethnographic data that no doubt most Egyptologists—both textually and archaeologically based—would profit from reading. Furthermore, it is hoped that this volume will encourage a similar examination of pastoral nomadism within the ancient Egyptian sphere on the part of Egyptologists.

NOTES

1. The publication is available in both print and digital formats from <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/catalog/ois/ois5.html>.
2. This is in response to O'Connor's view that the Egyptians "were well informed about conditions and events within the lands of Libu and Meshwesh" (David B. O'Connor, "The Nature of Tjemhu (Libyan) Society in the Later New Kingdom," in M. Anthony Leahy [ed.], *Libya and Egypt c. 1300–750 BC* [London: School of Oriental and African Studies, Centre of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, and The Society for Libyan Studies, 1990], 29–113 [66]).
3. See also now Robert K. Ritner, "Fragmentation and Re-integration in the Third Intermediate Period," in G. P. F. Broekman, Robert J. Demarée, and Olaf E. Kaper (eds.), *The Libyan Period in Egypt: Historical and Cultural Studies into the 21st–24th Dynasties: Proceedings of a Conference at Leiden University, 25–27 October 2007*. Egyptologische Uitgaven 23. (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten and Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 327–340.
4. See, conveniently, Jean-Dominique Lajoux, *The Rock Paintings of Tassili*. Translated by G. D. Liversage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963).
5. See also Troy Leiland Sagrillo, *The Reign of Shoshenq I: Textual and Historical Analyses*. Forthcoming.