

AND YET, A NOMADIC ERROR: A REPLY TO ISRAEL FINKELSTEIN

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Summary: And Yet, a Nomadic Error: A Reply to Israel Finkelstein

Israel Finkelstein's detailed criticism¹ of my 2019 publication "*The Architectural Bias in Current Biblical Archaeology*"² provides an opportunity to further clarify my arguments, and to deepen the discussion on issues related to the early Iron Age archaeology of the Arabah and nearby regions. In addition to pointing out specific problems in Finkelstein's treatment of the archaeological evidence—the dating of Khirbat en-Nahas fortress, the material culture of Tel Masos and more—I elaborate on my main argument regarding the prevailing methodological deficiencies in the interpretation of biblical-era nomads. I maintain that the chance discovery of a strong nomadic polity in the Arabah, whose existence is known to us solely because of its engagement in the archaeologically-visible copper production activities, necessitates a revision in the common treatment of nomads in archaeology-based historical reconstructions. The basic conclusion is that archaeology is inadequate for providing any substantial historical and social insights regarding mobile societies; and while it might be frustrating to scholars who use archaeology as history, adhering to notions about nomadic existence that have not changed much since the days of William Foxwell Albright is not conducive to the quest for accurate historical realities (to the degree that these even exist).

Keywords: Nomadism – Biblical archaeology – State formation – Edom – Arabah – Copper – Timna – Faynan – Khirbat en-Nahas – Negev Highlands – Tel Masos

Resumen: Y aún así, un error nómade: una respuesta a Israel Finkelstein

La crítica detallada que desarrolla Israel Finkelstein³ sobre mi publicación del 2019

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¹ Finkelstein 2020.

² Ben-Yosef 2019.

³ Finkelstein 2020.

“*The Architectural Bias in Current Biblical Archaeology*”⁴ me provee la oportunidad para clarificar mis argumentos y profundizar en la discusión de temas relacionados con la arqueología de inicios de la Edad de Hierro del Arabá y sus regiones aledañas. Además de indicar los problemas específicos que presenta el manejo de la evidencia arqueológica que realiza Finkelstein—la datación de la fortaleza de Khirbat en-Nahas, la cultura material de Tel Masos y demás—, desarrollo mi argumento principal respecto de las deficiencias metodológicas que predominan en la interpretación de los nómades del período bíblico. Sostengo que el descubrimiento casual de un estado nómade en el Arabá, cuya existencia conocemos únicamente por la relación que entabla con la producción de cobre arqueológicamente visible en la región, requiere una revisión del tratamiento tradicional que se realiza de los nómades en las reconstrucciones históricas que se basan en descubrimientos arqueológicos. La conclusión esencial establece que la arqueología resulta inadecuada para proveer cualquier tipo de conocimiento social e histórico significativo respecto de las sociedades móviles. Aunque pueda resultar frustrante para los estudiosos que utilizan la arqueología como historia, la adhesión a nociones de la existencia nómádica que no han sido sustancialmente modificadas desde los días de William Foxwell Albright, no resulta conducente para la búsqueda rigurosa de realidades históricas concretas (en el grado en que estas siquiera existan).

Palabras clave: Nomadismo – Arqueología bíblica – Formación del Estado – Edom – Arabá – Cobre – Timna – Feinán – Khirbat en-Nahas – Tierras altas de Negev – Tel Masos

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I published a paper entitled “The Architectural Bias in Current Biblical Archaeology” that deals with prevailing methodological deficiencies in the treatment of nomads in archaeology-based historical reconstructions.⁵ Such reconstructions are often presented by archaeologists in a conclusive manner (below), amplifying interpretational biases in related disciplines in which there is less awareness of the inherent difficulties in using archaeology as a historical auxiliary (hence I chose to publish in *Vetus Testamentum*).⁶ The flaws in the common interpretation of biblical-era nomads had become apparent as a

⁴ Ben-Yosef 2019.

⁵ Ben-Yosef 2019.

⁶ Cf. Japhet 2001, who criticizes the unthinking use of archaeology as history, in particular by Israeli archaeologists who engage in biblical scholarship.

result of recent research in the Arabah, and accordingly the paper focused on the archaeology of the region and the emergence of ancient Edom. In following publications I elaborated further on the implications of the methodological conclusions on the study of other nearby polities of potential nomadic origin, including ancient Israel at the time of “the Settlement” and the “United Monarchy.”⁷

A criticism of my *Vetus Testamentum* paper published by Israel Finkelstein in this issue⁸ provides an opportunity to further clarify my arguments, and to deepen the discussion on issues related to the early Iron Age archaeology of the Arabah and nearby regions. Finkelstein worked extensively on the archaeology of the Southern Levantine deserts from this period, and his publications often present synthetic historical reconstructions based on the available archaeological data.⁹ However, although my recent publications indeed challenge the typical means used by archaeologists to convert archaeology into historical narratives (in fact, they demonstrate that in the vast majority of cases that involve nomads, there is simply no reliable way of doing so), it is important to note that the interpretational flaws that I discuss are not restricted to Finkelstein’s work or others of the more “critical” scholars; rather, they cut across all schools of biblical archaeology, skewing interpretations presented by “conservative” scholars to no less effect.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first will discuss the broader question of nomads in biblical archaeology and the new methodological insights, including how they differ from previous considerations of this issue. The second will address specific problems in Finkelstein’s treatment of the archaeology of the south (the Negev, the Arabah and the Edomite Plateau) and difficulties in his historical reconstruction, including examples of what I term *architectural bias*.

⁷ Ben-Yosef 2021; forthcoming.

⁸ Finkelstein 2020.

⁹ Finkelstein often publishes interpretations of new data even before the team working on producing them does (e.g., Finkelstein 2005; Finkelstein and Piasezky 2008). Written in a conclusive and authoritative manner such as they are, these publications often become key references even after the database itself (or the understanding of its context) changes with the progress of the research by which it was obtained.

RETHINKING NOMADS

The extraordinary case of the archaeology of copper production in the Arabah presents a unique opportunity to investigate a nomadic society in unprecedented detail. In contrast to Finkelstein's understanding, it is not that this nomadic society "left no remains behind except for those that represented its mining and smelting activities,"¹⁰ but rather that the nomads' engagement in these activities left behind remains that enabled the study of their social structure and other aspects of their life to a degree that is unachievable based on *typical* archaeological evidence of nomads. It is difficult to detect nomads in the archaeological record—in fact, it was Finkelstein who stressed their invisibility even in desert landscapes¹¹—and even if some remains, such as pens and tent clearings, are detected, it is extremely challenging to precisely date them. Gleaning from such finds any meaningful insights on the nomads' social organization, let alone their historical impact, is basically impossible, and accordingly there has been a heavy reliance on Bedouin ethnography in the scholarly literature.

This includes Finkelstein's work. His contribution to the issue of biblical-era nomads have shaped key aspects of biblical archaeology, most notably those related to the archaeology of the Settlement period.¹² It concerns both historical reconstructions, such as his now widely-accepted view that early Israel emerged from a population of pastoral nomads that occupied the highlands, and methodological considerations, such as the invisibility of nomads mentioned above, and his notion of a "nomadic-sedentary continuum"¹³—namely that the transition into sedentary life was gradual and included the existence of mixed, polymorphous societies (evidently only partially visible archaeologically). However, in attempting to reconstruct social realities, Finkelstein has adhered to and promoted the use of modern Bedouin society as a model for understanding biblical-era nomads in general,

¹⁰ Finkelstein 2020: 12.

¹¹ Finkelstein 1992a (but see a differing view in Rosen 2017).

¹² E.g., Finkelstein 1994.

¹³ Cf. Cribb 1991.

and the Israelite tribes in particular.¹⁴ The gist of this approach and its “romantic appeal” are exemplified in the introduction to the book he edited with Zeev Meshel, *Sinai in Antiquity* (1980):¹⁵

*In the Sinai, history is not only a matter of the past. The current occupants—the Bedouins—, belong in our opinion to the past more than to the present... the secret dream of some of the researchers is to actually meet one day the people of the period they study. A meeting with the Bedouins is almost a fulfillment of this dream and the analogy is illustrative and instructive.*¹⁶

Given the fact that, generally speaking, the Bedouin tribes occupy the same regions that are at the focus of biblical archaeology and biblical scholarship, it is easy to understand how their use as an ethnographic model became so entrenched in both disciplines.¹⁷ However, while the ways of life of Bedouins in the recent past—and especially those documented before World War I¹⁸—might reflect certain aspects of nomadic life pertinent to the *longue durée* of the region, the overwhelming weight given to Bedouin ethnography in research on biblical-era nomads has resulted in a very limited spectrum of interpretational possibilities, hindering any consideration of exceptions. Moreover, even studies that attempt to widen this spectrum by considering ethnography of other nomadic societies from the greater Middle East and textual evidence—such as those published by Michael Rowton in the 1970s¹⁹ (and

¹⁴ See in particular Finkelstein and Silberman 2002.

¹⁵ Finkelstein and Meshel 1980: 7–8.

¹⁶ My translation.

¹⁷ Examples are abundant; noteworthy are the recent books by van der Steen (2013) and Bailey (2018). The use of Bedouins to illustrate Bronze and Iron Age nomads is so prevalent that it is often done without full consideration and sometimes even unconsciously. The Arabic word “Bedouin” is freely used to translate the words for nomads (or more generally mobile people) in ancient texts (e.g., Durand 1998), and the title “Bedouins” is given readily and without explanation to nomads of the period in conference lectures, in-class discussions and even the scholarly literature (e.g., “Shosu bedouin” in Finkelstein and Silberman 2002: 332, probably following Givon 1971).

¹⁸ Rowton 1976: 220.

¹⁹ E.g., Rowton 1976.

cited by Finkelstein to claim that my insights are “decades old”)²⁰—do not provide a satisfactory solution, as they also suffer from relying on (limited) specific cases and extrapolations that do not allow any discussion of possible deviations. In fact, the assumption that ethnography or historical accounts (always written from the perspective of the sedentary) cover all possible explanations for nomadic existence in antiquity is nonsensical, especially given the well-known limitations of the available evidence; and while one can understand the need to base conclusions on some sort of tangible data, in the case of nomads it would have been better to take into account the possibility of unknown unknowns,²¹ rather than to adopt a positivist approach.

Exceptions

Recent research in the ancient copper production districts of the Arabah revealed that exceptions to the prevailing interpretations of nomads should indeed be taken into consideration in historical reconstructions. The early Iron Age archaeology of the mining and smelting sites represents something different from what we thought we knew about biblical-era nomads. It is not simply another “nomadic territorial formation” such as those that had been identified before,²² but rather a centralized polity that was based on a complex society²³ and resembled an early *state*.²⁴ One should remember that until not so long ago the same archaeological record was consensually interpreted as representing imperial activities—the Neo-Assyrian Empire in Faynan and the New Kingdom of Egypt in Timna—and that the work of recent years has

²⁰ Finkelstein 2020: 13.

²¹ After Donald Rumsfeld’s briefing to the Defense Department of the United States of America, February 12th 2002.

²² *E.g.*, Finkelstein 1995; 1992b.

²³ Levy 2007, Levy *et al.* 2008; 2014a.

²⁴ Ben-Yosef 2019, f.n. 23. While it is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss the exact definition of the early Edomite polity in terminology used in social archaeology, it is worth noting that this polity had early on all the characteristics that biblical authors saw in a *kingdom* (and see more in Ben-Yosef forthcoming).

provided even more evidence for the complexity of early Iron Age copper production and the social organization associated with it.²⁵

However, no less important to the discussion at hand is the realization that the only reason this interpretation was possible in the first place is the nomads' engagement in the unique activities of copper production, and that in any other scenario we simply could not have known about the level of complexity of their society, if it was even possible to detect and properly date their mere presence. The quality of the archaeological record—with the thousands of mines that scarred the landscape and smelting camps with large mounds of waste that resulted from repeated visits to the same exact site—provides an unparalleled window into the reality of a nomadic society at the turn of the 1st millennium BCE; in addition to the evidence of systematic, large-scale and sustainable production efforts we can for the first time study in detail thick layers of nomadic material culture, which in Timna also contain organic remains in unprecedented preservation conditions. None of this was available to previous scholars, including those who were working on nomads of the Southern Levant and Rowton and others who studied nomads based on a broader set of evidence.

It is also worth noting that within the *longue durée* of the Southern Levant the early Iron Age witnessed exceptional conditions that were conducive for the accumulation of exceptional power by typically-marginal societies such as nomads. The end of the long-lasting Egyptian hegemony in the region, the desertification of certain areas due to worsening climate conditions and the break of the Bronze Age trade systems and monopolies on certain goods created an opportunity for nomadic tribes to gain power by joining together to form strong political entities. In the case of the Arabah and neighboring regions (the Negev Highlands and the Edomite Plateau) this opportunity also involved the potential to generate immense profit from copper produc-

²⁵ See a detailed summary in Ben-Yosef 2019. Observations based on technology were further discussed in Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2019, and those based on textile remains in Sukenik *et al.* 2021. The latter includes evidence for the use of textiles dyed with royal purple (*Murex* snails) by the nomadic elite in the late 11th century BCE.

tion surrounded by a safe trading zone in a period following the collapse of Cypriot control over this industry.²⁶

Architectural Bias

The case of the Arabah has significant implications for archaeology-based historical reconstructions related to nomads, as it raises the possibility that other exceptionally strong and historically-influential nomadic entities existed without leaving behind any substantial remains. In other words, it reveals an inherent flaw in the prevailing “procedure” used by biblical archaeologists to produce historical narratives, one that generates a bias “in favor” of the settled in the identification and characterization of a society’s role in the history of the region.

To encapsulate this problem I use the term “architectural bias” in a generalizing sense, in which “architectural” represents the sedentary and their particular archaeological qualities. Evidently, nomads were capable of building varied types of stone structures to fulfill changing needs (defensive walls, landmarks, corrals), as is the case in the early Iron Age Arabah and the Negev Highlands.²⁷ However, those would still represent a completely different archaeology, devoid of destruction layers and any significant accumulation of waste—the bread and butter of archaeologists who try to reconstruct social and his-

²⁶ As Finkelstein (2020: 14) notes, Knauf (1991: 185) indeed pointed out the possible pendular connection between the Cypriot and Arabah copper industries, but the recent major revision in the chronology of the mining activities in the Arabah makes his observations obsolete. Finkelstein (2020: 14) uses the missing reference to Knauf in Ben-Yosef and Sergi (2018) to hint that we took credit of an idea which is not ours; however, in that work we focused on studies that took into consideration the revised chronology (including building on the ideas of Finkelstein and Fantalkin [2006]), with no intention of providing a comprehensive survey of the history of research on metal trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. Such a survey would have easily demonstrated that Finkelstein (2020) and Fantalkin and Finkelstein (2006) missed earlier treatments of “the Cyprus-Arabah pendulum,” such as that of Liverani (1987: 70) who already proposed a swing between Cypriot and Arabah copper at the start of the Iron Age.

²⁷ Finkelstein’s (2020: 23) statement that “the very foundation of Ben-Yosef’s scenario is erroneous: The Iron I-IIA desert polity is not devoid of stone-built remains” is probably based on a narrow or literal treatment of the term; I am glad to have this opportunity to provide further clarifications.

torical realities. In the same way, when I discuss the interpretational bias that stems from focusing on the “architectural” I refer not only to the interpretations of the architecture itself (buildings’ monumentality, massiveness of defense walls), but also to the incomparable richness of the archaeological record of the sedentary.

The disparity between the qualities of the archaeological records is nothing new. Nevertheless, because Bedouin ethnography and other preconceptions regarding biblical-era nomads are used almost instinctively to fill the gap in archaeological substance, this disparity is often not properly discussed in research, and in synthetic historical reconstructions it is not fully disclosed, leading to the false impression that the quality of the archaeological record upon which they are based is homogenous.²⁸

The architectural bias is, in its essence, the manifestation of the limited spectrum of interpretational possibilities considered by archaeologists in their treatment of biblical-era nomads, which, as explained above, does not typically include any consideration of highly complex nomadic social organization.²⁹ While examples of the prevalence of this bias are discussed elsewhere,³⁰ in the context of the present paper it is worth noting that even the *conclusive manner* in which archaeologists often present historical reconstructions that involve nomads exemplifies this exact bias; this is because if the interpretational spectrum had been wide enough to contain multiple forms of nomadic

²⁸ A prominent example is the archaeology-based historical reconstructions of the United Monarchy (e.g., Finkelstein and Naaman 1994). It is informative for the discussion at hand in two ways: 1) The underlying assumption that a strong polity (a monarchy) has to be based on a completely sedentarized population is yet another manifestation of the common flat perception of biblical-era nomadic societies discussed above (it has nothing to do with the biblical accounts nor with the archaeological record itself); and 2) the use of the rich archaeology of Philistia to argue for the weakness of the 10th cent. BCE polity in the region of Judah ignores the expected disparity between the archaeological records of societies of completely different origins, one urban/settled, the other nomadic. For a detailed discussion of this example, see Ben-Yosef 2021; forthcoming.

²⁹ As it is well-accepted that many of the Southern Levantine Iron Age polities—including ancient Israel—had their origin in tribal-nomadic societies, the possible effect of this bias on biblical archaeology (and consequently also on biblical scholarship) cannot be overstated.

³⁰ Ben-Yosef 2019; 2021; forthcoming.

existence and exceptional cases, no archaeology-based reconstruction could have been presented so conclusively. Finkelstein's historical reconstructions, including his "alternative scenario" for the early Iron Age Arabah and the emergence of Edom,³¹ illustrate nicely this very issue (below).

IRON AGE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SOUTH AND ITS INTERPRETATION

Regarding Finkelstein's specific remarks on the archaeology of the south (the Negev, the Arabah and the Edomite Plateau), and his alternative interpretation, the following should be noted.

Why Edom

Regarding the identification of the early Iron Age archaeology of the south with Edom³² Finkelstein asks "why not Midian; Amalek, Kedar, Paran, Teman?,"³³ suggesting that all these biblical entities are equal candidates. This is of course a rhetorical question for him (he sees all these references as representing a much later reality), intended to illustrate his argument that the identification with Edom derives from a literal reading of the Bible. But this is not the case. In contrast to all the other biblical names that Finkelstein invokes, it is only Edom that is mentioned in non-biblical sources from the periods under discussion. Moreover, while it is true that the available non-biblical references—the Egyptian (13th cent. BCE)³⁴ and Assyrian (late 9th/early 8th cent. BCE)³⁵—do not provide a specific geographic location within the broader south, it is the fact that they are similarly not restricted to the

³¹ Finkelstein 2020.

³² It is worth noting that in addition to the excavators of the Arabah sites (Levy *et al.* 2008; Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2012; Levy *et al.* 2014b), this identification is now accepted by many other scholars (e.g., Mazar 2014; Hensel 2021: 78; Maeir in press), including Nadav Na'aman (2015), whose approach to biblical archaeology cannot be regarded as conservative.

³³ Finkelstein 2020: 15.

³⁴ Kitchen 1992.

³⁵ Millard 1992.

Edomite Plateau³⁶ that is telling; the emerging archaeological picture of a supra-regional entity, which included the Arabah *as well as* the Negev Highlands and the Edomite Plateau, makes the identification of this entity with the Assyrian reference almost straightforward. The 13th cent. BCE Egyptian source might indeed refer to a narrower region, possibly—as Kitchen suggests³⁷—in the vicinity of the southern Arabah, where the Egyptians were involved in copper production at this time. Following the Egyptian withdrawal from the region in the mid-12th century BCE, the emerging nomadic polity had to be associated with a certain supra-tribal title; the Assyrian reference to “Edom” as one of the subjugated states³⁸ in the days of Adad-nirari III (*ca.* 800 BCE), strongly suggests that this title was indeed *Edom*.³⁹

The difficulty that some scholars have with the identification of the early Iron Age archaeology of the Arabah with Edom⁴⁰ is also related to the gap in the available archaeological data in the 8th century BCE. According to these scholars, this gap suggests a discontinuity between the early Iron Age polity and the late Iron Age Edomite Kingdom (the latter’s identification with the archaeology of the Edomite Plateau is under scholarly consensus). However, this should, in fact, be seen as yet another manifestation of the architectural bias. There is no reason to assume that the gap represents an occupational discontinuity, or even a weakening of the nomadic polity (let alone its total “collapse”).⁴¹ The changing geopolitical circumstances, which brought the copper industry

³⁶ In the modern sense of the term, namely the southern Jordanian highlands.

³⁷ Kitchen 1992: 27.

³⁸ Millard 1992: 35.

³⁹ In turn, the adoption of this title by a nomadic polity whose economy was centered around copper production might support the idea that originally the term referred to a region in which copper production was practiced. For more on the identity creation of the early Edomites—especially in regard to the possible “trade union” role of the emerging polity—see recently Maeir *in press*.

⁴⁰ *E.g.*, Porter 2019: 314.

⁴¹ For example, Finkelstein’s (2020: 24) recent historical reconstruction for the region: “...the kingdom of Edom emerged [...] as an outcome of the collapse of the Iron I-IIA desert copper polity.” See more on the common, simplistic conflation between oscillations in archaeological visibility and changing degrees of social complexity in Ben-Yosef 2021.

to an end, simply rendered the still nomadic population archaeologically-invisible. Moreover, it is also reasonable to assume that some portion of the population (it is impossible to tell the exact proportions) stayed nomadic (namely archaeologically-invisible) even when other portions went through a sedentarization process on the Edomite Plateau starting in the second half of the 8th cent. BCE (when the region was under Assyrian domination). Thus, even for the later part of the Iron Age our archaeological knowledge is partial and skewed.

Admittedly, the identification of the “mute” archaeological record of the early Iron Age with Edom can never be fully confirmed without inscriptional finds from the sites themselves. However, this identification is still preferable to ostensibly “neutral” terms such as the “desert polity” or “Tel Masos Chiefdom” because it provides a *simpler* explanation for associated historical processes.⁴² According to Finkelstein’s most recent historical reconstruction—published as part of his criticism of my work—the Edomite Kingdom emerged in the late 9th century BCE, *precisely* at the time of its first mention as a political entity in a non-biblical source (in accordance with his ultra-positivist approach). This entails that either some previously unorganized “Edomites” replaced the existing population or took control over it, or, as Finkelstein suggests, a mixture of settled and nomadic populations on the Edomite Plateau, which included also those “who were previously engaged in copper production,”⁴³ established there a kingdom called “Edom” in an ultra-rapid process. These are both far more complex explanations than the possibility that the desert polity was already called Edom, even if one assumes a major change in its organization following the cessation of copper production in the late 9th century BCE.

In the context of the current discussion, Finkelstein’s reconstruction of a settled population on the Edomite Plateau in the late

⁴² Incidentally, it is noteworthy that within the broader discussion on the identification of archaeological records with biblical ethnic or political entities, the one discussed here is not less secure than the widely-accepted “Israelite” affiliation of the Iron I sites in the Hill Country, and is far more robust than the identification of the Iron I sites south of the Mujib with Moab, as suggested by Finkelstein and Lipschits (2011).

⁴³ Finkelstein 2020: 23.

9th/early 8th century BCE is illuminating, as it exposes the underlying assumption that a political entity that was strong enough to catch the attention of the Assyrians cannot be based on nomads. The accepted view for the history of occupation of the plateau is that sedentarization there started not before the late 8th century BCE, when the region was under Assyrian domination.⁴⁴ Going against this view, with evidence that is tenuous at best (Finkelstein's references to early occupation at Buseirah and Tawilan can be attributed to nomadic activities), reflects a specific and narrow perception of nomadism, and is yet another example of the architectural bias (in its broad sense, see above).

Biblical References and Circular Reasoning

Finkelstein asserts that my work is based on a literal and naïve reading of the Bible. He writes that “in order to justify the identification of the Arabah Iron I–IIA desert polity with early Edom, Ben-Yosef turns to the list of kings ‘who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites’ (Genesis 36:31–39). He [Ben-Yosef] sees this as ‘authentic materials on Edom before the days of David.’”⁴⁵ Finkelstein continues along this line, stating that “the description of David’s activity in Edom (2 Sam 8:14), is taken by Ben-Yosef as a genuine memory of affairs in the 10th century BCE.”⁴⁶ This is a distortion of the original context of these references, which I was using solely to demonstrate that the archaeological record can no longer be used to negate their historicity.⁴⁷ They, of course, can still be references to a later reality, but to support this one should bring other types of evidence from the varied tools of biblical criticism.

⁴⁴ This is based on evidence from well-studied sites such as Buseirah and Umm al-Biyara (*e.g.*, Bienkowski 1990).

⁴⁵ Finkelstein 2020: 15.

⁴⁶ Finkelstein 2020: 24.

⁴⁷ *E.g.*, Ben-Yosef 2016; 2019; Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2017. The fact of the matter is that in all of my publications on the archaeology of the south, I deliberately *avoid* treating textual issues, as I find archaeology’s potential for any significant contribution to be extremely limited, especially for the periods under discussion here.

For example, to support his claim that Genesis 36 depicts “realities [that are] not earlier than the late 6th or 5th centuries BCE” Finkelstein cites Knauf,⁴⁸ Nash⁴⁹ and Lemaire,⁵⁰ but all of these studies are principally based on the available archaeological data at the time. Knauf summarizes his study:⁵¹

*The ‘Edomite King List’ ... derives most probably from the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 5th century B.C. [...] This is to be concluded from **the history of settlement** in Southern Jordan... (emphasis is mine).*

Nash states that:⁵²

*The present study suggests that the chapter [Genesis 36] reached its unique shape as the result of a specifically Judahite discursive project. [...] New interpretations of **archaeological evidence** from southern Jordan and the Negev reveal [this] context... (emphasis is mine).*

And finally, Lemaire, who suggests that Genesis 36 reflects a late reality related to the Aramaeans:⁵³

[L]’interprétation de cette liste [Genesis 36] dans le cadre de la géographie et de l’histoire d’Édom reste obscure et problématique [Citing here Bartlett 1989’s treatment of the chapter, which is also at least partially based on the archaeology of southern Jordan]. À la lumière de notre rappel de la confusion textuelle classique ‘Édom/Aram’ et de la naissance probable de la royauté édomite vers 846–841, on se demandera tout naturellement si cette liste originale...

⁴⁸ Knauf 1985.

⁴⁹ Nash 2018.

⁵⁰ Lemaire 2001.

⁵¹ Knauf 1985: 253.

⁵² Nash 2018: 111.

⁵³ Lemaire 2001: 115–116.

In the current state of affairs, the muddled interface between archaeology and biblical scholarship can be easily exploited to promote any agenda one might have regarding the historicity of the text.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the only way forward is to deepen our understanding of the limitations of archaeology's application to historical issues; this can be done by bringing to the front epistemological discussions on archaeology-derived historical knowledge, such as the one presented here regarding biblical-era nomads.

The Khirbat en-Nahas Fortress

Finkelstein cast doubt on the 10th century dating of the Khirbat en-Nahas fortress already 15 years ago,⁵⁵ right after its first publication as part of the *preliminary* report on the early stage of excavations there by Thomas Levy and Mohammad Najjar.⁵⁶ More evidence in support of this dating that has accumulated since⁵⁷ did not change his conviction that the fortress was built as part of the Assyrian domination of the region during the late Iron Age (late 8th century BCE or later).⁵⁸ However, while Finkelstein's insistence might give the impression that the dating of the excavators is problematic—and possibly even affected by a desire to aggrandize evidence for 10th century social complexity—the fact of the matter is that the archaeological evidence for this dating, as presented in the final report,⁵⁹ is unequivocal. It is based on radiocarbon dating, pottery reading (indicating construction in the late Iron I) and typology of metallurgical remains. And while detailing the report's data is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is worth presenting here one observa-

⁵⁴ For example, based on the same archaeological record, Finkelstein (2020: 24) “see[s] no biblical references to a historic, pre 8th century BCE Edom,” while Na’aman considers the references in the Book of Kings (that put Edom in the Arabah, see 1 Kings 9:26) to contain genuine memories from the 10th and 9th centuries BCE.

⁵⁵ Finkelstein 2005.

⁵⁶ Levy *et al.* 2004.

⁵⁷ Levy *et al.* 2014a; 2018.

⁵⁸ Finkelstein 2020: 16.

⁵⁹ Levy *et al.* 2014a, in particular chapters 2, 4, and 13.

tion that clarifies the stratigraphy of the fortress's gatehouse, which is the basis for the early dating of the structure.

The *latest* stratigraphic phase that represents activities in the gatehouse is a thick accumulation of ash and other industrial debris, the remains of a metallurgical workshop that was established in this location after the fortress had been decommissioned. This layer (Layer A2), which is associated with substantial structural changes including a complete blockage of the passage into the fortress's courtyard, clearly covers the benches of the original phase (**Fig. 1**). Ten radiocarbon dates are available from this layer; the earliest samples (OxA-18977, GrA-25316) present calibrated, unmodelled 2-sigma ranges that fall exclusively within the 10th century, and the rest span the 9th century. Two dates from the final destruction/collapse phase (Layer A1) are also from this century.⁶⁰ This observation indicates that the fortress must have been constructed in the 10th century BCE (or earlier). Evidence related to metallurgical developments at the site, coupled with other considerations related to changes in the organization of production in the entire region, suggests that the decommissioning of the fortress and the establishment of the gatehouse's metallurgical workshop happened as a consequence of the Egyptian intervention in the days of Shoshenq I;⁶¹ accordingly, the original construction date of the fortress has to be earlier than this event.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that some of Finkelstein's considerations for a late date are shaky at best. Using an aerial photo to conclude that the fortress is late because "it was built on top of the site, cutting into the piles of copper industry waste."⁶² and the notion that while copper production was active it was "illogical to construct a fortress [...] in the midst of toxic fumes"⁶³ cannot be considered sound arguments. The site's extensive area (> 10ha.) witnessed major changes in the spatial organization of varied types of activities throughout the several hundred years of

⁶⁰ Levy *et al.* 2014a: 116. For the raw data see Appendix 2 in the digital supplementary materials.

⁶¹ See in particular and most recently Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2019.

⁶² Finkelstein 2005: 123.

⁶³ Finkelstein 2020: 16.



Fig. 1.

The gatehouse of the Khirbat en-Nahas fortress at the end on the 2006 excavations (Levy *et al.* 2014a: Figure 2.31; photo courtesy of T. E. Levy). “Benches” from the original construction phase are visible on both sides of the central passageway. They are clearly covered by a thick accumulation of ash (arrow), the remains of a secondary use of the structure as a metallurgical workshop in the late 10th and 9th centuries BCE.

the site’s function as a copper production hub. The hilly surroundings made leveling an area at the site’s entrance the easy solution for the construction of a fortress, which might have been used mostly during times of stress. In such times, the open courtyard could have been used as a temporary, protected gathering place for the important families and individuals of the site *as well as* those of the other tent dwellers of the region (similar to the function of the contemporaneous walled smelting camp of “Slaves’ Hill” in Timna).⁶⁴ In fact, except for a vast, open courtyard (73 × 73 m) surrounded by a solid wall with a single gate, the fortress lacks any structures, fitting well a defensive project of nomads.

⁶⁴ Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2017.

Lastly, the remote location of Khirbat en-Nahas, far from any important routes or strategic spots,⁶⁵ makes it hard to explain the construction of a fortress there in a period when copper was not produced in the region.

Tel Masos

While there can be little doubt that the history of Tel Masos is indeed related to that of the contemporaneous copper industry of the Arabah,⁶⁶ the archaeological evidence indicates that it was part of a different political entity.⁶⁷ An important observation in support of this is that in Tel Masos, the characteristic pottery of the Arabah and the Negev Highlands sites—the handmade, coarse “Negebite ware”—is absent.⁶⁸ However, even more telling is the disparate quality of the archaeological record of Tel Masos, which essentially represents a settled society. The site’s most prominent features—exceptionally rich archaeological remains, large stone-built structures, and even the metallurgical workshop that Finkelstein brings up in order to show connections to the Arabah copper producers⁶⁹—are all related to the fact that Tel Masos was a permanent settlement, occupied continuously for several generations. As Finkelstein suggests, the site was probably the place of a “gateway community”⁷⁰—its geographic location indeed supports this interpretation—but it was the frontier of the (*north*)*west* rather than that of the south. There is no reason to assume that the settled people of Tel Masos—with their connections and cultural affiliations to the north and

⁶⁵ The main trade route connecting Buseirah and Hazevah went through Naqeb Dahal, north of the Wadi Faynan area. For a detailed discussion on the regional road network see Ben-Yosef *et al.* 2014.

⁶⁶ Finkelstein 2020; 2014; Fantalkin and Finkelstein 2006.

⁶⁷ See details in Ben-Yosef 2019; forthcoming.

⁶⁸ This point was first highlighted by Ben-Dor Evian (2017).

⁶⁹ The metallurgical evidence at the site represents a bronze smithy (Bachmann 1983: 201), and is not related to smelting (Finkelstein 2020: 17, citing the erroneous description of Kempinski *et al.* 1983: 21). Similar smithies are known from the same period in many sites from the settled areas, including Philistia (see most recently Workman *et al.* 2020).

⁷⁰ Finkelstein 2020: 23.

west—were part of the same society that engaged in copper production, let alone that they were the ones who controlled it.

Similar to the downdating of the Khirbat en-Nahas fortress discussed above, Finkelstein's suggestion to see in Tel Masos "the seat of the tribal leadership" of the desert polity (which he compares to the modern Rawala Bedouins)⁷¹ can be best understood in light of the *architectural bias*, that is, the overemphasis on building monumentality and other aspects of the settled in the identification of social complexity and geopolitical power.

CONCLUSIONS: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In the 1980s and 1990s, Finkelstein pioneered archaeological research on Southern Levantine Bronze and Iron Age nomads, and was among those who emphasized the central role of nomadic societies in certain key historical processes, such as the emergence of ancient Israel in the Hill Country. At the same time, he was the one to (correctly) argue that nomads can be entirely archaeologically-invisible.⁷²

In excavations and surveys alike, negative evidence is sometimes as important as positive testimony. That may be a very frustrating fact for an archaeologist who spends weeks in the sun and dust of the desert; important as his finds may be, one can never know how much of the ancient population of a given area is not traceable.

According to Finkelstein, nomadic societies—like the one he reconstructs in the Late Bronze Age Hill Country—could have existed without leaving any detectable material remains, and even when some "nomadic sites" are found, they probably represent only a fragment of a polymorphous society whose true size cannot be estimated archaeologically. In light of this view, the conclusiveness of his historical reconstruction for the south is confounding, especially given that he does recognize the centrality of nomads to the historical processes in this region.

⁷¹ Finkelstein 2020: 19.

⁷² Finkelstein 1992a: 87.

While I still maintain that the historical reconstruction presented in my recent publications⁷³ fits better the available evidence, it should be noted that the differing views of specific aspects of the early Iron Age archaeology of the south—including its identification with Edom—have little bearing on my main argument, which is methodological in essence. It is related to the interpretation of Finkelstein's "invisible nomads," challenging the prevailing way in which historical knowledge is constructed regarding mobile societies. Recent research in the Arabah copper production centers, which revealed by chance a powerful nomadic polity, has demonstrated that "the comfortable library" (as Finkelstein puts it)⁷⁴ is not enough to fill the gap in our knowledge of nomadic social and political organization, and that generalizations and extrapolations might result in missing exceptional cases.

The mere possibility that other highly complex nomadic entities existed during these periods, only without leaving any remains that can attest to their high level of social and political organization, has far-reaching implications to core issues in biblical archaeology, as it challenges reconstructions based on the prevailing perception of nomads as weak and historically-marginal (a problem encapsulated in the term *architectural bias*). For example, the possibility that a nomadic population (or a mixed, sedentarized and nomadic population, along Finkelstein's "continuum")⁷⁵ created a strong polity in Judah during the early Iron Age, undermines the notion of the regional superiority of the more settled—and thus archaeologically more pronounced—(northern) Israel, an interpretation that has been ardently promoted by Finkelstein in recent publications.⁷⁶ In the same way, there is also no need for a Nimshide domination of (the still nomadic) Edom in order to explain social processes there.⁷⁷

⁷³ Ben-Yosef 2019; 2021; forthcoming.

⁷⁴ Finkelstein 1992a: 88.

⁷⁵ Finkelstein 1992a: 87.

⁷⁶ E.g., Finkelstein 2019.

⁷⁷ Finkelstein 2020: 22.

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