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MOVING BEYOND KING MESHA

A Social Archaeology of Iron Age Jordan

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In 1868, members of the Bani Hamida tribe revealed an inscribed basalt stone resting on the surface of a ruined city named Dhiban to a passing Christian missionary. As epigraphers would determine soon after, this stone possessed a first-person account detailing the statecraft of Mesha, a ninth-century Moabite king (Fig. 17.1). The inscription described the king's wars against the Northern Kingdom of Israel, his subsequent actions to expand Moab's territory, and ambitious construction and irrigation projects. The inscription's decipherment led to great excitement throughout Europe because the text corroborated events described in the Hebrew Bible's 2 Kings 3. For scholars eager to find written sources to narrate the history of Jordan's Iron Age kingdoms, Mesha's inscription provided them with a reputedly factual description of Moab's ninth-century history.

Despite its valuable content, Mesha's inscription has been a poisoned chalice for archaeologists and historians of the Iron Age Levant. The inscription's decipherment inspired the exploration of ancient Jordan in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century would see landscape surveys (e.g., Glueck 1940) and the excavation of major Iron Age settlements, such as the 'Amman Citadel, Busayra, Dhiban, Ḥesban, and many others.[1] This physical evidence, scholars believed, would hopefully fill in the remaining gaps in the historical sequence culled from the Hebrew Bible, the "Moabite Bible" that was the Mesha Inscription, and other chance epigraphic finds. Beginning in the 1980s, the Mesha Inscription took on a renewed purpose as

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17.1. The Mesha Stele (Louvre, AP 5066). The light gray stone is the original portions, while the black stone is a cast reconstructed from a frieze of now-missing portions. (Photo by Mbzt. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)].)

historians and archaeologists turned to writing social histories, using the text to issue general statements about the political and social structure of Jordan's Iron Age societies (LaBianca and Younker 1995). Mesha's characterization of Moabite society as one that consisted of distinct familial identities fixed to territories resonated with evolutionary typologies, such as "tribes," "chiefdoms," and segmentary lineage systems that were discussed throughout

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twentieth-century political anthropology. Believing they had discovered parity between an ancient "emic" worldview and a scholarly "etic" typology, scholars used trait lists built on ethnographic observations of, for instance, tribal societies with pastoralist economies, to reconstruct Iron Age society. One outcome of this line of reasoning has been that politics is the singular lens through which the investigation of Iron Age society is understood. Iron Age persons, their identities and motivations, and their relationships with each other are reduced to static categories, such as "pastoralist," "tribe," or "king." Confusion often ensues when archaeological evidence does not easily fit within such predefined categories or is absent altogether.

The archaeology of Jordan's Iron Age societies presently appears at an impasse, unable to resolve the rigid scholarly ontologies with the thin and difficult to interpret archaeological record. One productive direction is to recognize that Mesha's (or his scribe's) goal was not merely to chronicle events but rather, prescribe a vision for how his expanded kingdom should be understood. Mesha casts west-central Jordan as a space consisting of distinct identities fixed to territories, using phrases, such as "Land of ʿAtarot" and "Land of Madaba," to which groups such as the "Men of Gad" and "Men of Sharon" were assigned. Mesha's goal in his narrative was to integrate disparate segments within a single territorial and symbolic rubric of "Moab" under the sponsorship of the god Kemosh (Routledge 2004: 133–53). Hence, the Mesha Inscription deploys a hegemonic vision of Moab, one that seeks to naturalize the expanded Moabite territory – and Mesha's legitimacy to rule it – by drawing on broadly recognized frameworks of "tradition" that were likely recognized by the stele's audience.

Therefore, by questioning the structuralist ontology that has dominated scholarship on Iron Age Jordan for the past twenty-five years, it is possible to create opportunities to discover the myriad ways that the material world of Iron Age Jordan mediated real and ideal identities and relationships. Scholars may observe how groups assembled themselves in dynamic networks of political, economic, and social relationships that often obscure predefined categories. Given the brevity of space, three episodes are queried in this chapter to understand the diversity and complexity of social life at different moments in Iron Age history. This ambitious mission, it must be said from the onset, falls short of its goals due to the quality and abundance of available evidence. More research is needed if scholars desire to move beyond Mesha's rhetoric to understand the everyday social worlds of Jordan's Iron Age peoples.

COMPLEX COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE IRON AGE I

During and following the demise of the Canaanite polities that canvassed the Levant in the late thirteenth and twelfth centuries, a patchwork of diffuse

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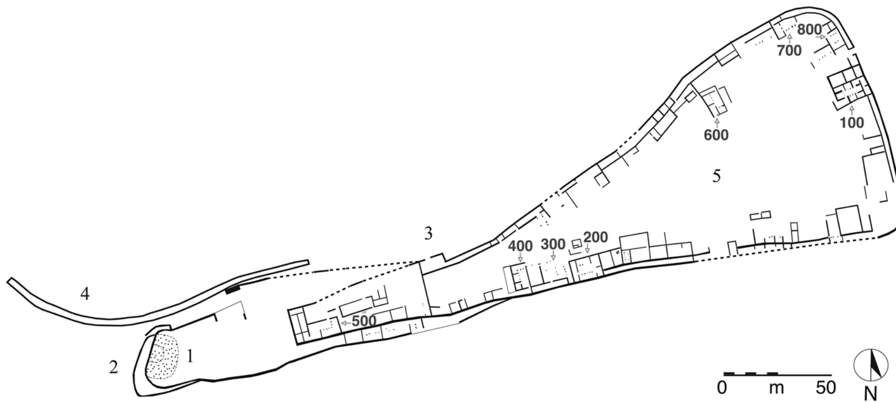

17.2. Map of Khirbat al-Mudayna denoting Buildings 100 through 800: (1) a tower, (2) a moat, (3) a possible gate, (4) a paved pathway, and (5) a courtyard. (Drawing by B. W. Porter.)

settlement systems emerged in venues throughout Jordan. Archaeological investigations determined that each system contained multiple small 1–2 ha settlements that were relatively equal in size and, often, architectural design. The conspicuous absence of rank-size settlement hierarchies within systems suggests that villages were relatively autonomous entities. Yet, the similarities in building design and material culture across settlements indicate communities were aware of each other and likely collaborated when advantageous.

While Iron Age I settlement systems are visible throughout western Jordan (Ji 1995), two systems are particularly well documented. One system is located along the Wadi al-Mujib watershed that drains north and then west into the Jordan Valley (Porter 2013). At least seven settlements emerged and declined between the twelfth and mid-tenth centuries BCE. These settlements positioned themselves on the edges of steep canyons at the bottom of which were thin riparian zones with key resources for subsistence, including water, soils, and wild animals. Excavations have determined that these settlements consisted of domestic residences encircling large empty courtyards. Substantial fortification systems made up of walls, moats, and towers protected these residences (Fig. 17.2). The predominance of domestic residences indicates that households were a basic unit of Jordan's Iron Age I societies, a pattern found throughout the Iron Age Levant. An intra-site comparison of domestic residences, however, reveals that they differed slightly in size and structure. Such patterns indicate a limited degree of inequality in wealth and authority that were likely exacerbated during periods of scarcity, when those households that had limited food reserves grew dependent on other households with more abundant resources (Porter 2013: 104–32).

A second Iron Age I settlement system, quite different in design from the Wadi al-Mujib system, emerged in southwestern Jordan between the twelfth and mid-tenth centuries BCE (Levy, Najjar, and Ben-Yosef 2014). These

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settlements were strategically located adjacent to outcrops of copper ores located in the seasonal tributaries that drained into the Wadi Aravah. The best-documented settlements were studied in and around the Wadi Feinan. Khirbat en-Nahas, for instance, was a mining community whose domestic residences were surrounded by slag heaps, the residue of an intensive copper mining and smelting industry that was a major supplier for the Levant and possibly Egypt.

Archaeologist have interpreted western Jordan's settlements as those belonging to kingdoms that were mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Glueck 1940). Biblical passages present Iron Age I Jordan's societies as politically integrated within bounded territories under the rule of kings, such as Eglon (Judges 3). These passages, most likely written several centuries after the events they purport to describe, overstated Jordan's Iron Age I political organization in order to contrast the representation of ancient Israel as a confederacy of tribes. When this skeptical interpretation of the biblical evidence is considered in tandem with a clear-eyed understanding of settlement systems like those found in the Wadi al-Mujib and Wadi Feinan, it becomes clear that Iron Age I society did not require the guiding hand of a supra-regional political organization to take the forms that it did (*contra* Finkelstein and Lipschits 2011). Rather, these settlement systems are best understood as emergent networks of communities that were based on relationships between households. The fact that households gathered themselves in nucleated settings rather than segment themselves in individual units across the landscape reveals a tacit strategy to create purposeful communities. The short duration of these communities suggests that these arrangements were temporary solutions to mitigate anxieties over food scarcity and household security, or, in the case of Feinan, pool labor resources to maximize copper production.

STATECRAFT, RITUAL, AND MORTUARY PRACTICES IN THE IRON AGE II

Current evidence suggests that most Iron Age I settlements of western Jordan dissipated during the mid-tenth century. An unfortunate gap exists in the archaeological record from this time until the ninth century, a gap that will hopefully be remedied in future research. Whatever developments occurred during this century-long lacuna laid the groundwork for the emergence of ethno-political territorial polities that first come into view during the mid-ninth century BCE. Written sources describing the emergence of the kingdoms of Gilead, Ammon, Moab, and Edom include only a small amount of epigraphic sources (e.g., the Mesha Stele; the Siran bottle; the Qos Gabr seal) and passages in the Hebrew Bible that describe ancient Israel's relationships with its neighbors (2 Kings 3). This thin historical record has driven scholars to

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17.3. Iron Age II fortifications on Dhiban's southeast corner. Ashlars dating to the Iron Age II are the lowest set; Nabataean and Byzantine fortifications rest on top. (Photo by B. W. Porter.)

investigate their capital administrative settlements. Limited ninth–seventh-century BCE archaeological deposits at administrative settlements, such as the ʻAmman Citadel, Dhiban, and Busayra, contain evidence for monumental buildings, gates, and fortification systems. These features simultaneously played practical roles in the kingdom's governance while also standing as powerful symbols of the state's efficacy.

The ancient Moabite capital Dibon (modern Dhiban) stands as one of the most intensively studied and published of the Iron Age capitals. Excavations have yielded evidence of monumental architecture and elite material cultural assemblages that help archaeologists understand the political and economic role these buildings played. Research at Dhiban has determined that the settlement was substantially transformed during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, conspicuously in the decades following the events described in the Mesha Inscription.[2] The northern tell was artificially enlarged at least 0.75 ha and then encircled with fortification walls and towers (Fig. 17.3). A monumental building at least 20 m wide and perhaps as much as 43 m long was constructed at the tell's highest point. Recent excavations have identified large reservoirs on the northern tell's western edge that may date to the Iron Age. An extramural necropolis with several chambers built into the bedrock was also used in the Iron Age II and III. Current evidence suggests that settlement activity declined in the seventh century.

Despite the kingdoms' outward presentation of themselves as socially and territorially cohesive, hidden transcripts in the Mesha Inscription suggest these

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kingdoms were anything but integrated. Laid bare in Mesha's language is his challenge of imposing a new territorial ideal – "Moab" – upon a social landscape characterized by preexisting segmentary lineages residing in already defined territories. Having left no texts behind for scholars to understand their reception of Mesha's and other Iron Age kings' activities, these groups can only be understood through their material remains that have been identified in surveys and excavations. Domestic residences and other buildings have been identified at partially excavated settlements, such as Khirbat al-Mudayna on the Wadi ath-Thamad, Tall as-Sa'idiyeh, and Tall al-'Umayri.[3] The recovered evidence indicates that Iron Age II communities organized their social networks and subsistence practices at the household and community levels, much like the Iron Age I societies described above.

Similar to their southern Levantine neighbors, Jordan's Iron Age kingdoms were each affiliated with a patron deity. *Kemosh* and *Qws* were affiliated with Moab and Edom, respectively, while *Milkom* was likely affiliated with Ammon. The popularity of these patron deities is evident in the onomastic evidence of Iron Age personal names that have been documented in epigraphic sources. Parents would embed theophoric elements consisting of gods' names or nicknames in children's personal names, signaling the family's devotion to the deity. The frequent use of the Edomite deity *Qws*, for instance, in names documented in epigraphic sources found in southwest Jordan and southern Israel attests to the god's prominence in the Iron Age II and III (Porter 2004: tables 1, 2). The evidence suggests that people from all economic and social sectors implemented these naming practices, from ordinary people to the kings and their royal courts.

The worship of these patron deities as well as other deities took place in a variety of contexts dating to the Iron Age II and III. A multi-room temple complex was recently identified at 'Ataruz with several altars, vessels, and figurines, pointing to intense ritual activity within its rooms (Ji 2012). Scholars strongly suspect that a large monumental building (Building A) at Busayra was dedicated to ritual practice based on multiple conspicuous features, most notably a likely shrine room located off of a courtyard on the building's northern half (Bienkowski 2002) (see Fig. 17.4 below). At Khirbat al-Mudayna on the Wadi ath-Thamad, a small enclosed room contained incense altars and figurines that point to ritual activities (Temple 149 [Daviau 2012: 437–8]). A roadside station (WT-13) indicates that ritual was an important element of travel across the landscape (Daviau 2012: 443–6). A *temenos* wall surrounded a one-room building that contained a significant number of vessels and figurines. Large amounts of discarded faunal remains that were discovered at the station point to the practice of animal sacrifice. Small corners in domestic residences contained figurines, small altars, and dedicated vessels that were used in daily ritual activities.

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Similar to the popularity of personal names bearing theophoric elements, the diversity of ritual spaces in monumental buildings, domestic spaces, and even roadside stations attest to the fact that a broad swath of society could participate in the national cult.

Mortuary practices are another important window into the social world of Jordan's Iron Age II societies. Chamber tombs designed for a small number of persons have been identified in extramural necropoleis adjacent to settlements (e.g., Dhiban [Winnett and Reed 1964]). These chamber tombs were carved into the sides of cliffs and usually contained a wide bench for laying out the deceased's body and associated objects assumed to be needed in the afterlife. This mortuary practice may have been reserved for prominent families due to the limited number of tombs discovered thus far. A more common mortuary venue during the Iron Age I and II was the large tomb chambers modified from caves and sinkholes in the karst landscape (e.g., Umm Dimis [Worschech 2003]). Multiple individuals were buried in these chambers; their remains, however, were commingled, making it difficult to distinguish individuals from each other. Similar to the chamber tombs, jewelry, weapons, and metal and ceramic vessels for holding food were interred with the deceased. These tombs likely contained members of extended lineage groups that held ancestral rights to the territory in which the chamber resided. A subtle gesture of ancestor veneration can be detected in an Iron Age I chamber (Cave A4) in the Baqa'a Valley (McGovern 1986) where multiple crania were singled out from other skeletal elements and lined up along the room's perimeter.

THE IMPOSITION OF EMPIRE IN THE IRON AGE III

Jordan's Iron Age kingdoms were not immune to the aggressive policies of Mesopotamian empires that began in the eighth century and continued for the rest of the first millennium. Similar to their Levantine counterparts, the first experience of Jordan's Iron Age societies with empire was through the threat of violence that often saw settlements destroyed and populations deported. Of the four Iron Age kingdoms, Gilead likely had the earliest and most violent encounters with the Assyrians. Written sources and limited archaeological evidence suggest the Assyrian army campaigned in northwestern Jordan in the latter half of the eighth century. Assyrian court documents indicate that Ammon, Moab, and Edom's kings mitigated Assyria's threats of violence with the payment of tribute, taxes, and expressions of loyalty to the Assyrian kings (Weippert 1987). These interactions with the empires influenced Jordan's ruling elites who simultaneously represented themselves as loyal imperial subjects and yet powerful rulers of their kingdoms (Porter 2004). This influence is visible in the monumental building program at Bozrah (modern

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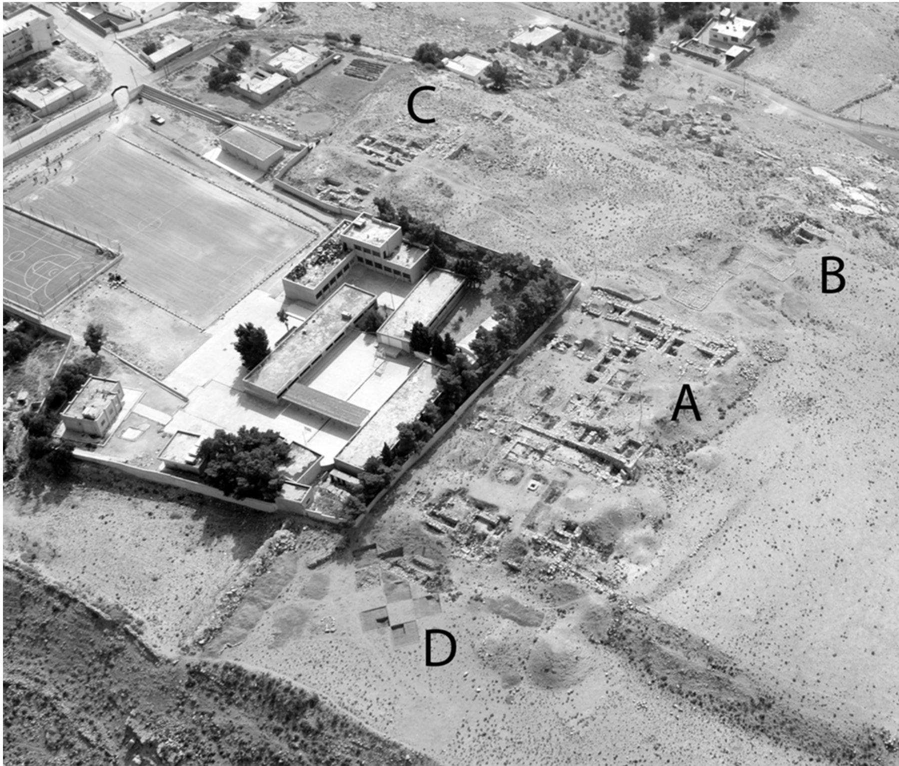

17.4. Busayra (ancient Bozrah), the Edomite administrative capital, looking south over the acropolis. Features include: (a) monumental building (Field A); (b) postern gate and domestic residences (Field B); (c) monumental building (Field C); and (d) domestic residences (Field D). (Photo by D. L. Kennedy. Courtesy of the Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East [APAAME]. Modified from APAAME_20141019_DLK-0287.jpg. [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)].)

Busayra), the administrative capital of Edom (Bienkowski 2002). An acropolis encircled by a fortification system sits atop a well-defended spur with canyons on either side. Excavations identified two monumental buildings (Buildings A and C) with interior courtyards that resemble larger administrative buildings in Assyrian capitals in northern Iraq such as Kalhu (modern Nimrud) (Fig. 17.4). Recent geophysical research by this author and his colleagues has identified additional subsurface features associated with these monumental buildings that await study (Brown et al. 2016).

The economic stability of the so-called *pax Assyriaca* that lasted much of the seventh century saw the development of international markets that crossed the Levant, linking the Mediterranean Basin with Mesopotamia. Jordan's agropastoralist and craft economies participated in these networks. Many areas saw the expansion of small settlements across the landscape and, at times, into semiarid environmental zones that were less ideal for agricultural production (Routledge 2004: 192–201). The presence of loom weights

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in settlements such as Mudeibi (Wade and Mattingly 2003) and Jawa (Daviau 2002: 180–201) attest to the presence of, and possibly increase in, weaving activities and the production of finished textiles from readily available animal wool. Much sought-after prestige goods, such as incense, passed through Jordan on its way from southwestern Arabia to emporia on the Mediterranean coast, such as Gaza. Tridacna shells harvested from the Red Sea were likely carved in southern Jordan into elaborate designs and then traded throughout eastern Mediterranean markets (Bienkowski 2002: 454–8). All evidence suggests that the *pax Assyriaca* opened eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamian markets to Jordan's Iron Age producers. Such markets also brought ceramic and metal prestige objects to western Jordan. Demand for these objects was apparently so great that local imitations mimicking the originals were produced using more common materials (Routledge 1997).

The demise of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of its Neo-Babylonian successors brought a period of destruction and administrative neglect throughout the Levant during the sixth century BCE. Jordan's Iron Age societies were somewhat more resilient compared to their neighbors to the west, who saw their major cities destroyed and populations deported to southern Mesopotamia. Written sources are conflicted on whether or not Ammon, Moab, and Edom were annexed into the Babylonian Empire's administrative system. Excavations at Tall al-'Umayri indicate that the settlement continued well past the decades when other cities (e.g., Jerusalem) and towns had been destroyed. In southwest Jordan, the monumental buildings at Busayra (described above) were destroyed at some point in the sixth century, possibly during the Babylonian king Nabonidus's 553 BCE campaign (Bienkowski 2002: 477–78). The town, however, was resettled soon after these events, likely before the end of the century, and was used into the fifth century BCE.

Compared to the Babylonians, the Achaemenid Persian Empire took a greater interest in administering the Levant upon establishing their rule in 539 BCE. Nevertheless, whatever political and economic infrastructure remained from the Iron Age II kingdoms declined during the sixth and into the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Jordan would not see a resurgence in population levels until the development of the Nabataean kingdom beginning in the first century BCE. On the plateau, many settlements show evidence for limited occupation activity, with small amounts of ceramic vessels and coins found in thin deposits (see Bienkowski 2008). Archaeological surveys also report limited numbers of fifth–fourth-century settlements on the plateau (Miller 1991). Although the thinness of the evidence makes interpretations difficult, all clues indicate that the region's industries continued to produce raw and finished products for broader markets, although not at such intensive levels seen, for instance, during Assyrian rule.

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The situation in the Jordan Valley, however, is more visible due to a greater amount of evidence. Settlement activity was more intense in areas north of the Dead Sea, likely a result of the region's agricultural potential and strategic position on a north–south highway. Excavations at Tell Deir 'Alla, Tell al-Mazar, Tall as-Sa'idiyeh, and other settlements have detected buildings, agricultural pits, and cemeteries dating to the fifth and fourth centuries. The Jordan Valley likely played the role of a bread basket for the emporia that developed along the Mediterranean coast. Cemetery A at Tell el-Mazar provides a glimpse into the fifth-century societies that lived and worked in the Jordan Valley (Yassine 1984). At least 85 graves were excavated with single-individual interments, ranging from infants to the elderly. Biological males and females were differentiated in mortuary commemoration practices. Males were interred in an extended position on their back, usually with metal weapons. Females were interred in a flexed leg position on their side with modest amounts of jewelry and tools needed for domestic production. Some individuals were buried with luxury items that are attested in other Levantine settlements, indicating that the Tell al-Mazar community had access to broader prestige good markets.

CONCLUSION

So much of the past century of archaeological research on the societies of Iron Age Jordan has understandably aimed to reconstruct the political and historical development of the four major kingdoms. Thanks to this research, archaeologists and historians have a good understanding of architectural features and material cultural assemblages. An understanding of Iron Age social life remains limited, however. Scholars still lack an understanding of how, for instance, Iron Age persons crafted identities that may have complimented or contradicted broader collective identities (e.g., "Moabite"). How did social life, especially during the Iron Age II and III, unfold within the backdrop of western Jordan's environment that was an often-unreliable partner in terms of natural resources?

The reason these and other questions have not yet been answered is partly a paradigmatic issue. Scholars have only engaged superficially with the large body of archaeological theory – household archaeology, gender archaeology, the archaeology of ritual and religion, to name only a few – that sets out tools and perspectives for understanding social life in past societies. But even with these intellectual frameworks in place, scholars must develop research designs that draw on rigorous sampling methods that will test their ideas. The past century of field research in Jordan has, after all, shown that the necessary evidence is not easily recovered through traditional excavation methods. With more careful spadework, analysis, and publication in the coming decades, Iron Age social life in ancient Jordan will reveal itself.

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NOTES

1 For a review, see Herr and Najjar 2008.
2 For a summary and bibliography, see Porter et al. 2007.
3 For a list of settlement names, see Herr and Najjar 2008: table 10.3, 4.

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