



The Civilization of the Moabites

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THE CIVILIZATION OF THE MOABITES

DURING the months of May, June and July, 1933, the writer was engaged in an archaeological survey of that part of Transjordan which in ancient times was the territory of Moab. The survey was carried out on behalf of the American School of Oriental Research, Jerusalem, with the active coöperation of the Transjordan Department of Antiquities, which was represented by its Director, Mr. George Horsfield, and also by Mr. R. G. Head, and by Mrs. George Horsfield. An important Bronze Age trade-route, lined by ancient fortified cities, dating from about 2000 B.C. was discovered, extending along both sides of the Wâdī el Môjib, and was traced from el-Lehûn and Balû'ah as far southward as Ader. The largest of the Bronze Age sites was discovered immediately behind the great Roman camp of



FIG. 1.—BRONZE AGE MONOLITHS PROBABLY OF A SACRED CHARACTER
AT LEJJÛN IN TRANSJORDAN

Lejjûn. Directly west of 'Ain Lejjûn, on the slope and top of the hill which rises behind it, is a tremendous walled Bronze Age site. It is oriented east and west, and measures approximately seven hundred and fifty by two hundred and fifty metres. On the northeastern slope, a part of the ancient city-wall was found, together with the supporting revetment below it. The line of the ruined wall enclosing the site is clearly visible, with towers at various points, particularly on the southern side, which is the most vulnerable one. There is an inner, roughly rectangular acropolis at the southwestern end of the site, with four corner towers, the westernmost one being an exceedingly large one. The slope of the hill between the spring and the eastern wall is strewn thickly with sherds belonging to the end of the third millennium B.C. On the slope below the northwestern corner of the site is a gently curved row of sixteen maşşebôth, aligned north and south (Fig. 1). A number of them have fallen down. They are uncut monoliths, most of them being about a metre and a half high. They probably belong to a sanctuary, which resembles that found at

Gezer by Macalister. These pillars could not possibly be house wall-supports or hitching-posts. They are certainly no later than the Early Bronze Age, and may well belong to prehistoric times.

It may definitely be said that the discovery of these early Bronze Age cities in ancient Moab substantiates the historical validity of the background of the biblical narrative in Genesis 14, which has often been considered as legendary by modern scholars. This account, which deals with the Patriarchal Age, represents the invading armies of the Eastern kings as marching down from the Ḥaurân through eastern Gilead and Moab to the southeastern part of Palestine. The cities discovered, whose pottery remains indicate beyond all question that they flourished in the period concerned, were all on the only possible route the invading armies could have taken, and were most probably the very object of their incursions into Eastern Palestine. It is most remarkable that the biblical records, which were first put into written form about the eighth century B.C., could so correctly recall historical events, which took place fully more than a thousand years previously, and especially remarkable in view of the fact that all the Bronze Age cities which lined the route of march and of trade in question, were destroyed or abandoned about the middle of the eighteenth century B.C. A similar example of the correct oral transmission of historical facts for hundreds of years, usually in poetic form, before they were recorded in writing, is furnished, for instance, in the *Iliad*. Although the *Iliad* has been proven to reflect faithfully events which transpired in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C., it was compiled from older epic lays about the tenth or ninth century B.C., and was put into writing in the sixth century B.C.

It was also possible in the course of this archaeological survey to obtain information about the extent and nature of the hitherto practically unknown Moabite civilization, the history of which seems to parallel that of the kingdom of Israel. The Moabites are now proven to have had a highly developed art and architecture, fully equal to that of their neighbors on the western side of the Jordan. To judge from the pottery found on numerous sites, the history of the Moabites as a settled group extends from about the time of the Israelite occupation of Palestine to the Assyrian conquest in the eighth century B.C. On a line due west from Qal'at ed-Dab'ah, in Transjordan, lies the Moabite city of el-Medeiyineh. It is a large, well defined tell, situated on an isolated knoll, and commands the approach to the Wâdī eth-Themed. Although it was May 29, when our party reached the Wâdī eth-Themed, it still contained large pools of water, relatively near to each other. It was found that by digging little more than half a metre beneath the surface of the wâdī bed, a plentiful water supply could be obtained. There can be no doubt that the itinerary of the Israelites led them to the Wâdī eth-Themed, which is the only possible place north of the Wâdī el-Môjib, where an adequate water supply is available for a large number of people. The proposal to place the station of Beer in the Wâdī eth-Themed seems to be correct, and similarly does it seem justifiable to identify the site of el-Medeiyineh with the station of Mattanah, which is mentioned as one of the halting places along the route of the Exodus, in the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Numbers. The tell, the alignment of which is almost due north and south, measures on the top one hundred and sixty by forty-five metres. About

half way down the slope is a wide ditch or dry moat, which encircles the entire mound. Two walls separated the upper part and top of the tell. Sherds were picked up on the top surface and on the slopes, but very large quantities of sherds, in addition to a number of figurines and bodies of pottery animals, were found on an ancient dump heap at the northeastern corner of the tell. The pottery belongs for the most part to the period extending between the thirteenth and eighth centuries B.C. In addition to types common to sites of corresponding periods in Palestine, there was a new type of pottery, which may be definitely characterized as Moabite,

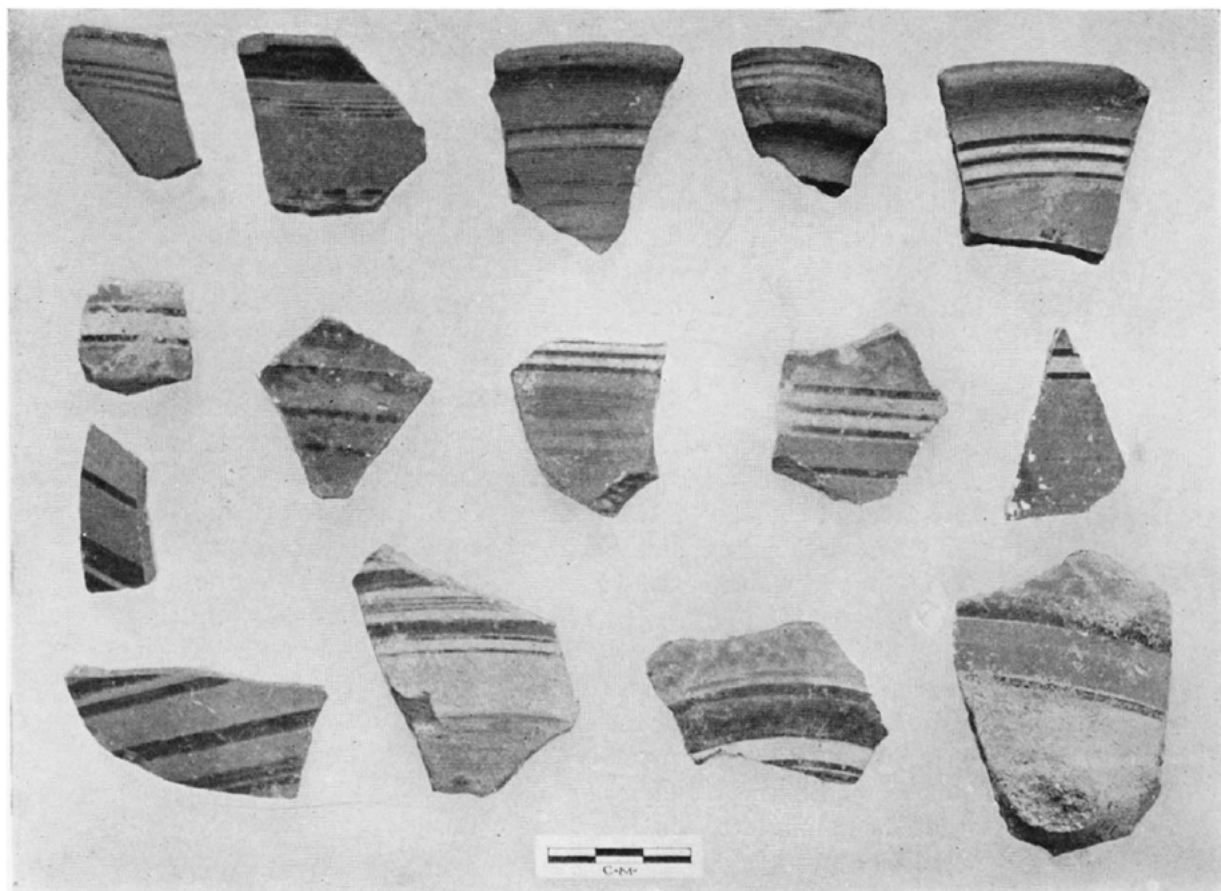


FIG. 2.—MOABITE POTTERY OF THE EARLY IRON I PERIOD FOUND AT EL-MEDEIYINEH IN TRANSJORDAN

because it was found in a dozen different scattered sites in Moab. This new pottery bespeaks a high civilization, and the presence of potters skilled in ceramic craft and possessed of high artistic sense. The sherds belonging to this new type of pottery are covered with a beautiful, rich red or brown slip, highly polished, and further decorated with mathematically exact, horizontal bands of dark brown paint. Sometimes a red slip is put on in separate horizontal, parallel bands. These bands of red slip are often separated from one another by horizontal, parallel lines of dark brown paint, between which bands of white wash were placed after the vessel had been fired (Fig. 2). The type of ornamentation is suggestive of that of the

Cypro-Phoenician ointment juglet of the Early Iron Age in Palestine, but is sufficiently different from it to necessitate a classification of its own. If this type of Moabite pottery is not indigenous, it may well be that it was imported from Syria. Excavations in Syria may throw light upon the problem of the origin of this new Moabite pottery. The larger and coarser of the decorated Moabite sherds have the same general type of ornamentation on a larger and less exact scale than on the smaller sherds, with bands of paint often replacing bands of slip. Among other sites examined, the Iron Age pottery of which is essentially similar to that of el-Medeiyneh, may be mentioned Salīyeh, Jemeil, el-Libb, the larger of the two sites called Za'ferân, Jâwâ, and Balû'ah.

The most important of the small finds at el-Medeiyneh was the head of a figurine, found on the dump-heap at the northeastern corner of the tell, by Mr. R. G. Head.



FIG. 3.—HEAD OF A SEMITIC DEITY OR KING FOUND AT EL-MEDEIYNEH IN TRANSJORDAN



FIG. 4.—HEAD OF MALE FIGURINE FOUND AT BALÛ-AH IN TRANSJORDAN

It represents a Semitic deity or king (Fig. 3). Every feature is clearly and boldly delineated. The head-dress is held on by an 'uqâl, tied in front with a bowknot. Beside and below the large ears extend long locks of braided hair. The pointed beard, which shows traces of having been affixed after the head had been made, extends from immediately below the full, protruding lower lip. The squat nose and large slanting eyes complete the picture. There are two incisions on the right cheek. The back side of the head-dress shows perpendicular lines of dark brown paint, with one such line remaining in the center of the right side of the head-dress. A smaller head of another male figurine was also found on the dump-heap. The prong by which it was attached to the body of the figurine remains intact. Above the bulging eyes of this head are very long, almost semicircular eyebrows. A small pointed beard is visible. The cheek-bones are high and the mouth is represented by a narrow slit. The ears are large, and cow-like in shape. A similar head was

found also at Balû'ah, so amazingly alike, that it might have been made in the same mould (Fig. 4). Half of the body of a figurine of the mother-goddess type, with large breasts, was also found at el-Medeiyineh, in addition to a number of fragments of crude animal figurines. One of the most interesting finds was part of the body of an animal figurine, with the legs and hands of a rider still attached to it. Other fragments of similar horse and rider figurines were found, representing, evidently, one of the most popular Moabite divinities.

North of the Wâdî el-Heşâ, an important fortified site was visited, called el-Medeibî'. It is a large, walled enclosure on top of a small knoll. The walls were made of rough basalt blocks, taken from the adjacent hillsides. They seem to belong to the Early Iron Age. Four square corner towers, a rectangular tower in the center of the northern and southern walls, and two entrances, one each, respectively,



FIG. 5.—PROTO-IONIC CAPITAL FOUND AT MEDEIBÎ' IN TRANSJORDAN

on the eastern and western sides, flanked by two rectangular towers each, make up the complete fortification. The gates themselves were constructed of large, hard limestone blocks. Inside this fortification was a later, smaller Nabataean walled enclosure. Inside the eastern entrance of the earlier structure, a large decorated pilaster capital was found, measuring 1.90 by .87 by .50 metres. The type of decoration seems to be proto-Ionic (Fig. 5). The volutes and triangle are similar to those of the capital found by Fisher at Megiddo, and of the capitals found by Crowfoot at Samaria, and by Maisler at Ramath Rahel. There is also a striking resemblance to the decoration on the back of the lion-censer found by Albright at Tell Beit Mirsim. A few Nabataean sherds were found, but otherwise the site was peculiarly destitute of sherds of any kind, which might have been of assistance in helping to determine the date of the proto-Ionic pilaster capital. While probably no later than the eighth century B.C., it may well belong to an earlier part of the Iron Age.

One of the most interesting sites visited was el-Meşeiṭbeh, which is southeast of Umm er-Raşâş and almost due west of Khân ez-Zebîb. It is a raised platform, about twenty-one metres square, approached on the northern and southern sides in the center by broad steps. The outer walls of the structure are built of roughly cut,

rectangular blocks. The inside of the structure was apparently filled up to the top, which was leveled off to the height of the highest step, with great masses of small stones. After removing some of these stones from the top, however, it became apparent that the structure was not of solid masonry, but that it contained vaults. The certainty of the presence of a vault or vaults in this building was established by the finding of a blocked, vaulted doorway in the north wall, to the west of the staircase. One of the most characteristic features of the many Nabataean sites visited, was the presence of vaulted chambers. The raised platform at el-Meşeiṭbeh is similar to another one, called Ekhwein el-Khâdem, northeast of Meḍeibî', which we also visited. A similar one, which existed once at Lejjûn, and of which there is photographic record, was destroyed when the modern Turkoman village,



FIG. 6.—A NABATAEAN WATCH-TOWER GUARDING THE EASTERN FRONTIER OF THE NABATAEAN KINGDOM

which is now abandoned, was built on the rise immediately west of the spring at Lejjûn. It seems probable that these platform-like structures, which were built over vaults, served primarily as burial places of important personages, and that in connection with these burial places there was practiced a cult of the dead.

The examination of about a hundred and fifty Nabataean sites revealed the fact that the Nabataean kingdom was an exceedingly well organized one, which evidently possessed great wealth, and enjoyed a commerce sufficiently thriving to support a number of very large cities. The eastern frontier of the Nabataean kingdom was guarded by an elaborate system of fortifications and watch-towers (Fig. 6), to man which alone a sizable standing army was necessary. We visited a number of huge sites, such as eth-Thuwâneh, el-Moreighah, and Nikhl, which we were definitely able to establish as Nabataean, by means of the structures and the sherds found in them (Fig. 7). Some of the sites were as large, practically, as Petra. When the Romans conquered the Nabataean empire at the beginning of the second century

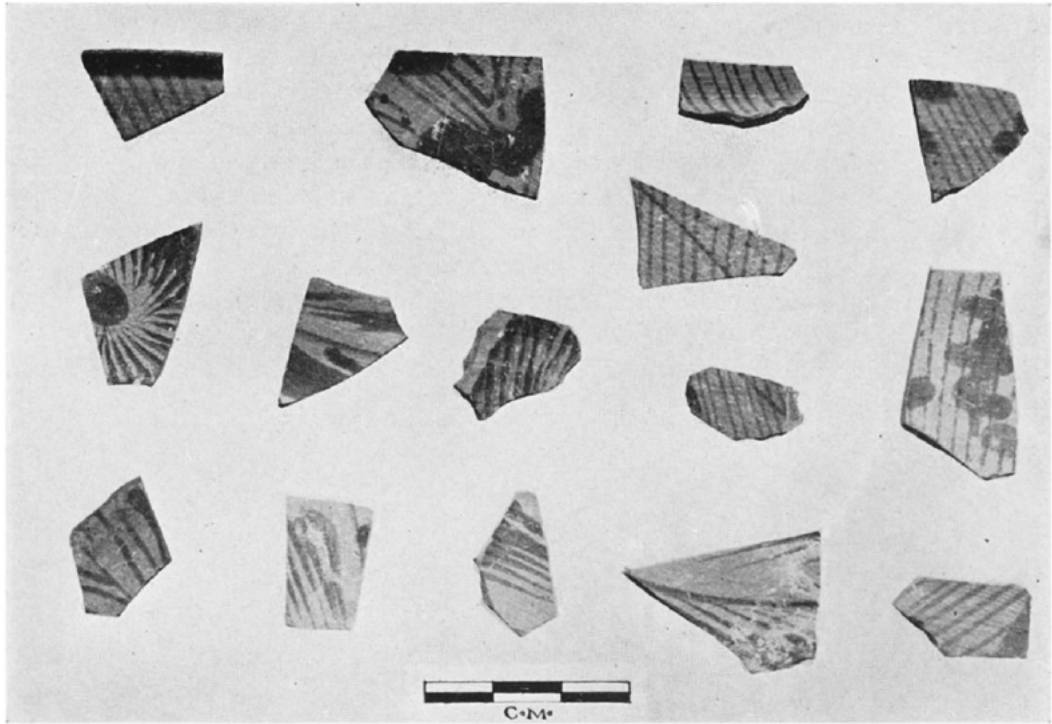


FIG. 7.—NABATAEAN PAINTED SHERDS

A.D., and diverted the trade-route, which went northward through Petra to Damascus, to their own city of Alexandria, the Nabataean kingdom simply melted away, and disappeared completely, leaving ruins of great cities, and long lines of fortresses and watch-towers to testify to their former glory. Many of their sites abandoned then have never again been reoccupied.



FIG. 8.—FEMALE NABATAEAN HEAD SHOWING HELLENISTIC INFLUENCE. FOUND AT PETRA

It is interesting to note that similar fates befell the Bronze and Iron Age trade-routes which were discovered. After a period of prosperity, some great catastrophe or series of catastrophes, occurred, which caused the complete abandonment of entire countries, and the disappearance of their inhabitants. Thus we are able definitely to state that in ancient Moab there was a Bronze Age civilization between the twenty-second and eighteenth centuries B.C., which was possibly destroyed by the Hyksos. There was also an Iron Age civilization, which extended between the thirteenth and eighth centuries B.C. It may have been brought to an end by the Assyrians. There is a complete gap in the history of settled communities in the region visited between the eighteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C., and another between the eighth and third centuries B.C. Many of the Nabataean sites, after their abandonment, were also never again reoccupied.

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