State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East

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Conditions of State Formation at the Edges of Empires: the Case of Iron Age Moab

Bruce Routledge

A book dedicated to state-formation and state-collapse across five millennia of Middle Eastern history is, to say the least, ambitious – and this ambition provides a rather clear challenge to the contributors. On one hand, we must seek out concepts, problems and processes that tie these five millennia together sufficiently to make comparison meaningful. On the other hand, in making those comparisons we must avoid displacing the reality of actual historical contexts with the categories and concepts that allow us to compare polities as disparate as the Ur III state and the Umayyad Caliphate.

Two such general categories are found already in the title of my paper – namely State and Empire, as is the specific historical context of Iron Age Moab. The task with which I have been charged is to examine state formation at the edges of empire, using the case of Moab. The implication being that state-formation in Iron Age Moab was linked to Neo-Assyrian imperialism and that this link may have some general relevance to state formation at other points in the history of the Middle East.

Obviously, I see the relevance of this question – across the Levant and the Jazirah in the four centuries that follow the collapse of the Late Bronze Age political system (i. e. 1200–800 BC), numerous small kingdoms emerge only to immediately serve as both the justification and objective of an Assyrian imperial revival. Additionally, Moab really was at the edge of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, both practically in its position relative to unincorporated territory such as the Hejaz and Egypt (until 664 BC), and conceptually, as the mention of Moab beside other far-flung kingdoms in the Sargon Geography seems to suggest (Horowitz 1993). So Moab presents an interesting case of political processes in a small polity situated near the physical limits of a large expansionist state.

At the same time, despite working on these sorts of issues for most of my academic career, I find generalising in this manner deeply dissatisfying. Virtually all of the categories one might use to organise evidence relating to political developments in Iron Age Moab; terms like state, secondary state, tribe, tribal kingdom, even empire are problematic; not so much in what they define as in how they orient scholarly investigation. In particular, focusing on categories turns our attention away from politics as a social process involving networks of relationships between people and

towards the definition of "things", such as the State, which are not really "things" in any physical sense. When deploying such categories, scholars, with the possible exception of Max Weber himself, seem to have great difficulty remembering the difference between ideal types and actual historical cases.

Think for a moment about the case of Moab. On one hand, during the course of the Iron Age (ca. 1200–550 BC), we can point to real transformations in the expression and representation of political authority in what is now central Jordan, transformations that seem to have had material effects. Furthermore, Moab takes its place among the nations as it were, interacting as a named polity in a similar manner and context to other – often larger and more centralised – polities. On the other hand, it must be admitted that Moab barely meets most of the leading definitions of a state. There is limited evidence for a professionalized army, and even less for judicial or legislative decision making or enforcement. While some titles and offices are attested (especially "scribe"), none of this adds up to a coherent administrative apparatus. Finally, insofar as we understand settlement patterns in central Jordan, the Iron IIB–C periods (ca. 850–500 BC) when Moab is attested as a kingdom, seems to be characterised not by a primary central site but by a number of regional centres of a similar size.

Here our problems become clear. Not meeting definitional criteria for statehood implies Moab is something else, maybe a chiefdom or a tribal coalition, or alternatively it might be some special sub-type of the state, like a tribal kingdom (e. g. Bienkowski 2009; LaBianca 1999; Van der Steen and Smelik 2007) or a segmentary state (e. g. Routledge 2000: 239–244; but see Routledge 2004: 151–152 for a revised view). Note that already our use of definitions and ideal types has drawn us away from the evidence for transformations in political authority in Moab and away from important questions such as "how do some come to successfully claim political authority over others and how is this authority reproduced over time?" In other words, framed in this way we risk dissipating our energies debating the nature of fictive entities rather than actual historical contexts.

This problem of misplaced concreteness is well recognised in studies of the modern state where, as Michel Foucault (2007: 276–277) reminds us, the state is not an entity but a set of governmental practices that are not in fact bounded by particular state institutions (cf. Jessop 2007; Lemke 2007). However, for the modern state one can at least point to a common discourse on "The State"; a reflexive idea that provides what Foucault (2007: 286) termed a "principle of intelligibility" for these governmental practices (cf. Abrams 1988; Mitchell 1999).

When one turns ones attention to the premodern past one finds that the concreteness of the State is not only misplaced, it is also misleading, mistaken, and misunderstood. It is not simply that the State is an invention of Modernity; after all institutions of sovereignty and concentrations of force were not invented in the sixteenth century. Rather, the problem is that the modern compromise in which these (and many other) dynamic processes are summed up in a convenient package, one whose coherence and singularity is actively promoted by an immense web of state discourse, falls apart when we turn to times and places where no historical

agent ever uttered the words "The State". This does not mean that there is nothing for us to talk about in relation to premodern states; nor does it imply that there is no basis for comparing political formations across time and space in the Middle East. It just means that when we do so we must think very carefully.

For these reasons, in what follows I would like to reorient discussion of the key terms "State" and "Empire". Rather than treating states and empires as entities or even definitions, I will treat each as a locus for investigation and a sign-post for common problems worthy of comparative discussion. Essentially, I believe that under the heading of "State" or "Empire" one can define a series of issues that are interrelated and worth talking about through the comparison of different historical contexts. However, I would also insist that these issues, and their interrelationship, will not necessarily resolve themselves in the same way in each context. Furthermore, the variability we see in socio-political configurations between distinct historical contexts is not an unfortunate by-product of realising ideal types in a messy world, rather it is the central historical dynamic that we should be investigating (cf. Yoffee 2005: 193–195).

From this perspective, when we talk about state-formation and state-collapse, we are not talking about the birth and death of an organism. Rather, we are tracking how different sets of practices cohere or disaggregate over time, what effects these practices have, and what processes take shape from the historical realisation of these practices and effects in a given place. In the case of Moab and its relation to Assyria, I want to consider three such processes, namely; militarization, centralization, and identification. In classic State Theory, militarization and centralization feed on one another, creating a kind of "feed-back loop", where military force both requires and enables the central mustering of resources on an ever greater scale (e. g. Tilly 1975). Identification, in the sense of polity defining discourse, serves to explain and legitimise these processes. The case of Moab disrupts this package to some extent in that it is identification and militarization that seem to feed off of one another, while centralization in the classic sense lags far behind.

One might argue that Moab is unusual in this regard because it is a 'secondary state', artificially stimulated to take a state-like form as the direct, or indirect, result of Neo-Assyrian imperial expansion (Knauf 1992; following Price 1978). However, this proposition is not really a solution as it tells us very little about how Moab came to take on a state-like form. Furthermore, I would argue that one cannot treat empires and imperialism as entirely external to state-formation. The Neo-Assyrian Empire was not an entity acting on Moab from the outside, rather it was the global context into which both Moab and Assyria were incorporated and transformed, albeit from different positions and to different degrees. In other words, an empire is not a distinct kind of state; rather, it is a network of relationships that hinge on differences in power realised across differences in culture/identity. From this perspective, the division between internal (local) and external (international) political processes seems rather arbitrary. To understand the implications of these broad generalisations, we must now turn our attention very specifically to the kingdom of Moab in its Iron Age historical context.

1 Moab

1.1 Background

Moab appears as the name of a polity with a king in Neo-Assyrian and Biblical texts, as well as the Mesha Inscription, our only major indigenous source. However, in the first instance it appears to have been a geographical designation, as in the phrase "the Land of Moab", and indeed this is how it appears in its first attestations from the reign of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II in the 13th century BC (Kitchen 1964; Darnell and Jasnow 1993). During the Iron Age, Moab retains the designation of being a "land", but it also acquires a king and an international political identity. It is the formation of this identity that I want to consider first.

One of the mysteries of the modern state is the way in which mundane practices (e. g. taxation, diplomacy, regulation) are linked together to constitute a unified agency (e. g. the State, government, Germany, etc.). Because it does not reside in any given person, this agency generates what might be called virtual relationships; in which on one side we find the State as an agency with no body and on the other side we find people and collectives transformed into abstract legal entities (e. g. citizens and institutions). This is what gives the modern state its 'doubly impersonal' character as something distinct from both those who hold the offices of government and those over whom they rule (Skinner 1989). This then is one example of what I mean by transcendent identification.

On first glance, ancient kingdoms look nothing like the modern State in this regard. Such kingdoms are frequently represented in highly personal terms, either in the person of the king himself (e. g. "L'Etat c'est moi") or through the domestic terminology of the family, household and estate. However, even the most personal of polities involve transcendent forms of identification insofar as they entail the transformation of relationships and people. Divine selection, or even birth, elevated genealogies and astounding acts of self-making success are familiar aspects of royal titulary and propaganda. Such practices continually seek to reclassify the ruler as a different sort of human being, perhaps even to assert that he or she is not, strictly speaking, a human being at all. Less recognised is the collectivization of people and territory into things over which a king could reign. The land, or people, named and made singular, perhaps represented as the children or estate of a ruler, or better those of the deity whom he or she serves, are all familiar devices for transforming relations between people into relations between a ruler and his or her subjects. Therefore, in the case before us, we should be asking "was Moab something that could be ruled, and if so, when and how did this come about?"

1.2 Early Moab in the Hebrew Bible

For the Hebrew Bible, this transcendent identification is rooted not in geography, but in a primordial history parallel to that of Israel. Moab is the eponymous ancestor of a people (Gen. 19:37), who like Jacob/Israel is three generations removed from Terah (Abraham's father). In parallel to Israel, the Moabites occupy the land of

Moab by displacing an indigenous population (Deut. 2:10). Indeed, Moab is slightly ahead of Israel in this regard. By the time of the Israelite Exodus east of the Dead Sea, Moab is already settled with a king, as well as chiefs or officials (śārê mō'ab; see Num. 22:4–8).[1]

In some cases biblical authors limit this kingdom of Moab to the Karak Plateau (Ard al-Karak) south of the Wadi Mujib (e. g. Num. 21:13), while in other cases Moab is associated with the land running north of the Mujib to the northern end of the Dead Sea (e.g. numerous references to "the plains of Moab" as the plateau opposite Jericho at the north end of the Dead Sea). As with many of the references to Moab in the Hebrew Bible, these geographical references are not disinterested but are tied up with Israelite claims to the northern part of this territory, known in Hebrew as the Mishor. Indeed, in the biblical narratives relating to this early period, Moab is consistently tied to colourful, comical or striking stories that are clearly making a point to their readers. Born from Lot's incestuous relations with his daughters (Gen. 19: 30–38), Moab is where Balaam's donkey talks (Num. 22: 21–35), the corpulent king Eglon gets his comeuppance (Judges 3: 12-30), and Ruth shows Israelite girls how a proper daughter-in-law ought to behave (esp. Ruth 1:16–17). While these narratives of early times tell us a good deal about the place of Moab in the cultural imagination of the Bible's authors it is difficult to connect this information directly to internal political developments in Moab itself.

1.3 The Mesha Inscription

Our earliest, and most informative, non-biblical source is an inscribed basalt slab, currently resident in the Louvre, but discovered in 1868 on the surface of the site of Dhiban (ancient Dibon/ Daybon) in what is now central Jordan. Known alternatively as the "Mesha Inscription" the "Mesha Stele" and the "Moabite Stone", it is the longest extant Iron Age inscription from the southern Levant and relates events also detailed in the third chapter of the Second Book of Kings (cf. Lemaire 2007; Na'aman 2007). The stele commemorates Mesha's victorious military campaign against the King of Israel, who was occupying and "oppressing" Moab, and Mesha's subsequent unification of Moab under his own rule.

The stele dates to some point in the second half of the ninth century BC and presumes that Israel under the Omride kings is an established, and regionally powerful, kingdom. As such, the events narrated in the Mesha Inscription are situated after the point at which biblical narratives relating to the Exodus suggest that Moab was organised as a centralised kingdom. Given this situation, the narrative of the Mesha Inscription has some surprising characteristics. Mesha claims that he was king of Moab and that his father had ruled before him. He refers to Moab as the land of the god Kemosh, and he credits Kemosh with both causing the oppression of Moab through his anger with his land, and bringing about its liberation by com-

1 The substitution of "chiefs/officials of Moab" with "elders of Moab" (ziqnê mō'ab) in Num. 22:7, suggests a reference to the community-based councils of elders, known from the Bible and elsewhere in the Near East (see Reviv 1989; Seri 2005).

manding Mesha to act and delivering him from his enemies. However, in contrast to this unified, 'national' view, Mesha describes himself as a Dibonite, draws his resources from Dibon and seems to attach conquered territories to Dibon rather than Moab. Some years ago I pointed out that the syntactical structure of this inscription created divisions in the text that matched specific geographical areas conquered by Mesha and that these areas where named according to the pattern 'land of (city name)' (Routledge 2000: 231-232; 2004: 143–147). I suggested that this inscription was organised according to a segmentary logic in which Mesha overcame the conflict inherent in Dibon conquering equivalent entities by representing Moab as a higher order entity that could unify the territory in its opposition to Israel (Routledge 2000: 237–239; 2004: 143–151).

My interpretation was part of a larger trend to emphasise the fragmented, decentralised, nature of Moab on the eve of the events narrated in the Mesha Inscription (e. g. Dearman 1992; Miller 1992; Younker 1997; Steiner 2001; Van der Steen and Smelik 2007; Na'aman 1997; 2007; Bienkowski 2009) and to question the vision of an early, highly centralised, monarchy in Moab largely derived from simplistic readings of the Bible and the available archaeological evidence (e. g. Glueck 1970; Van Zyl 1960).

1.4 The Early Iron Age in Moab

Archaeological evidence would seem to support this more limited view of early Moabite state-formation. Certainly, the available evidence does not suggest any period of marked centralisation, or any steady evolution of social complexity, in Moab from the end of the Late Bronze Age up to the time of the Mesha Inscription (c. 1200–850 BC). Indeed, during these centuries, sedentary settlement seems to have been quite volatile over relatively brief periods of time.

At the dawn of the Iron Age, in the decades around 1200 BC, sedentary settlement in the "land of Moab" appears to have been very sparse (see Routledge 2004: 78–82). There is at least one striking find that may relate to this period, the so-called Balu'a stele, found on the surface of Khirbat Balu'a in 1930 (Routledge and Routledge 2009 with bibliography). Interestingly, the central figure is depicted in a manner similar to Egyptian depictions of Shasu nomads. In short, although Moab was not empty at the end of the Late Bronze Age, it was also very far from being crowded and many of its inhabitants probably had a relatively mobile lifestyle.

This begins to change with the earliest phases of the Iron Age dating to the 12th century BC, where occupation is more clearly attested in what we might term the core-area of Moab, at sites such as Dhiban, Jalul, Hisban and Madaba. Indeed recent excavations on the tell, beneath the modern city of Madaba, indicate that the city's fortification wall had already been founded (at least as early as Late Bronze IIB) and was in active use in this earliest Iron Age phase (Harrison 2009). In contrast with highland Palestine, it would appear that fortifications are present from quite early in the Iron Age in Moab – pointing I think to the prominence of internecine conflict throughout the period.

With the 11th century BC we see a striking boom in settlement that breaks out of the core areas of the plateau and focuses along the edges of the major wadi systems, especially the Wadi Mujib and its tributaries (see Routledge 2004: 93–108; 2008). These sites tend to share an isolated location overlooking the precipice of a deep wadi; they also share a common architectural pattern of houses arranged in a ring and fortified with a casemate wall. This has led scholars since Nelson Glueck in the 1930s to posit a chain of fortresses guarding an early Moabite state centred on the plateau (Glueck 1970: 157–184). The problem with Glueck's argument is that, on one hand many of his proposed fortresses do not actually date to the early Iron Age (see Van der Steen 2009), while on the other hand, Iron I settlement in the centre of the plateau, the supposed core of Glueck's early Moabite kingdom, is actually less prominent than it is along the wadi margins. Instead, our excavations at Khirbat al-Mudayna al-'Aliya have suggested that this wave of settlement was oriented to exploiting the habitat created by perennial water sources in all of the major wadi bottoms of this region (Lev-Tov, Porter and Routledge 2011).

These marginal Iron I sites seem to have been very short-lived and are abandoned in the decades around 1000BC. Settlement in the next phase, Iron IIA (980–840 BC) is again very sparse and only found on a small scale at large sites in the core area of Northern Moab. The sparseness of Iron IIA settlement in Moab is interesting for two reasons. First, Iron IIA coincides with what is traditionally seen as the initial period of state-formation in Palestine; the ages of David and Solomon in the old 'high' chronology, extending down to incorporate most of the Omride Dynasty according to the new 'Modified Conventional Chronology' (see Mazar 2005).[2] The tenth through early ninth centuries is also when a number of Neo-Hittite[3] and Aramean kingdoms were formed in the Northern Levant. Additionally, it overlaps with the key initial phases of the establishment of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, from the campaigns of Ashur-Dan II (934–912 BC) north up the Tigris river through to Shalmaneser III's (858–824 BC) campaigns into central Syria. Second, Iron IIA immediately precedes the best evidence we have for initial state-formation in Moab – as attested in the Mesha Inscription. So the events in the Mesha inscription take place not against a back drop of steady increase, but rather of volatile expansion and contraction.

1.5 Was Moab a state?

While it is now common to stress the decentralised nature of the land of Moab before Mesha, there is rather less agreement over what, if any, transformations follow on from the tumultuous period of his reign. Developing Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony (Gramsci 1971), I argued that Mesha transformed the "land of Moab" into something that could ruled both through his military success and by casting

2 The alternative "low" chronology (e. g. Finkelstein and Piasetzsky 2010) does not affect this synchronisation as both sides in the debate now agree that the Iron IIA period includes the Omrides.

3 The earliest Neo-Hittite kingdoms, such as Carchemish and Melid predate this by a century or more (Hawkins 1995).

this success in a particular way, one that strategically deployed and transformed local cultural resources (Routledge 2004: 152–153). In particular, I argued that he acknowledged local political units such as the "land of Mehadba" and the "land of "Ataroth", but used a familiar segmentary form of identification to reimagine these as components of a larger Moab that gained its significance in its contrast with Israel and its ownership by Kemosh (cf. Harrison 2009).

Recently, Piotr Bienkowski (2009) has published an extended critique of my arguments regarding the Mesha Inscription. Two points raised by Bienkowski are of particular relevance to the themes of this book. First, in noting that no one in the Mesha Inscription is identified as a Moabite, he argues that the Mesha Inscription does not merely recognise political identities below that of the State (as argued in Routledge 2004: 151), it in fact only recognises these lower order identities (Bienkowski 2009: 12). Second, for Bienkowski (2009: 14) the key fact about the Iron Age kingdoms of Transjordan is that they were epiphenomenal to the primary social dynamic of tribal affiliation and alliance. He does not deny that these kingdoms existed and interacted within an international context, indeed it is this external pressure the provided the catalyst for their formation as extended tribal confederacies (Bienkowski 2009: 9). However, according to Bienkowski, such kingdoms were

> "short-lived, existing in particular contingent circumstances, with limited influence: once these circumstances changed, the "thin veneer of central administration" disappeared, leaving the essentially tribal and dispersed nature of society, occupation and settlement effectively unchanged." (Bienkowski 2009: 14–15)

Bienkowski's first point directly questions the relevance for Moab of what I have termed transcendent identification. His second point questions the relevance for Moab of transformative processes such as militarization and centralisation. Both of his points ultimately question the relevance of the theme of this chapter, since there seems to be little point in discussing state-formation on the edge of empires if nothing of substance actually changed.

Let us then take a closer look at these issues. First, it is important to recognise that our analysis begins, not with a set of presumptions about the nature of Moabite society, but with the specific literary structure and political strategies of the Mesha Inscription itself (*cf.* Thompson 2007). From this perspective, even as we read the decentralised nature of Moab between the lines, we should not forget what is actually written on the lines. The inscription sets up a triumvirate of key terms in the person of Mesha, the god Kemosh and the land of Moab. Mesha uses the verbal form of *mlk* ("to rule") in lines 2–3 to claim that both he and his father ruled over Moab and again in lines 28–29 to claim that either he ruled, or he caused others to rule (see Gaß 2009: 46), over hundreds in the cities that he had annexed to the land. If one takes Dibon to be a tribe rather than a settlement (Van der Steen and Smelik 2007) as Bienkowski (2009: 19) prefers, then the land containing the hundreds in the cities over which Mesha now rules can only be Moab. In lines 4b–5 the term land (*'rṣ*) directly links Moab to the god Kemosh through the statement "Now Omri

king of Israel oppressed Moab many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land". This special relationship between Kemosh as the deity who owned Moab and Mesha as his agent is evident throughout the inscription. On Kemosh's part, he delivered Mesha from "all the kings" and caused him to prevail over his enemies (line 4); returned the land of Mehadba (line 9) and Ḥawronen (?) (line 33) in Mesha's days (line 9); drove the King of Israel out of Jahaz from before Mesha (line 19); and spoke directly to Mesha, commanding him to attack Nebo (line 14) and Ḥawronen (line 32). In return, Mesha built a cultic structure (*bmth*) for Kemosh (line 3); dedicated the city of 'Atharot to Kemosh and Moab (line 12) and Nebo to Ashtar Kemosh (line 17), apparently by killing everyone in both cities; and hauled before Kemosh the *'ryl* (a cultic brazier? See Mittman 2002: 53–59) of *dwdh* (a deity? See Gaß 2009: 27–31) from 'Atharot (line 12), as well the "vessels of Yahweh" from Nebo (line 17–18).

In the aftermath of his military success, Mesha engages in activities across the internal boundaries of Moab. He rebuilds cities and temples in the "land of Mehadba" and probably also in the "land of 'Atharot" and in the vicinity of Jahaz (see site identifications in Dearman 1989), as well as refitting his apparent capital Qarḥo and making a "highway" across the Arnon river (Wadi Mujib). In certain cases, he does this with unfree labour in the form of Israelite prisoners of war (lines 25b–26a). Mesha also settles new descent groups ("men of Sharon" and "men of Maḥrot") in 'Atharot in place of the slaughtered "men of Gad". In other words, Mesha treats all of Moab as his domain and as the object of his actions.

This said, I do believe that Bienkowski is correct to question my use the phrase 'national identity' when arguing that it is in opposition to Israel that Moab is constituted as a "workable and independent national identity" in the Mesha Inscription (Routledge 2004: 150). This phrase immediately calls to mind the personal affiliation associated with modern nationalism and is not what I was referring to in the case of Iron Age Moab. Rather, it would have been better to say that it is in its opposition to Israel that Moab emerges as a viable narrative presence within the Mesha Inscription, one that can thereby incorporate other collectives and serve as the object of Mesha's rule. As we have already seen, Moab is the object of both Mesha's and his father's rule (line 2), of the King of Israel's oppression (lines 5–6), and of Kemosh's anger (line 5). Along with Kemosh, Moab receives the city of 'Atharot as a dedication (lines 10–12) and when Kemosh drives the King of Israel out of Jahaz from before Mesha it is with the aid of 200 men Mesha takes from Moab (lines 18–20). At the very least, within the Mesha Inscription, Moab is represented as the only collective directly opposed to Israel.

To summarise, even though scholars detect signs of decentralisation in what the Mesha Inscription takes for granted (e. g. the existence of relatively autonomous sub-divisions within Moab), the actual claims of the inscription are that Moab is a unitary land, owned by Kemosh and ruled by Mesha. As is already widely recognised, the Mesha Inscription does this using literary genres (e. g. memorial inscriptions) and themes (e. g. reversal of fortunes, divine deliverance, military success and extensive building campaigns) that link it strongly to other Northwest

Semitic royal inscriptions and, less directly, to Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions as well (Miller 1974; Drinkard 1989; Parker 1997: 43–75; Thompson 2007; Green 2010: 95–135). This does not mean that Moab was a 'State' in the sense of some classic definition (e. g. with a monopoly on coercive force or a centralised and autonomous administrative apparatus). However, it does mean that the Mesha Inscription sought a strategic recasting of local politics, transforming cultural resources that were available on hand, such as the idea of a land of Moab.

2 State-formation and Empire

2.1 The 'global' context

If we look at other royal inscriptions from Neo-Hittite and Aramean kingdoms formed in this same time period across the Levant, we see more examples of such political *bricolage* work. There is, for example, no set governmental structure defining over what an Iron Age king ruled. In Assyrian and indigenous royal inscriptions, contemporary Iron Age kingdoms can be defined as: 1) primate cities with a territory, like Karkamish (Hawkins 2000: 72–223); 2) a territory distinguished in name from its capital city, as in the case of Unqi/Patina vis-à-vis Kunulua (Harrison 2001); 3) a group of people, such as "the Sons of Ammon" (Hübner 1992: 243–245); 4) a temporary coalition of kings such as the one that opposed Zakkur in the Zakkur inscription (Millard 2000); 5) a dual entity such as Zakkur's kingdom of Hamath and Lu'ash (Millard 2000); or 6) one kingdom in which a primary ruler incorporated secondary rulers – as appears to be the case for the kingdom of Adana as reflected in the Karatepe inscription (Çambel 1999; Hawkins 2000: 44–68).

Similarly, we see a range of collective terms used to refer to these polities. Phrases such as "Land of X", "City of X", "House of (Dynastic Founder)", "House of (Eponymous Ancestor), and "Sons of (Dynast/Ancestor)" are all used, and in many cases more than one is used to refer to the same polity (see Routledge 2004: 125, Table 6.1). In other words, like Moab, transcendent political identities (i. e. polities) in the Iron Age Levant had to be constructed from the cultural resources on hand in specific spatial and historical contexts. Genealogy, kinship, identity, piety, patronage, and military success were all cultural resources valued, familiar and hence available for reinterpretation in the interests of royal hegemony.

This combination of similarity and difference across Levantine Iron Age kingdoms highlights an important historical dynamic in which external interaction creates equivalency in spite of internal structural differences. By this I do not mean that all Iron Age polities were transformed into 'States' through interaction and in spite of themselves, as suggested, for example, in the model of 'Secondary State-formation'. Rather, I mean that international interaction proceeded as if these polities were structurally equivalent, regardless of actual internal differences. For example, rulers of polities with very different internal structures deployed markers of kingship, such as architectural forms and inscriptional genres, which were shared across the Levant (Routledge 2004: 154–183).

Interestingly, Neo-Assyrian texts had an inherent capacity to represent structural differences between polities using the determinative signs that are attached as classifiers to proper nouns in cuneiform writing systems. In particular, one finds "land" (Sumerian sign KUR = Akkadian *māt*), "city" (Sumerian sign URU = Akkadian *ālu*) and "person/ people" (Sumerian sign LÚ = Akkadian *amēlu*) attached to the named clients and conquests of the Assyrian king. In theory, these could be used to distinguish territorial kingdoms from city-states and tribes. However, although there is a tendency to classify long-lived city-states such as Byblos with URU, determinatives are not used consistently to make such structural distinctions. Moab, for example, is primarily referred at as a "land", but is also referred to as "city" in three of the fourteen known references to Moab in Neo-Assyrian texts.[4] At least one of these examples would seem almost certainly to be referring to Moab as a whole, rather than to a specific city of Moab (Esharhaddon Prism A; see Borger1956: 58–61). Additionally, in another reference to Moab, tributary items are said to come "from the midst" of Moab marked with the determinative for "people" (Sargon II. K 4783 = ADD 928. See Postgate 1974: 309–311).

What seems more important from the Assyrian perspective is the common, preferably lengthy, listing of clients and conquests in tribute and campaign lists; emphasizing the global scale of the king's achievements. As Nicholas Postgate (1992) has argued, the primary division within the Neo-Assyrian Empire was between the "Land of Assur"; territory taxed and administered in the same manner as the home provinces of Assyria; and the "Yoke of Assur", made up of client kingdoms ruled indirectly through local dynasts that provided tribute and military support to the Assyrian king. The implications of this simplified typology extend beyond mere ideology in that there seems to have been some level of regularisation of expectations and administrative practices within these broad categories.

For example, Moab, as a client kingdom under the "Yoke of Assur", sent representatives to deliver tribute at regular intervals to the Assyrian court. Once in the capital, these Moabite representatives mingled with similar officials from across the Neo-Assyrian Empire and were hosted and given dispersements of wine and small luxury items on behalf of the Assyrian king (e. g. Dalley and Postgate 1984: 252–253). The tribute itself included items, such as gold, silver, coloured textiles and horses, which implied an engagement with international networks of exchange and skilled crafting (see Bär 1996). Closer to home, the king of Moab was called upon to provide military support to the Assyrian king. This included providing troops for Ashurbanipal's campaign against Egypt in common with other neighbouring kingdoms (Rassam Cylinder and Cylinder C; Borger 1996: BVIII44; 115, 244), as well as conducting proxy campaigns against Arab confederacies immediately east of Moab (see below). In other words, when dealing with Assyria, Moab appears to have

4 Thirteen of these texts are gathered together, transliterated, translated and extensively discussed in Timm 1989: 303–309. All fourteen texts, including the more recently published Sargon Geography reference (Horowitz 1993) are gathered together, transliterated, translated and discussed (albeit less extensively than Timm) in Gaß 2009: 115–136. Vera Chamza 2005: 133–157 includes transliterations and translations of a number of these texts as an appendix, and discusses others in relation to specific historical issues throughout his book.

been grouped together with an assortment of peer-polities and treated as a member of this common category. Whether or not specific rulers actually held monopolistic powers within their own polities, they were generally treated as if they did by the Assyrians. As a result, client rulers and their court were given an intermediary role between Assyria and the local population, one whose tensions are nicely illustrated by the biblical account of the Rab-Shakeh's direct appeal to the "people on the wall" during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 2 Kings 18: 26–29.

This is not to say that Assyrian policy was the same in every region and in relation to every polity (e. g. Parker 2001). What I am suggesting is that state-formation on the edges of empire, should not be imagined only in terms of discrete polity to polity relations between, for example, Assyria and Moab. Rather, the Neo-Assyrian Empire also placed client kingdoms within a patchwork of polities similarly subject to the "Yoke of Assur". This in turn provided the opportunity for multilateral interaction and the mutual adoption (or active resistance) of practices, institutions and material culture circulating within and between these peer kingdoms.

While Moab must be considered from its position within the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it is also important that this position is not turned into a *deus ex machina* that explains all social and political change during the later Iron Age. There is, for example, no indication that there was ever an extensive Assyrian presence in Transjordan, especially south of Gilead (see Bienkowski 2000; contra Oded 1970). Indeed, evidence for Mesopotamian influence in the material culture and material practices of Transjordan increases dramatically only *after* the end of the Assyrian Empire in the late seventh century BC (Routledge 1997).

One needs to avoid thinking strictly in terms of an imperial core acting upon an outer periphery, and think instead of a long-term history of mutual, if radically unequal, transformation. It should be remembered that, despite Assyria's overwhelming military might, its complete dominance was not a foregone conclusion prior to the eighth century BC. The wars between Aram-Damascus and Israel, of which the events of the Mesha Inscription might be considered a chapter, envelope the first Assyrian campaigns into the Levant on either end. Similarly, Hazael of Damascus' brief hegemony over much of central Syria at the very end of the ninth century suggests that the question of Assyria's world domination had not been settled by Shalmaneser III's campaigns of 853–824. In other words, in the first instance Assyria was not the primary catalyst driving the formation of the kingdom of Moab, although it did play a part in shaping the broader historical context.

From this broader context, one could in fact link initial Assyrian expansion and Levantine state-formation as part of a common post-Bronze Age process. In the aftermath of the Late Bronze Age collapse, social groups were very fluid, and new identities were being formed in light of new geo-political realities. This included both newly founded and initially undifferentiated communities, as well as monarchies such as Karkamish that survived the collapse of the Hittite empire and reinvented themselves as independent kingdoms (see Hawkins 1995). In this context, aspirant rulers competed to control people, territory and resources with virtually every early Iron Age polity being expansionary in some sense. The Assyrians had

an advantage in this free-for-all, having actively maintained royal institutions, an imperial ideology and an accompanying sense of entitlement to most of Northern Syrian dating back to their Late Bronze Age conquests of the 13th century BC. Most of the earliest Neo-Assyrian rulers up through Ashurnasirpal II understood their extensive military campaigns within the framework of reclaiming land that was rightfully Assyrian against various 'rebels', especially the rising tide of Aramaean speaking polities and tribal groups (see Sader 2000 and this volume). Assyrian success in this regard certainly pressurized the Levant through a kind of domino effect, but this was not prior to, or generative of, on-going local conflict and conquest. Instead, both Assyria and the Levantine polities were drawn into and transformed by an increasingly 'global' context that was increasingly shaped by Assyrian military success and imperial ambition.

2.2 The 'local' context

What then of internal change? Even if one were to concede that within the literary context of the Mesha Inscription, or the diplomatic context of Assyrian patron-client relations, Moab was constituted as a transcendent identity, it remains to be demonstrated that this made any difference at all on a day to day basis. As noted above, Bienkowski argues that political and social change in Iron Age Moab was rather limited. In particular, he offers two concrete suggestions as to how the 'tribal kingdom' of Moab evidenced continuity with, rather than a transformation of, its pre-existing tribal social foundation. First, Bienkowski (2009: 11, 18) argues that leaders such as Mesha lacked a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force (Weber 1978: 54) and hence exercised charismatic leadership through oratory persuasion and personal reputation. Second, Bienkowski (2009: 11-14, 2–22) points to diversity in the size, layout and ceramic assemblages of Iron Age sites across Transjordan as evidence for a decentralised, tribal, society.

One piece of evidence directly relevant to Bienkowski's first suggestion is line 28 of the Mesha Inscription, which reads "...the men of Dibon were in battle-array, for all Dibon were subjects/a body-guard". The key term in this sentence is the noun *mšm't* (*mišma'at*), which in Biblical Hebrew is derived from the root *shema* = "to hear/obey". It can have the meaning "one made subject/obedient" as in the case of Isaiah's vision of the Ammonites being made subject to a restored Israel in Isaiah 11:4. On this basis, one might argue that, at least in Dibon, Mesha was able to command obedience from others. However, *mišma'at* is used more commonly in the Hebrew Bible to refer specifically to a select bodyguard (1 Sam. 22: 14; 2 Sam. 23:23; 1 Chron. 11:25). Indeed, citing Ugaritic and Assyrian parallels, Manfred Weippert (2003) has suggested that "all Dibon" in this sentence refers not to a territorial unit or a tribe but to an elite military unit that served as Mesha's bodyguard. Semantic uncertainty aside, the real problem with countering Bienkowski in this way is the assumption that whole social systems can be characterised on the basis of select attributes. Presuming that the language of sovereignty indicates a centralised state ruled by relations of force, while genealogical language indicates a

decentralised tribal system ruled by consent, posits the sort of monolithic packages that we rejected in relation to definitions of the State.

Some of these same totalising assumptions remain embedded in Bienkowski's arguments. Besides representing force and consent as mutually exclusive modes of authority, Bienkowski also assumes that economic centralization (in the proxy form of the inter-site diversity of ceramic assemblages) is a measure of political centralization. This typological thinking distracts us once again from direct, empirically grounded, questions such as "what actually changed during the Iron Age and do these changes relate to the emergence of Moab as a political identity?"

Elsewhere (Routledge 2004) I have in fact detailed some of the changes attested in the archaeological record of Moab that correlate with the establishment and life-history of the kingdom of Moab. For example, the site of Dhiban (ancient Dibon/Qarḥo) was radically replanned at some point soon after the events commemorated in the Mesha Inscription. Construction projects included a large public building that may have been a palace (Morton 1989; Routledge 2004: 173), a possible monumental gateway (Morton 1989), and an artificial platform that extended area of the mound by perhaps 0.75 ha (Tushingham 1990; Tushingham and Pedrette 1995). My current fieldwork at Dhiban, as part of the Dhiban Excavation and Development Project, has shown that at 12 ha. the site is much larger than previously thought, and that as much as 10 ha. of this area appears to have been occupied in the Iron IIB (840BC–700BC) period (Porter *et al* 2007).

We cannot say with certainty that this transformation was the result of the building projects detailed by Mesha in his inscription, but this is secondary to the fact that following on from his triumphs the site of Dhiban was transformed. Interestingly, this reconstruction of Dhiban does not appear to have been accompanied by an extensive centralization of regional administration at Dhiban. Practical epigraphic finds, such as ostraca, seals or bullae have so far been almost non-existent amongst finds from the site (see Morton 1989 for exceptions), and are rare across Moab (see Eggler and Keel 2006 for seals). Indeed, at present formal lapidary inscriptions are more common in Moab than more quotidian ostraca. Furthermore, it is clear that Madaba to the north remained a large fortified settlement, at least equal to Dhiban in size and importance during the eighth century (Harrison 2009), and it is generally presumed, if not archaeologically demonstrated, that the same held true for al-Karak to the south. Other settlements, especially Hisban (Ray 2001), Jalul (Younker 2007) and Balu'a (Worschech 1995) grew considerably in the seventh through sixth century BC, which does not appear to have been the case for Dhiban. So, at present it appears that after Mesha, Dhiban as a settlement was remade with a heavy investment in symbolic architecture, but that this was not necessarily accompanied by an elevation of Dhiban to a primate position in terms of practical administration and economic production. These functions are likely to have remained dispersed amongst a number of regional centres in Moab.

A second example of large-scale change is the renewed settlement of Moab's eastern frontier in the eighth through sixth centuries BC (see Routledge 2004: 191–201). My original characterization of this process in terms of key towns, strategically

located forts and a large number of isolated compounds and farmsteads (usually with a stone tower) has been confirmed and expanded by more recent work (see Andrews et al. 2002; Daviau 2006; Homès-Fredericq 2009). From an agro-pastoral point of view, this dispersal of settlement into small farms is likely to represent an intensification of production (Routledge 1996). It is also likely that the dispersal of farmsteads was encouraged by the foundation of fortresses and several fortified towns, such as Khirbat al-Mudayna on the Wadi ath-Thamad, which seems to have served as a regional centre given its shrines, inscriptions and evidence for industrial production (see Daviau 2006).

As already noted (Routledge 2004: 200–201), the likely context for this intensification of settlement on the east of Moab, and its link to military architecture, was the growing importance of the Arabian trade (esp. incense and other aromatics) within the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the concomitant pressure on Moab to secure its eastern flank. Three of the fourteen Neo-Assyrian texts mentioning Moab deal with probable military conflict between the kingdom of Moab and groups likely to represent pastoral nomads based to the south and east. A letter (Nimrud Letter 14; ND 2773) from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, states that a report on the raid of a Moabite city by the "land of Gidir" is being passed on from a regional official to the king.[5] While Gidir is an unidentified toponym, it is reasonably identified with pastoral nomadic groups east of Moab (Timm 1989: 327–329; Vera Chamza 2005: 75–78; Gaß 2009: 120–121). According to the Rassam Cylinder, a city of Moab[6] is one of the locations where the Ashurbanipal's troops are said to have inflicted a defeat on Yaite "king of the land of the Arabs" (Borger 1996: 61–62, 245). The possibility that Ashurbanipal's troops may actually have been Moabite proxy troops is raised by the multiple accounts of Ashurbanipal's conflict with Ammuladin "king of the land of Qedar", a related pastoral nomadic confederacy (see Timm 1989: 374–392 for these accounts). In the annalistic accounts repeated on Prisms B, C and D, Ammuladin is said to have plundered Assyria's western vassals, but Kamashalta king of Moab, designated as "my servant" by Ashurbanipal, delivered Ammuladin into the hand of the Assyrian king. However, in the later, abbreviated, "letter to the God", Kamashalta is removed and Ashurbanipal is directly credited with capturing Ammuladin. This incident illustrates the proxy nature of Moabite troops in relation to Assyrian interests along the desert frontier on the east of Moab.

Developments along Moab's eastern frontier suggest several things. First, both the construction of fortresses and the strategic, geo-political, nature of Moab's eastern conflicts point to an expanding military capacity that could serve as a material manifestation of the kingdom of Moab, both locally and internationally. Second, this

5 First published in Saggs 1955: 131–135. This letter has been discussed innumerable times in the scholarly literature. Among the more important studies are Donner 1957; Mittman 1973; Weippert 1987; Timm 1989: 321–329; Vera Chamza 2005: 71–78; 136–137; and Gaß 2009: 118–121.

6 $^{\text{URU}}$*mu-'a-a-ba*. This may simply be a reference to the land of Moab mistakenly written with the city determinative. Gaß 2009: 134; Timm 1989: 396 and Weippert1973/74: 63 see this as a scribal error. Oded 1970: 182–185 and Eph'al 1982: 150n.514 see this as evidence for Assyrian troops being stationed in specific cities in Transjordan.

military capacity may have had the secondary effect of encouraging the dispersal of settlement across the countryside through the provision of security, and perhaps also markets for agro-pastoral products. This in turn implies at least some sort of change in land-use and domestic relations, with many more households living singly and visibly on the land, rather than in nucleated villages (or "invisibly" in tents).

What remains unclear is how this military capacity was resourced, especially in the absence of any clear evidence for an increase in administrative infrastructure or centralized surplus extraction. J.S. Holladay (2006; 2009) has argued that the profits from overland trade itself allowed the rulers of the kingdom of Judah to maintain a central political and military apparatus in the absence of extensive internal surplus extraction. This could also apply to Moab, where evidence for taxation, record keeping, centralized storage, etc. is even less abundant than in Judah. Unfortunately, at present, we lack the evidence necessary to test such ideas in relation to Moab.

3 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like emphasize two general proposals that are made evident from the case of Moab. First, state formation is not an event it is an on-going process by means of which political authority is continually reproduced (and thereby reformed) along established pathways of institutions and identification. It follows, rather directly, that state collapse is the failure of this reproduction. Certainly, the history of Moab in the Iron Age was not one of crossing some sort of absolute threshold of "stateness". Rather, it was one of on-going changes in military, ritual and administrative practices that were subsumed under the transcendent umbrella of the "Land of Moab".

Second, empire is a context rather than a catalyst. The kingdom of Moab begins to take shape prior to its direct contact with Assyria, as part of a wider trend of Levantine kingdom formation that cannot be wholly credited to Assyrian intervention. More importantly from a comparative perspective is the fact that both cores and peripheries are embedded within a larger imperial matrix. We should, therefore, not think in terms of asymmetrical relations *between* Moab and the Neo-Assyrian Empire, because these asymmetrical relations *were* the Neo-Assyrian Empire. These asymmetrical relations were materialised in the unfavourable conditions of loyalty oaths (*adé*), the one-sided transfer of booty, tribute and special gifts, and in the requirement to provide troops and provisions on command. However, even though I have emphasized the role these practices may have played in transforming Moab, one should remember that Assyria was also transformed. The spread of Aramaic as a dominant language (Tadmor 1991), the ethnic diversification of Assyria (*cf.* Postgate 1989; Zadok 1997; and Parpola 2004) and the disempowerment of Assyria's land-holding families in favour of imperial officials are all well-known examples of social change brought on by the relations of empire.

Returning to the question of state-formation on the edge of empires, I think the challenge for future research on the Neo-Assyrian Empire is to analyze this question in terms of mutual histories of empire; a story not of two processes but of one.

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