

(Re)constructing the history of the nomadic population in Bronze Age southern Levant

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Abstract

Bronze Age was a dynamic period in southern Levant history marked by the emergence of urban centres followed by their collapse and subsequent re-emergence. Reconstructing the processes of urbanization implies understanding the interactions between the different components of society (rural sedentary, nomadic and semi-nomadic). The problem with the pastoral nomadic society is that it was not explicitly mentioned in the written records. Most written sources came from the urban centres and were written by biased scribes. The second problem with the pastoral nomads is that they did not leave much archaeological traces. By using analytical methods in comparing all of the available data, both written records and material remains of the Bronze Age sites as well as the anthropological models of the cultural contacts between nomadic and sedentary populations in different region and in different times it is possible to re(construct) the history of nomadic population during Bronze Age southern Levant.

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Introduction

Bronze Age Levant history portrays different components of a rather versatile society. Urban, rural and nomad components of Bronze Age society must be considered when trying to decipher the historical processes of the period.

The period in discussion is most commonly recognized as the first great urban period in the area.¹ Some settlements became urbanized but the majority of the population continued to live in rural settlements. Alongside the urban and rural populations, the region was, and still is, occupied by a variety of groups that live a nomadic lifestyle.

Nomadism takes various forms in different parts of the world, depending not only on the natural environment, but also on the economic, social and political environment (cf. Castillo 2005, 126). Pastoral nomadic groups have existed throughout Near Eastern history, but their failure to leave behind written records or abundant physical traces has meant that their history is poorly documented relative to that of sedentary people (cf. Schwartz 1995, 249).

Interrelations between nomads, semi-nomads, and urban city dwellers along with farmers and sedentary villagers have been considered in many terms and from different perspectives. In order to assess the role of the pastoral nomads of the ancient Near East we must rely on scant archaeological remains, written records of the sedentists and comparative data from ethnographic studies of modern-day nomads.

This paper aims to highlight the cultural contacts between nomadic and sedentary populations in the Bronze Age southern Levant by presenting several interesting aspects of the interactions between urban, rural and nomadic populations in order to re(construct) the history of the nomadic population in Bronze Age southern Levant.

¹It was marked by the emergence of urban centers followed by their collapse and subsequent reemergence all of which is well documented in historiography based on many decades of intensive archaeological research combined with intensive study of ancient archives.

The Bronze Age southern Levant

At the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC the Levant was undergoing a process of urbanization. This is not to say that the entire population moved into towns and it may be assumed that the majority still continued to live in villages scattered throughout the countryside. However, the crystallization of the city or town as a form of settlement is the single most important social phenomenon during Bronze Age in the Near East as a whole and appears to be one of the essential conditions for the development of civilization (Ben-Tor 1992, 85). Various explanations for the origin of cities have been advanced and debated at length in the literature, ranging from the monumental work of Lewis Mumford (1968) to the most recent anthropological works on this inexhaustible subject.²

The definition of the city or town is a subject often studied and much debated. Its intricacies cannot be fully treated here, but it can be generally said that some conditions such as size, fortifications, population density, public buildings, social stratification and a part of the population engaged in non-rural pursuits are essential for the definition of a settlement as urban, though not all of them are required in every case. During the Bronze Age settlements that developed into urban centres were relatively large, surrounded by fortifications, and display rudimentary zoning of sacred spaces, markets and residential areas (Mazar 1992, 108-109).

The important developments incipient in the Early Bronze Age I such as the expansion into new regions, the establishment of a Mediterranean economy, the accumulation of surplus, and the increase in population, reached maturity in the Early Bronze II and III. Only a few Early Bronze Age I sites were abandoned or destroyed while most of them continued into the following phase gradually becoming urbanized.

Most of these urban centres were founded at the beginning of the Early Bronze II period, increasing in size and strength of fortifications in Early Bronze III. In the southern Levant the cities evolved out of an agricultural economy, that is, they evolved from rural settlements of the Early Bronze I period in a way that left some rural settlements abandoned while others grew in size which resulted in the formation of a two or three level hierarchical system in which the largest settlement became an urban centre which dominated over smaller neighbouring rural settlements.³ The urban unit dictated the political organization of the Levant region for the following two thousand years. Nevertheless, the development of agriculture developments, a higher standard of living and the resultant increase in population also led to the foundation of new smaller settlements, farmsteads and villages (cf. Ben-Tor 1992, 96). Because ancient cities were part of an agriculturally based economic system, the centre and its surroundings were interdependent. It is precisely the regulation of the agricultural surplus that played a key role in the process of the urbanization.

² For example Aidan Southall's book *The City in time and space* published in 1998 remarkably combines anthropological archaeology with contemporary urban anthropology.

³ In the three level system those rural settlements dominated over smaller villages and hamlets, cf. Frick 1997, 15.

The concentration of Early Bronze Age settlements in the Mediterranean zones led to the establishment of the so-called Mediterranean economy which was the basis of economic life for thousands of years, from the beginning of the third millennium onward. This economy is based on a combination of goat and sheep herding with cultivation, especially of the olive, the vine, and other fruit trees. In agriculture there is a noticeable increase in the importance of previously known crops such as cereals, vegetables and legumes (lentil, chickpea, bean and pea) and various fruits (walnut, almond, fig, plum, date, pomegranate).

The most characteristic feature of the Early Bronze Age economy seems to have been the investment in large-scale horticultural production, implying a settled and stable mode of life (cf. Stager 1976) as fruit trees and vines can only be reproduced by cloning and do not produce fruit until many years after planting. So, floral, faunal and textual evidence all point to a settled agricultural life style in the Bronze Age Levant.

Agriculture on any scale is bound to be a sedentary occupation, therefore agricultural settlements are mentioned in the context of sedentary inhabitants. But sedentary populations were not the only ones inhabiting this region. Some settlements contain evidence of seasonal settlement by pastoral nomads. It is an established fact that a significant non urban population coexisted with the urban and rural population during Bronze Age (and further on). To put it simply, towns provided villagers and semi-nomads with various spiritual and material services, with a market for their produce, protection in times of danger, and perhaps a political framework and a sense of community. The villagers and semi-nomads, in return, brought their surplus produce into the urban settlements, and played an important part in inter-site communication and the trade network.

Aristotle (1988) describes the different agricultural and pastoral lifestyles in *Politics* "But as there are many sorts of provision, so are the methods of living both of man and the brute creation very various; and as it is impossible to live without food, the difference in that particular makes the lives of animals so different from each other. Of beasts, some live in herds, others separate, as is most convenient for procuring themselves food; as some of them live upon flesh, others on fruit, and others on whatsoever they light on, nature having so distinguished their course of life, that they can very easily procure themselves subsistence; and as the same things are not agreeable to all, but one animal likes one thing and another, it follows that the lives of those beasts who live upon flesh must be different from the lives of those who live on fruits; so is it with men, their lives differ greatly from each other; and of all these the shepherd's is the idlest, for they live upon the flesh of tame animals, without any trouble, while they are obliged to change their habitations on account of their flocks, which they are compelled to follow, cultivating, as it were, a living farm. Others live exercising violence over living creatures, one pursuing this thing, another that, these preying upon men; those who live near lakes and marshes and rivers, or the sea itself, on fishing, while others are fowlers, or hunters of wild beasts; but the greater part of mankind live upon the produce of the earth and its cultivated fruits; and the manner in which all those live who follow the direction of nature, and labour for their own subsistence, is nearly the same, without ever

thinking to procure any provision by way of exchange or merchandise, such are shepherds, husband-men, robbers, fishermen, and hunters: some join different employments together, and thus live very agreeably; supplying those deficiencies which were wanting to make their subsistence depend upon themselves only: thus, for instance, the same person shall be a shepherd and a robber, or a husbandman and a hunter; and so with respect to the rest, they pursue that mode of life which necessity points out." Aristotle's understanding of different strategies of life illustrates his standpoint as representative of the urban population.

As already mentioned, during the Bronze Age we can observe the process of urbanization that was interdependent with the development of an agricultural economy. Animal husbandry represents a crucial facet of this economic system.

There is a variety of ways in which herd animals can be managed, varying from the keeping of small herds within sedentary village communities, through small scale grazing movements in the surrounding landscape, to large scale, nomadic patterns of movement, although there is a lack of evidence that full-scale nomadic pastoralism was practised in the Levant during Bronze Age. Each of these pastoral strategies implies an increasing degree of mobility on the part of the animal keepers and an increasing disassociation between animal keeping and agriculture, which is primarily a sedentary occupation. As Grigson (1998) points out the term pastoralism is widely used in contemporary archaeological literature with a wide variation in meaning, so pastoral systems include such diverse lifestyles as: mixed farming, semi-sedentary pastoralism, semi-nomadic pastoralism to nomadic pastoralism. Agricultural sedentarism and nomadic pastoralism represent different forms of potential economic strategies that certain populations practised in trying to adapt to given geographical and ecological conditions. These economic strategies could easily be combined in the same general area, that is, they weren't mutually exclusive. For example, when faced with severe environmental or climatic difficulties, farmers had the option of adopting a pastoral nomadic life style.⁴ Trying to decipher the history of nomadic populations of the Bronze Age in the southern Levant is difficult because research has traditionally been mostly focused on the urbanization process, but it is precisely the archives from urban centres that provide textual evidence on the subject.

Written records - introduction to nomads

Due to the exclusively verbal practices of cultural dissemination the nomadic populations of the Bronze Age did not leave any direct written records so, in order to study them, we must consider the written records of the sedentary population. However, the important historical archives we have at our disposal today contain very few records of nomads which makes this a difficult task.

⁴ For example most of the explanations of abandonment of the Early Bronze III urban system simply consider the population shift to pastoralism, cf. Issar and Zohar 2007, 139.

Nomadic pastoralists are not explicitly mentioned in Near Eastern written sources until the second half of the 3rd millennium, although the small number of texts prior to this period does not preclude earlier contact with such peoples (Schwartz 1995, 253). The later 3rd millennium texts tend to depict pastoral nomads as groups outside the urban sphere whose behaviour was dangerous and disruptive, a portrayal also found in succeeding periods. In the alternating cycles of political centralization and disintegration characteristic of Near Eastern history, the ancient texts often target nomadic groups as the principal agents of decentralization and destruction.

For example MAR.TU in Sumerian texts from the 3rd millennium BC appear most frequently as a group of people that pillage sedentary territory. Shu-Sin mentions that he had built up a 280 km long wall to stop these attacks. "A wall of the Amorites which holds back Tidnum" (Nilhamn 2008, 26) points to a significant effort to stop the nomadic population infiltrating the territory considered to be part of an urban domain.

Because ancient historical sources were written by urban-based scribes the traditional scholarly view of nomadic-sedentary relations focused on the antagonism between the two polarities. Ancient texts often emphasized the "otherness" of pastoral nomadic groups. For example, a late 3rd millennium text from Mesopotamia *The Curse of Agade* describes the nomadic group Gutians as a group "not classed among people, not reckoned as part of the land/... people who know no inhibitions / with human instinct but canine intelligence and monkeys' features" (Schwartz 1995, 250).

The nature of cultural contacts between nomads and sedentary populations is similarly described in other regions as well, for example Smith (2005, 263) mentions in his work about the evolution and ideologies among the nomads in Arid North Africa "Saharan nomads are notorious for their personal aversion to agriculture. They are, however, quite happy for other people to grow grains for them and to extract their tribute at harvest time."

This rather negative aspect of nomadic society is present in other works as well, for example the description of the ruthless nature of nomads by Issar and Zohar (2007, 102) "Nomadic people have always been warriors, 'lean and mean'; they not only fight continuously with other nomads over wells and pastures, but constantly hover, like birds of prey, on the edge of the fertile fields, ready to pounce on the stores of the farmers at the slightest sign of weakness."

It seems that urban based scribes tried to present nomads as people who are the diametric opposite of urban populations. In the so called Weidner chronicle nomads are depicted as individuals "who were never shown how to worship god, who did not know how to properly perform the rites and observances" in short people completely beyond the pale of urban civilization and, perhaps more to the point, beyond the control of urban political authority (Schwartz 1995, 250).

These representations of nomads rely on an antithesis between nomadic and sedentary ways of life. Dwellers of urban centres and rural people did not look favourably upon groups of

nomadic pastoralists who had established themselves in the fields around the villages or near croplands. It is understandable why such an intrusion would be considered a threat to their way of life. But the presence of nomads on the periphery of the city could present a force able to help in defending the city against a common, more powerful enemy. Some sources provide information on how the nomads were required to bolster the rank of the armies. For example, a document from Mari provides information about drafting the nomadic population in military campaigns of the urban rulers "Go to the heart of the steppe and be accompanied by La'um's employees and the sugagus of the Banks of the Euphrates. In the camps there are one thousand men who have not taken the oath. Take care of the centre of the steppe. La'um and the sugagus of the Banks of the Euphrates should travel all around the camps and the sugagus of the camps should render the oath by the life of the god." (Durand 1998, 502-3)

Mutually dependent relationships between the nomadic and sedentary societies included not only the recruiting of nomads in military services for sedentists. The nomads depended on the sedentary society mainly because their economy was not entirely self-sufficient. Pastoral nomadic economy had to be supplemented with agriculture and crafts. Historical sources demonstrate beyond doubt that a substantial part of their material culture was procured by the nomads from the sedentists (cf. Khazanov 1984, 16-17). The nomads also played a very important role as middlemen in various types of exchange between different sedentary societies. As Ibn Khaldûn (2005) explained it "While the Bedouins need the cities for their necessities of life, the urban population needs the Bedouins for conveniences and luxuries". The role of nomads in the trade was extremely diverse, ranging from mediating trade between sedentists to transportation of goods. Although textual data does provide evidence of the role of nomads in the context of trade, an analysis of selected archaeological data provides further insights into the history of the Bronze Age nomads in the Levant.

Archaeological records - placing nomads in context

As Schwartz (1995) points out, the recognition of pastoral nomadism in the ancient Near East in the archaeological record is notoriously difficult because pastoral nomads tend to leave only meagre physical traces.⁵ Also it can be difficult to establish specific associations of archaeological remains with nomadic pastoralists, rather than with sedentists or hunters. Because of the relatively scant material remains it is also difficult to determine the dating of the archaeological data. These problems are exacerbated by the fact that research was mostly focused on sedentary settlements, while rural settlements as well as the remains of nomads were often ignored.

However, archaeology has advanced significantly and research has shifted to marginal regions uncovering more and more evidence of nomads.

⁵ Such remains could include campsites, hunting traps, animal pens, cemeteries not attached to permanent settlements, or rock art, as well as ceramics, stone tools, and other portable artefacts, cf. Schwartz 1995, 251.

In the context of the well known phenomenon of coexisting urban and nonurban populations in the Levant Bronze Age we could argue that nomadic pastoralists were hardly involved in plant cultivation, i.e. they were mobile to the extent that exclusively practiced animal husbandry. Such nomadic mobility is most certainly evident in the role they played in overland trade routes.

An excellent example of the role of pastoral nomads in the context of trade can be observed in the metals trade of the southern Levant. Recent results of archaeological research in the southern Levant sites provide sufficient evidence of the role of the nomadic population in the production and trade of copper and bronze. It is conceivable that the nomadic population established contacts with representatives of sedentary societies like the Egyptian officials who were likely interested in exploiting the natural resources of the region. Copper was one of the most traded commodities during the Bronze Age and the demand for it was so large that significant efforts were made in tracking all of the available sources of this metal. Notably, the southern Levant region, especially Timna and Faynan were very rich in copper ore.

Archaeological research discovered mines and other remains of metallurgical activities in Timna (Rothenberg 1972, 63). The results reveal large Egyptian expeditions to this area and it seems that a local nomadic population known as Midianites was employed for some of the labour in these smelting sites (Rothenberg 1972, 230-234). Timna was located along the copper trade route that connected the northern part of the Negev with a large urban centre Tel Masos where large scale copper production took place and which seems to have been a meeting point of nomadic populations and sedentary inhabitants.

In Early Bronze I period Egyptian artefacts begin to appear in the south Sinai area and copper from the Faynan region of Jordan can be found in Egypt. Egyptian documents refer to the Shasu people, a nomadic tribe whose economic subsistence was based on pastoral nomadism. Along with the Egyptian documents, recent archaeological data from southern Jordan sheds new light on the relations between southern Levant nomadic population and Egypt (see Levy et al. 2004)

Thirteen smelting sites were discovered containing some 5000 tons of slag which indicates a scale of metal production of perhaps several hundred tons of copper during the Early Bronze Age. This is by far the largest example of copper production during this period in the ancient Near East (see Hauptmann 2000). During the Early Bronze II-III period, when the first "urban revolution" occurred in the southern Levant, radical changes in copper production are evident at the site of Khirbat Hamra Ifdan. Excavations at the site have revealed the largest Early Bronze Age metal workshop in the Middle East, and have yielded thousands of finds related to ancient copper processing.⁶ The data from this site provides vital information for accurately reconstructing Early Bronze Age metal processing as well as the extents of trade

⁶ This unique assemblage of archaeometallurgical remains includes crucible fragments, prills and lumps of copper, slags, ores, copper tools (e.g. axes, chisels, pins), copper ingots, a few furnace remains and an extensive collection of ceramic casting moulds for ingots and tools, see Levy et al 2002, 425.

networks that were linked to significant social changes in that period. The excavations at Khirbat Hamra Ifdan shed new light on the scale and organization of Near Eastern Early Bronze Age metal processing due to the unusually large sample of artefacts related to production activities. The exact nature of the Shasu nomads involvement in the metallurgy production activities is still unclear but their presence in the region is evident from Egyptian records as well as archaeological materials. The role of pastoral nomads in the trade of copper and bronze is evident but future research should focus on other aspects of trade as well.

Conclusion

The Bronze Age was a period marked by the emergence of relatively large urban centres. Accumulation of surpluses and the increase in population also led to the foundation of the new smaller settlements, villages and farmsteads. Animal husbandry was practised not only by sedentary people residing in permanent settlements but also an important economic strategy of pastoral nomads. When discussing the developments of the Bronze Age period in the southern Levant, the urban-rural-nomad network should be taken into account. The differentiation between nomadic and sedentary populations is not always easy to decipher because nomads in general did not leave written records. Also, the archaeological remains of nomadic campsites and temporary settlements were often perceived as remains of sedentary people. That is precisely why the reconstruction of the history of nomads should be considered "between texts and material culture".⁷

The problem with the written records of the period in question is that they come from urban archives. Texts concerning the nomadic populations were composed by urban scribes who often did not make an effort to explain the background of nomadic tribes. Scribes mostly portrayed nomadic tribes as invaders, raiders, in general "other people". Although such records emphasize the polarity between nomadic and sedentary people they offer insight into nomadic culture. Nomads are described as tribal people, loyal to their tribe and courageous. Written sources confirm that they were feared for their military skills. Such portrayals of nomads in the official records could have been used by the urban elites to justify and validate their influence in the cities. Whatever the case, written records are important because they place nomads in specific regions at specific periods of time.

Because of the problematic nature of the literary sources it is important to confirm our assumptions with archaeological evidence. Historically, this was considered unreliable because of the migratory nature of nomads, however due to different strategies of nomadism, ranging from almost sedentary to totally mobile, some of the nomadic populations have left traces such as temporary settlements or campsites which can be found in the archaeological record.

⁷ The title of the conference held in Lisbon 2016 where this paper was presented.

Reconstructing the history of nomads must include their interactions with sedentary populations best exemplified in the symbiotic trade relationships. The evidence from Timna and Faynan testifies to the existence of a nomadic population engaged in copper production and trade with Egypt which is also evident in the Egyptian records.

The presence of nomadic populations in the Levant today, coexisting with our modernized global culture is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of this lifestyle.

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