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# The Fluidity of Tribal Peoples in Central Transjordan : Four Millennia of Sedentarization and Nomadization on the Madaba Plains

Oystein LaBianca

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# THE MIDDLE EAST – UNITY AND DIVERSITY

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## PREFACE

This is the second volume of papers from the Nordic conferences on Middle Eastern studies. The first volume, *The Middle East Viewed from the North*, collected a selection of the papers from the inaugural conference of the Nordic Society for Middle Eastern Studies, at Uppsala in 1989. The present volume includes some of the contributions to the Second Nordic conference, held in Copenhagen 22-25 October 1992.

Our intention is thus to present a cross-section of some of the research on the Middle East being carried out in the human and social sciences in the Nordic countries today. Like all such volumes of papers, it is a "snapshot"; some presenting finished projects, others outlining research still under way. It was, however, our intention that whether finished or preliminary, the papers should present the reader with new insight in the topics at hand. Thus, in spite of its heterogeneous approach, we hope that the volume will present some elements of a common approach across the boundaries of discipline and geography.

The general theme of the conference, "diversity and unity", was a focus on two contradictory tendencies of the geo-cultural entity that we very broadly call "the Middle East". On the one hand, there is an underlying unity of the area, which is however very hard to define precisely. Neither Arabic nor Islamic, there is something that is specifically "Middle Eastern", and several papers in this volume struggle with an understanding of what this "Middle Eastern" identity under different names consists of.

This indefinable union of destiny is on the other hand coupled with a rich cultural and geographic variation, sometimes hidden by the media and other casual observers' stereotypes. The Middle East, as well as the wider "Islamic world", is a conglomerate of different cultures, religions and societies, indeed its identity can only be understood through its variety. Our intention was thus also to bring to light some of the many strands of Middle Eastern cultural, social and religious life that lie beneath the apparent unity of the region.

Thus, keeping in mind the warning from our keynote contributor that uncritical use of such concepts as "variation" and "unity" may make us forget that all these societies and cultures—and the people who inhabit them—change continuously and that we must change with

*THE FLUIDITY OF TRIBAL PEOPLES IN  
CENTRAL TRANSJORDAN:  
FOUR MILLENNIA OF SEDENTARIZATION AND  
NOMADIZATION ON THE MADABA PLAINS*

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*Introduction*

One of the more difficult phenomena with which students of Middle Eastern societies are confronted is the fluidity of the way of life of people in this region. What I am referring to is the tendency of households and whole communities to shift back and forth between living nomadic lives and living settled lives. This tendency is particularly prevalent in the regions of the Middle East which straddle the borders between the desert and the sown. In these intermediate zones, writes Gulick, individuals and social groups tend to "convert" from one to the other way of life (Gulick 1971, 99-100).

As a consequence of being associated with an archaeological project which has been investigating the long-term history of one such intermediate zone—namely the Madaba Plains in Central Transjordan—I have become interested in the phenomenon of fluidity. Specifically, I have been in a position to document and study how and why, over the past four millennia, the people of this part of Transjordan seem to have converted back and forth between sedentary and nomadic ways of living (LaBianca 1990; 1991).

In the few pages which follow I would like to give a brief introduction to our project, including a brief history of the development of the Madaba Plains Project, an explanation of our methodology, and a few highlights of what we have learned so far about the nature of the phenomenon of fluidity in this region. Before doing this, however, I would like to offer an indication of the sorts of scholarly contexts in

which the phenomenon of fluidity has been documented in one way or another in the past.

*Previous research*

While Middle East scholars have long been aware of the phenomenon of fluidity, as far as I am aware, it is not a problem which has been formulated explicitly and examined in depth by any particular discipline or group of scholars. Consequently, one encounters pertinent observations and insights in many different and unrelated contexts.

Perhaps the most common context in which relevant observations are found is in discussions of the process of sedentarization of nomadic peoples. That this process involves people substantially changing their way of life is commonly recognized. It is today a widespread process throughout the Middle East which a number of recent studies have linked to the rise of modern national states (Marx 1967; Awad 1970; Bates and Rassam 1983; Hiatt 1984). While in recent times the process of settlement of a nomadic tribe may occur within the span of just a few decades, in the past it apparently took much longer. Indeed, Glubb has argued that it used to take "an average period of about three hundred years" for a tribe to convert from being camel nomads to being village agriculturalists (Glubb 1938).

Another context in which insights relevant to the phenomenon of fluidity occur is in studies of the problem of nomad-sedentary relations. Perhaps one of the most influential contributors to this line of research is Fredrik Barth (1961; 1973). In his analysis of the Basseri tribe of Iran, for example, he noted a tendency for the richest and poorest members of the tribe to become sedentary. Such sedentarization was not necessarily permanent, however, especially in the case of the poor who for economic reasons were forced to settle. In their case, once it became economically feasible for them to return to more nomadic ways, they would do so (Barth 1961). More recently, Cole (1973), Swidler (1973) and Asad (1973) have followed Barth in viewing nomads and sedentaries as being enmeshed in a single system.

A third context where the phenomenon of fluidity is illuminated is in studies of the social organization of village communities. Gulick has noted, for example, that the "unilineal principle of kinship organization" of the Levantine Arabs ranges greatly in its extensiveness. Thus, in the desert fringe areas "there are groups of villages, each of which is

inhabited by a section of a recently nomadic tribe, so that the whole can indeed be regarded as a 'tribal' group consisting of localized sedentary sections" (Gulick 1971, 99-100).

The phenomenon of fluidity also surfaces in the context of investigations of long-term changes in human occupation of particular regions throughout the Middle East. Adams' research on changes over time in settlement and land use over the past six millennia along the Mesopotamian Floodplain is a classic example (Adams 1965; 1974; 1978; 1981). In this particular instance, an oscillating pattern involving centuries of sedentarization and urbanization followed by centuries of nomadization and desertion of towns and villages has been documented. Similar oscillations over time in long-term settlement patterns have been reported by Rostovtzeff (1932) in Syria; by Glueck (1939) and LaBianca (1990) in Jordan; by Reifenberg (1955) in Israel and by Johnson (1973) in Libya.

#### *The Madaba Plains project*

As its name suggests, the region with which this project has been concerned is the Madaba Plain which is located in the highlands to the east of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. In addition to the town of Madaba, well known for its Byzantine mosaics, this region includes Mount Nebo, Hesban, Um el Amad and many lesser known Jordanian villages and towns. It is a region which is mentioned in the Old Testament in stories involving the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Israelites. It also contains ruins of importance to our understanding of the Greco-Roman, Byzantine and Islamic centuries in Palestine.

The event to which the Madaba Plains Project traces its origins is the launching of the Heshbon Expedition by Siegfried H. Horn of the Theological Seminary at Andrews University in 1968. As its name suggests, this expedition had as its original mission not to study the phenomenon of fluidity, but to excavate Tell Hesban to see what light, if any, it could shed on biblical stories about the conquest of the Heshbon region by the Israelites (Numbers 21; Joshua 13). That the present-day site of Tell Hesban had once been the Heshbon mentioned in the Bible in connection with these events is a claim which most biblical scholars had taken for granted when the project began.

Given the original mission of the Heshbon Expedition, what was produced by the excavations at Tell Hesban was not what had been

hoped for. Instead of extensive remains from the biblical periods, the site produced a prolific quantity of material from the Greco-Roman (c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 600) and especially the Ayyubid-Mamluk (c. A.D. 1200 to 1450) periods. Fortunately, this situation did not lead to abandonment of further research at this site. Instead, it catalyzed re-thinking of the objectives of the entire project. Out of this re-thinking emerged the Madaba Plains Project which has identified as one of its explicit research *foci* to investigate the phenomenon of fluidity in Central Transjordan.

More specifically, what led to this new focus was the dilemma of how to account for shifts over time in the extent to which Tell Hesban was settled and in the intensity with which its surrounding region had been settled. The picture which our research had brought to light was that of a region undergoing repeated cycles of filling up and emptying out of traces of permanent settlements. Did people simply abandon the region during the emptying out phases of these cycles, or did they convert to nomadic ways which left few archaeological traces? Were the people who settled down during the filling up phases of these cycles the descendants of the region's pre-existing nomadic population or were they primarily immigrants from elsewhere? These are the sorts of questions which fuel much of the current research of the Madaba Plains Project.

#### *The food systems methodology*

Central to the research which now is being carried out by the Madaba Plains Project is our food systems methodology (LaBianca 1990; 1991). A few of the assumptions which underlies this methodology need therefore to be made explicit.

One such assumption is that what most people in the past spent their time doing, had to do, in one way or another, with the daily tasks of maintaining their food procurement arrangements. A second is that, of all the activities the majority of men, women and children engaged in the past, none were more instrumental in producing the archaeological record than those related to the maintenance of these arrangements. A third is that the various activities involved in the quest for food are somehow systematically related.

This last assumption is, in fact, integral to the definition of the food system concept: A food system is a dynamic and complex unity consis-

ting of all the purposive, patterned and inter-dependent symbolic and instrumental activities carried out by people in order to procure, process, distribute, store, prepare, consume, metabolize and dispose of food (LaBianca 1990).

Pivotal to understanding the dynamic aspects of food systems variability are the concepts of intensification and abatement. As we have explained elsewhere (LaBianca 1990; 1991), these concepts give an idea of the direction of variability in terms of the extent to which a given region is managed or exploited for purposes of providing its inhabitants with food, shelter and water. Generally, as a region's food system intensifies, its inhabitants tend to become increasingly land-tied due to increased investment in plough agriculture. Consequently their residential patterns tend to become more sedentary. Intensification, therefore, normally is accompanied by sedentarization.

Abatement is said to occur when a given region's inhabitants diminish their reliance on plough agriculture in favor of livestock production within a given territory or homeland. This generally involves adoption of more mobile residential patterns, or nomadization, whereby people, for the sake of their increased investment in pasture animals, turn to seasonal migration between watering places, ploughlands and pasturelands within a given territorial homeland.

The field procedures employed by the Madaba Plains Project in gathering and processing data relevant to its study of food systems and the phenomenon of sedentarization and nomadization include, as already indicated, excavations of several major *tell* sites, excavations of several smaller hinterland sites, archaeological surface surveys, investigations of pertinent historical texts and documents, and ethnographic inquiries among present-day inhabitants of the project area. To these may be added specialists' studies of various assemblages of artifacts such as pottery, stone objects, metal objects, human skeletal material, animal bones, carbonized seeds, and so on.

These various lines of inquiry contribute in different ways to reconstruction of changes over time in the extent to which people invested in ploughlands or pasture animals. For example, investment in ploughlands is reflected archaeologically in renewed settlement activity in formerly inhabited *tell* sites; restoration of cisterns, terraces and watch-towers in the hinterlands of such sites; occurrence in the animal bone samples of larger quantities bones of draft animals, and so on.

Typically such activities slack off during periods when investment in pastoral activity is on the rise. During such periods, people become more mobile, living in tents and caves in different locations according

to seasons. Archaeologically, they leave comparatively fewer traces, although investigations of camping sites, burial sites, storage depots and herding stations provide valuable clues to the populations' activities during such periods. I would refer to our seasonal reports for much more extensive discussion of our methods and results (Geraty *et al.* 1987; 1989; Geraty and LaBianca 1985; LaBianca 1990; and Herr *et al.* 1991 for full details of our work).

### *Highlights of findings*

While our research to date has brought to light a great amount of information about how settlements on a cyclic basis have filled up and then emptied out inside our project area, what I would like to highlight here is what we are beginning to learn about the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms that have made it possible for the indigenous inhabitants of this region to adapt to these cyclic episodes. Specifically, what I am referring to is the relationship between food system fluctuations, sedentarization, nomadization, local-level political organization (specifically tribalism) and the larger world system (especially as seen in externally imposed supra-tribal polities).

Pivotal to understanding this relationship is the age-old notion of tribalism—by which we simply mean strong ingroup loyalty based on variously fluid notions of common lineal descent. As we have examined the oscillations over time in patterns of landuse and settlement in Central Transjordan, we have come to see tribalism as being the enabling sociocultural mechanism that has made it possible for small groups of kin to adapt to a succession of variously effective supra-tribal polities (cf. Bates and Rassam 1983, 242).

For example, over the past three millennia, the indigenous population of Transjordan has had to adapt to a wide range of different types of supra-tribal polities. These included the indigenous Iron Age kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom and the late first millennium B.C. Kingdom of Nabatea. These polities were followed by a succession of externally imposed government bureaucracies, beginning with the Persian provincial administration about two and a half thousand years ago and ending with the Late Ottoman administration in the early part of the present century. Thus, for more than two and a half millennia, Transjordan was "ruled"—with extremely varying degrees of effectiveness—

from Persia, Rome, Constantinople, Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul.

Against the backdrop of these transient and mostly externally imposed supra-tribal polities, tribalism has provided a highly flexible system of local level political organization, by means of which small groups of kin have been able to cope with political and economic uncertainties in an already hazardous natural environment. Tribalism—based as it is on the principle of lineal descent—has provided a system of local-level political organization that has served the interests of those investing in crops as well as those investing in pasture animals.

It is possible, in fact, to posit the existence of an axis along which local level political organization shifted in the past. On the one end of this axis is a comparatively rigid system of lineal descent which typically accompanied increased investment in crops. On the other end of the axis is a comparatively loose system of lineal descent which typically accompanied increased investment in pasture animals.

The reason why sedentarization would lead to development of more rigid genealogies or lineages, is that as kin-groups begin to expend labor on clearing, terracing, ploughing, planting, watering and guarding particular plots of ploughland, their sense of ownership and investment—along with feelings of in-group loyalty and obligation—is heightened. Such sentiments make it harder for 'outsiders' to be incorporated, hence the tendency toward more rigid lineages as people become more settled and "land-tied."

The reason why nomadization would lead to development of looser, more flexible, lineages is that as kin-groups become more dependent on access to widely dispersed rangeland pastures, cooperative alignments which enable them to reach beyond the social and territorial boundaries of smaller blood-related kin groups offer distinct advantages. By means, therefore, of such processes as 'telescoping,' 'fusioning,' and 'grafting,' pastoral nomads continually generate loose and flexible networks of cooperation and alignments by means of which they maintain control over wide-spread rangeland pastures, watering places, camping sites, storage depots and burial grounds. Hence the tendency toward more loose and flexible lineages as people become more mobile and "range-tied" (cf. Marx 1967, 190; 1973; Lancaster 1981; 35, 151; Hiatt 1981; Eickelman 1989, 89).

Significantly, most tribes in Jordan today are made up of a combination of variously land-tied and range-tied households and kin groups (Glubb 1938; Hiatt 1984; LaBianca 1990; cf. Barth 1961). This is because, at any given point in time, a certain amount of sedentarization

and nomadization is continually occurring among individual households, depending on personal circumstances and shifts in economic and ecological conditions within the tribes' homeland. Thus some households may be in the process of becoming more land-tied and settled, others may be in the process of becoming more range-tied and mobile.

The extent to which a particular tribe includes land-tied and range-tied households appears to vary over time. On the one hand, when political and economic circumstances make land-tied production of crops more attractive, the center of gravity—in terms of the tribe's social organization—is likely to shift in the direction of clans and lineages bonded by means of more or less rigid lines of descent. When, on the other hand, circumstances make range-tied production of pasture animals more attractive, the organizational center of gravity is likely to shift in the direction of hierarchically organized groups of kin and non-kin more or less loosely bonded together via lineal descent through a claimed common ancestor.

A consequence of the co-occurrence of the processes of sedentarization and nomadization among Jordan's tribal peoples is that residential patterns representing different segments along the sedentism-nomadism continuum have co-existed in varying proportions in time and space. In other words, at any given point in time and space, nomadic, seminomadic, semisedentary, or sedentary groups have lived together in different numbers (see Gubser 1983, 24-5 for a succinct description of each of these terms). What has changed over time and space is the extent to which each has been represented proportionally. As we continue our research, we shall seek to deepen our understanding of the underlying socio-cultural mechanisms which have generated these different proportions of nomads and sedentaries in Central Transjordan over the centuries.

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