Gass, Erasmus

Die Moabiter: Geschichte und Kultur eines ostjordanischen Volkes im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.

Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 38

Ernst Axel Knauf
University of Bern
Bern, Switzerland

This study, the author’s Habilitationsschrift submitted to the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Tübingen University, 2007, continues a mostly but not exclusively German tradition of research dedicated to ancient Israel’s “marginal neighbors,” which was founded by Manfred Weippert in 1971 with the magisterial and monumental Tübingen dissertation “Edom: Studien und Materialien zur Geschichte der Edomiter auf Grund schriftlicher und archäologischer Quellen”—over seven hundred pages in typescript that were never published but inspired subsequent investigations of the Ishmaelites, Midianites, Ammonites, and two monographs on the Moabites, which were, however, not comprehensive. The present study intends to be.

After a brief introduction (“A. Name und allgemeine Verortung,” 1–4), the first main part is devoted to the written record. The designation “B. Literarische Quellen” does not completely match its first section, “1. Moab im Spiegel vorderorientalischer und

ägyptischer Quellen” (5–137); some of the epigraphic material collected might be treated as “literature,” as, for example, the Mesha Stela, but other texts, such as Lachish Ostracon VIII, rather should not. The inherent methodology of the approach—to treat primary texts from ancient Moab first (5–101), from the wider ancient Near East next (101–37), and after these the biblical material (138–212)—is state of the art. The collection of Moabite texts includes in “1.1.1 Mesha-Stela”3 to “1.1.9. Steintafel von Khirbet el-Mudeyine,” items of indisputable authenticity; Gass presents, but tends to reject, “1.1.10 Fragment unbekannter Herkunft” (76–83)4 and “1.1.11. Der sogenannte Marzeah-Papyrus” (84–87) with good reasons—none of these texts is provenanced; he also denies the Moabite nature of the Heshbon ostraca (87–88) without presenting them, and this with disputable reasons: the relative particle דּעַ instead of דּעַ is also found at Khirbet el-Mudeyineh (see 72, 1.1.7), and paleography does not constitute ethnicity (pace 88 and a fairly widespread belief); it only testifies to schools and their area of recruitment, of which there might have been more than one in seventh–sixth century Moab. I gain the impression from the growing epigraphic corpus that one must distinguish between a “Moabite language” (the language of the royal administration) and “languages in ancient Moab,” which may or may not have been influenced by the former. The intriguing, quite unofficial, and seemingly semiliterate inscription on the pestle from Balu’ (1.1.5, 70–71) might represent a ditty or work-song:5

’anú ʾasínú ha-kább li-rááb {b} / bané ʾiyyín ha-bákk {r} bi-bétuh

We apply the pestle to (its) master (= the mortar) / sons of ruins (= prisoners of war?), the pestle in its house.

Chapter 2, “Moab aus der Perspektive des Nachbarn—Das Alte Testament” (138–210), introduces the biblical material together with the specific point of view from which it is written. To connect the itinerary (or itineraries) in Num 21 with the “Exodusgruppe” and to derive them from oral tradition (140) sounds, however, of scholarship from another century.6 The review of references to Moab or Moabites in their biblical context (138–60) follows the Old Testament of the Protestant tradition (historical books—teaching—prophets—deuterocanonical books). A chapter on the linguistic aspects of the lexeme

3. For easier reading, personal and place names have been anglicized in the quotes.
5. In the following transcription, vowel length is left unmarked for the benefit of the accentuation.
“Moab” (161–69) is not what most readers would expect in a study of history but stresses well the literary character of the biblical text and reflects the author’s scholarly origins (see his dissertation, n. 1). The same holds true of “2.3. Toponyme in Moab” (172–89; see RBL 12/2005). The Moabite deity Chemosh is dealt with on 169–72. This is hardly enough for Moabite religion; neither the two goddesses, which are epigraphically attested, nor Moabite iconography receive due attention and systematic treatment (bits and pieces of the Moabite artistic heritage are scattered throughout the archaeological section; see infra). Sihon is studied historical-critically in depth (190–209), but the presupposed “oral tradition” of an Israelite conquest of Heshbon (203) is difficult to substantiate. Iron IIA occupation might, contrary to Gass, well extend into the first half of the ninth century, but Iron IIA Heshbon was not destroyed by conquest—and what would be the earliest date for “conquering Israelites” that Heshbon was a Reubenite foundation (see infra on 296 fig. 34). Josephus (Ant. 10.9.7 §181), dating Nebuchadnezzar’s annexation of Moab and Ammon to 582 B.C.E., provides the starting point for a short review of Moabite history in the Persian period (210–12). The best argument for Josephus’s date (it coincides with the third deportation in Jer 51 and reminds of the Ammonite and Moabite involvement in Gedaliah’s assassination) is not represented, nor is the Aramaic inscription from Kerak (211–12 with n. 1040), which dates to the third rather than fourth century.

Under “C. Archäologischer Befund” (213–94), the author first gives brief summaries of excavations reports (213–44) and compares the fortifications and other architecture (244–48). Figures are provided for Iron-I settlements (245 fig. 18), Iron-II fortresses (249 fig. 20); the plan of Khirbet el-Fityan shows the Roman fortress; cf. 274), city gates in Iron I and II (250 fig. 21), palaces in Iron II (251 fig. 22), and pillared structures of Iron I (252 fig. 23). A “classification” (248), with no quantitative classification or some criteriology previously discussed, is too brief to be meaningful. Pictures strewn over the text show, in addition to the plates mentioned, the fragment of a statue from Dibon (224 fig. 15), the Balu'-stela (235 fig. 16), which is a surface find and has nothing to do with the

7. His conclusions to שדָד מַהֲבָט (Moab north of the Arnon river, 165) are not convincing. (a) Only in Late Biblical Hebrew does שדָד stand for “fruchtbare Ackerfeld.” Earlier it denotes “cultivable land which is uncultivated.” (b) In Gen 36:35 and in Ruth, שדָד evidently refers to the Kerak plateau. (c) Num 21:20 is part of a late scribal compilation, containing a narrative w-qatal and identifying the summit of Mount Pisgah with “the valley” (or vice versa).
8. Toponyms are again hardly “literary sources.” The assertion that Rabbat-Moab is not mentioned in the Old Testament (184 n. 947) overlooks Jer 49:3 (cf. Knauf 1992b), where “Ai” is another Moabite town south of the Arnon River. Rabbat-Moab, though attested in Greek only ραββάθμωβα, is nevertheless a pre-Aramaic toponym attesting to the fact that at some point the language of administration and/or the language of the northern Kerak plateau switched from “Mesha-Moabite” (Qir Moab) to “common Canaanite.” It is this “Canaanite lingua franca” that is also attested by the Heshbon ostraca.
9. The plans are based, contrary to the page heading, on surveys, not excavations.
excavations at this site, and a proto-aeolic capital (243 fig. 17). Under “Surveyergebnisse” (253–94), an “incomplete selection” (253) of surveyed sites follows. The date, extent, and methodology of the various surveyors and surveys are neither documented nor discussed (the same holds true for the excavations). The sites selected are grouped into “2.1. Wohnsiedlungen” (253–68), “2.2. Befestigungsanlagen” (268–80), and “2.3 Vermutlich landwirtschaftliche Einrichtungen” (280–87). Illustrations include the Shihan (Rujm el-'Abd) stela (259 fig. 24), the (royal) Kerak statue (264 fig. 25), the Kerak lion orthostat (264 fig. 26), “Stadtanlagen der Eisenzeit II” (266 fig. 27, with the outlines of Abaroth and ed-Deir/Horonaim; of the latter, at least one of the two discoverers regards them as Hellenistic), “Festungen der Eisenzeit II” (267 fig. 28; in Roman terms, of the burgus-type), “Festungsanlagen der Eisenzeit II” (279 fig. 30, castella), and “Landwirtschaftliche Anlagen der Eisenzeit II” (285 fig. 32, villae rusticae). The archaeological section concludes with “Kultische Einrichtungen” (287–94), which comprise “3.1. Heiligtümer” (temples, 287–92), “3.2. Schrein” (292; two more temple models are mentioned—and, unfortunately, not illustrated—of which at least one is provenanced), and “3.3. Figurinen” (293–94, no illustrations). The last chance to present and discuss Moabite religious iconography comprehensively is missed, as is the author’s aim to present “alle greifbaren Hinterlassenschaften…, die Einblicke in die Religion der Moabiter zu geben vermögen” (287). The new temple at Ataroth, dated by the excavator to the late tenth century (287), provides another argument for Finkelstein’s low chronology, for historically the only candidates for its first construction are Omri or, more likely, Ahab.

Chapter 4, “Zusammenfassung und Ausblick auf die Besiedlungsgeschichte Moabs” (295–306) only summarizes section “C. Archäologischer Befund” and the positions of Routledge, van der Steen, and others, again without regard for the various theoretical backgrounds of those presently involved in Moabite research. There is hardly a connection between the data presented before and the interpretations offered here. A cluster analyses of the map visualizing Moabite settlement in the Iron I period (296) by the naked eye, even without elaborate nearest-neighbor-analysis, shows two tribal settlement clusters north of the Arnon River, which coincide with the territories of Reuben (around the town of Nebo) and Gad (around Dibon) according to Wüst (1975b), and at least three on the Kerak Plateau. Both Reuben and Gad appear highly segmentized into clans, both by clustering and by transgressing the maximal circumference of endogamy. A more detailed study of the clan structure of the five (or more) tribes on this map is impeded by the suppression of any indication of settlement size categories. None of these observations is found in the text; quite on the contrary: “Die soziale

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Instabilität und Brüchigkeit dieser frühisenzeitlichen Gesellschaft schließt ein tribales politisches System faktisch aus” (300). As a student of tribal societies might be aware of, “social/political instability” is both a presupposition and a characteristic of tribal societies (which, contrary to 300 n. 489, has nothing to do with the “settlement of nomads”). The author’s map for the Iron II period (302 fig. 35)12 shows the same five tribal clusters already known from Iron I and, in addition, three more along the eastern fringe of the Kerak Plateau. The map contradicts blatantly the discontinuity between Iron I and II suggested on 29913 and the author’s assumption of a “strong central power” from the ninth century onward (305), followed by a retribalization of the area after the fall of the “Moabite national state” (306). There is nothing in the archeological as well as in the epigraphical evidence (which shows a tribal society using a variety of Canaanite languages/dialects) that shows a Moabite “Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl” that could have “eroded” (306) after the kingdom’s fall—especially not yet in the ninth century, where the Mesha Stela does not “document … a high degree of literacy” but, on the contrary, incipient literacy in various forms (Mesha’s scribes could write but could not yet compose). How much of a “central state” existed in Moab in the ninth or seventh centuries is not a question of texts and their exegesis but of settlement hierarchies and rank-size indices. The overall evidence is very much in favor of Steiner’s (2001) theory of parallel existences of the “state” and the tribal society (rejected on 305 n. 508), which fits well the empirical evidence from the Near East (including the kingdoms of Israel and Judah) and the eastern Mediterranean from antiquity through the present (now also including modern Greece and Italy), and might well serve as a default assumption in the case of ancient Moab. The notion of all people at all time not wishing anything more fervently than to form a “national state” is a piece of nineteenth-century central European political fiction.14

There is no synthesis of the textual and the archaeological data, nor are the textual and archaeological data contextualized. The establishment of a Moabite state is attributed to Mesha’s genius (100) with no regard to Hazael of Damascus and other international constellations and changes that provided the stage for Mesha to be “genial.” In short, here

12. Ataroth, which according to common knowledge did exist in the Iron II period, is not on the map. Similarly, the map for Persian period settlement (303 fig. 36) does not show any settlements north of the Arnon River, although the text (306) mentions such.
13. Continuity of settled areas combined with discontinuity of individual settled sites again attests to a “fluid,” preurban, and prestate society. See J. Wellhausen’s pertinent remarks on pre-Islamic Yathrib/al-Medînah: “bei geringfügigem Anlass verließ ein Geschlecht sein altes Quartier und siedelte sich an einer anderen Stelle an, wenngleich immer innerhalb des Tales zwischen den beiden Harra. Anbaufähiges Land gab es dort noch genug, und die Hütten, in denen man wohnte, waren ebenso leicht aufgebaut wie abgerissen” (Medina vor dem Islam, in vol. 4 of Skizzen und Vorarbeiten [Berlin, 1889], 1–64, here 21).
is no history, only an up-to-date collection of data and a review of research pertaining to Moabite history. Useful as this will be for some time, the monograph mainly documents a methodological deficiency quite common among “ancient historians”: the misguided belief that one can write a history without regard to the ecological and economic chances and limitations imposed on a society at a given moment, without an anthropological theory of what human dealing and wheeling is all about, and without some sense of macro-history. The settlement rise in the Negev during the Iron I period has been explained by changes in rainfall patterns. Does the same reason apply to Moab? The question raised by Knauf (1992a)—Why is statehood, despite favorable ecologic conditions, absent from Moab for extended periods?—does not find an answer in this book, but it can now be partially addressed by an approach coordinating the development of the Moabite periphery with the Mediterranean core.15

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centuries</th>
<th>Mediterranean economy</th>
<th>Settlement in Moab</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17–12 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Very low to low</td>
<td>Very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–10</td>
<td>Nonexistent</td>
<td>Very low to low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9–7</td>
<td>Very low to low</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>6–3</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
<td>Medium to very low</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 B.C.E.—2 C.E.</td>
<td>High to very high</td>
<td>Medium to high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–6</td>
<td>High to medium</td>
<td>High to very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>Very low to low</td>
<td>High to medium</td>
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<tr>
<td>9–15</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
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With the exception of the “Iron I” and “Neo-Babylonian/Early Persian” anomalies, which afflict the whole of the Southern Levant, the settlement curve for Moab until late antiquity follows fairly exactly the Mediterranean economy, sometimes with a time lag of one phase. This behavior of peripheries seems to be the rule rather than an exception; it also shows up, for example, in the economy of Roman Gaul and Palmyra. The long-term comparison of settlement activity in Moab contradicts the last sentence of the book:

‘Dieser in der Folgezeit [sc. after the demise of the Moabite kingdom] wieder ausschliesslich tribal besiedelte Landstrich erreichte zudem nie mehr die kulturelle Blüte wie in der Eisenzeit II.’ According to this reviewer’s knowledge, the number of settlements, settled area, number of population, intensity of administration, highest walled volumen, and the GNP were much higher in Moab during the Roman-Byzantine-Early Islamic periods than in the Middle Islamic period (Ayyubid/Mameluke), and in the Middle Islamic period still higher than in the Iron Age.

The bibliography (307–67) is extensive but pays no regard to political anthropology and macro-history. From T. E. Levy, ed., The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land (1995), only the article on Ammon, Moab, and Edom is listed (with the date 1998); from A. Musil’s magisterial Arabia Petraea, only the first volume (the travelogue on Moab), not the third, the ethnography, which illustrates marvelously an agricultural tribal society under the constraints of recently reappearing, but still largely absent, statehood. The discussion on statehood in Israel (with I. Finkelstein, M. Niemann, and others) is ignored, though it would teach something about statehood in Moab, too. So is the chronology debate, now on the brink of being settled;16 “1200–1000” for Iron I is now obsolete, regardless of which one of the proposals from A. Mazar to I. Sharon one favors. If Israel in Transition I (see n. 15) appeared too late to be considered, R. B Coote and K. W. Whitelam, The Emergence of Early Israel in Historical Perspective (1987), might have demonstrated the usefulness of a world-systems approach to the author and might have inspired him to look for explanations for the rise and fall of cultures and civilization in Moab beyond that rather small section of the ancient world.
