

NOMADS, TRIBES, AND THE STATE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

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The Fourth Annual Oriental Institute Post-Doctoral Seminar was held in Breasted Hall March 7–8, 2008. Our aim was to present and discuss ways to integrate approaches to and ideas about the roles of pastoral nomads and tribe-state interactions in the ancient Near East. These concerns are by no means new; they have been of interest to researchers for decades, and recent work continues to be shaped by the classic theories of Ibn Khaldun, Jean-Robert Kupper (1957), and Michael Rowton (e.g., 1973), along with accounts and ethnographies of Near Eastern nomads in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries too numerous to list. However, despite calls for the integration of archaeology, anthropology, and history in the study of ancient pastoral nomadism in the Near East, each of those disciplines has been addressing these issues in relative isolation. Although great strides have recently been made on this front, there remains a pressing need for cross-disciplinary dialogue to establish a common framework for the study of pastoral nomadism and tribe-state interactions specific to the ancient Near East.

It was this overriding concern that lay behind this year's seminar. The goal of the conference was to find commonalities among the work of those studying nomadic and tribal groups throughout the greater Near East, from Iran to Egypt, and from prehistory to the early Islamic period. Where approaches and theories differed, we aimed to evaluate those differences in order to learn new ways to think about and talk about nomads and tribes in our own research. The seminar was thus an attempt to bring disparate scholars together to push forward a new agenda for studying pastoral nomads, tribes, and the state in the ancient Near East.

One particularly thorny problem associated with organizing a small conference on such a large topic presented itself from the outset: how to convey the themes of the conference without falling into the semantic trap of establishing social categories that may not represent reality. For example, the term “tribe,” itself, and many of the attributes associated with it, such as segmentary lineages and egalitarianism, notions that have troubled anthropologists for some time, seem even more fluid and amorphous according to recent literature. In recent years, scholars of both texts and archaeology have acknowledged a degree of integration between urban and pastoral sectors, and between tribes and states, that earlier models did not anticipate. Although these recent approaches appear to capture more accurately the complexity of ancient tribe-state interactions, they also introduce questions about the very categories we use to describe pastoral nomadic tribes. Did such bounded categories really exist in antiquity, or are they fabrications or idealizations created by modern ethnographers? If so, should they be applied to mobile and sedentary communities in the past? Does it even make sense to discuss tribe and state as separate social, political, or economic sectors? As the division between tribe and state in antiquity continues to blur, we may seem hyperaware of the inadequacy of those terms that make up the title of the seminar: “nomad,” “tribe,” and “state.”

This was one among the many issues that we discussed over the course of the conference, in which papers were presented by archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians whose work has focused on the following regions:

- Israel
Steven Rosen, Ben Gurion University

Benjamin Saidel, East Carolina University

- Jordan
 - Eveline van der Steen, University of Liverpool
 - Thomas E. Levy, University of California, San Diego
- Egypt
 - Robert Ritner, Oriental Institute
 - Hans Barnard, University of California, Los Angeles
- Iran
 - Abbas Alizadeh, Oriental Institute
 - Frank Hole, Yale University
- Syria
 - Donald Whitcomb, Oriental Institute
 - Bertille Lyonnet, Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques, Paris
 - Daniel Fleming, New York University
 - Anne Porter, University of Southern California
- Central Asia
 - Anatoly Khazanov, University of Wisconsin, Madison
 - Thomas Barfield, Boston University

Participants presented papers in three thematic sessions. The first session, chaired by McGuire Gibson of the Oriental Institute, focused on the first step in solving some of these problems: how to identify ancient pastoral nomads and tribes. These papers all dealt with collecting and interpreting problematic or scarce data: how do we interpret the past when texts confront archaeology?



Seminar participants, from left to right: Front row: Jeffrey Szuchman, Bertille Lyonnet, Daniel Fleming, Anne Porter, Anatoly Khazanov, Robert Ritner, Thomas Barfield. Back row: Frank Hole, Steven Rosen, Eveline van der Steen, Hans Barnard, Benjamin Saidel, Thomas Levy, David Schloen.
Photo by Kaye Oberhausen

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How do we interpret archaeological data in the absence of texts? How do our own assumptions about modern nomads affect the way we analyze ancient remains?

Hans Barnard's paper on pastoral nomads of Egypt's Eastern Desert dealt with the ramifications that ensue from identifying remains of mobile peoples: now that direct archaeological data of mobile or desert populations is both recoverable and subject to rigorous new forms of analysis, we must avoid simplistic correspondences of named ethnic groups of ancient texts with archaeological cultures. While his conclusion that we may never find archaeological correlates of almost mythic nomadic groups like the Medjay or Blemmyes is sobering, Barnard is ultimately optimistic that an archaeology of mobility in the Eastern Desert will advance our understanding of the region as a locus of complex cultural development in its own right (rather than as a mere appendage to the civilization of the Nile). Whereas Barnard noted that Egyptian texts that refer to nomads were often composed by people who in fact knew very little about the populations to which they refer, Ritner highlighted this very incongruity as evidence for the nature of the relationship between the Egyptian state and Libyan pastoral nomads. For the Egyptian authority, Libyans existed as archetypes, whose defeat had to be represented in visual displays, even if Egyptians in reality knew very little of their western neighbors. Saidel offered a new technique for conducting ethnoarchaeological research: identifying modern nomadic tents and tent remains from satellite imagery freely available from Google Earth. Lyonnet's paper offered evidence that characteristic circular cities (*Kranzhügel*) of third-millennium B.C. Syria may not have been occupied and ruled by an urban elite, rather they may have been central places for annual gatherings of otherwise dispersed pastoral nomadic groups. Her theory is a compelling argument that what archaeologists might initially interpret as urban occupations or administrative centers may in fact have been produced by mobile groups.

The second session, chaired by David Schloen of the Oriental Institute, focused on social and economic aspects of nomadism. How are these factors related to other defining characteristics of nomadic communities: mobility? Does the mobility of nomads set their economic agenda, or is it the economics of pastoral nomadism that determines their mobility? Just how interdependent, in terms of economies, sociopolitical structures, or kinship, are nomadic and non-nomadic communities? What effect does mobility have on nomadic social structures, intertribal interactions, and nomad-sedentary relations? Can urban or hierarchical power structures develop among mobile populations? Many of the papers in this session questioned the lingering sedentary biases of current research and reassessed the potential of pastoral nomadic communities to develop independent complex social structures and sophisticated technologies, and to impact state formation and regional dynamics.

Khazanov explained what a dramatic revolution the domestication of the camel must have engendered in traditional nomad-sedentary interactions. Horses and camels allowed nomads to untether themselves from sedentary agricultural societies and made possible dis-integration of enclosed nomadic systems. Alizadeh differed in his approach to long-term changes in nomadic adaptations in southwest Iran. There, he argued, early mobile pastoralists were not dependent upon sedentary farmers, rather they constituted but one element of a fully integrated agro-pastoral social complex. His approach offers a way to understand how hierarchical state structures may develop from tribal contexts and indicates that the highland nomadic tribes of southwest Iran may in fact have been the organizational force behind social, political, and economic transactions between Mesopotamia and Elam. Levy argued that seasonal copper production, organized and carried out by nomads, took place on an industrial scale at the site of Khirbet en-Nahas in Iron Age Jordan. Levy's paper stretches previous conceptions about the potential for nomads to undertake large construction projects or industrial craft activities. Porter's paper made a strong case that

archaeologists have long operated according to a misguided model, derived from modern ethnography, of ancient nomads as “essentially alien to urban and agricultural society in the Near East of the third and second millennia B.C.” In fact, she argued, the very fact that nomads were mobile required that they develop social structures that were able to counteract the forces that would otherwise have led to fragmentation of geographically dispersed tribes. In the late third and early second millennium B.C., one way to encourage social cohesion was by attributing the same name to multiple locales where religious or royal rituals took place. These toponyms became evocative symbols that served to socially integrate tribe members who were dispersed in time and space.

The last session, chaired by Adam T. Smith of the University of Chicago Anthropology Department, focused on tribe-state interactions: how tribes develop into states, or tribal states; the role of tribal leaders in shaping interactions; how multiple power structures can co-occur within the same tribe or state; and the factors that determine long-term changes in tribe-state relations. Rosen looked at shifting settlement patterns of agricultural and pastoral peoples in the Negev Desert over several millennia and found that in certain periods the relationship between the two takes on distinctive characteristics. Whitcomb discussed the settlement of Arab tribes during the early phases of the Islamic state and looked at archaeological evidence of both seasonal movements of centers of authority and sedentarization as mechanisms that aided the transition from nomadic tribes to the Umayyad state. Fleming argued that Zimri-Lim, the ruler of the Mari kingdom in the eighteenth century B.C., was uniquely able to combine the mobile and non-mobile segments of his kingdom. Van der Steen presented similar cases attested in the ethnohistorical record of nineteenth-century A.D. Jordan, when charismatic individuals became the rulers of powerful tribes and sometimes tribal states.

The responses by Frank Hole and Thomas Barfield prompted a number of important debates. One recurring topic centered on the appropriateness of ethnographic analogy for understanding ancient nomadism. The archetypal black tent, upon which many ethnoarchaeological studies of camp layout, domestic space, and personal effects have been based, is probably not an appropriate analogue for ancient nomadic environments or behavior. Furthermore, the behavior of modern pastoral groups in one region may be very different from that of pastoralists in another region, either as a result of geographic, political, social, or a host of other contingent factors. Despite the critique of ethnographic analogy that was woven into several papers, others suggested that new technologies and a nuanced ethnohistorical approach can indeed offer new ways of understanding changes in social, economic, or domestic behavior in the past. Hole also reminded us that there is much to be gained by a careful analysis of the behavior of modern pastoral nomadic groups in the Middle East, especially when those behaviors are a response, in part, to geography and climate, features which have changed very little since antiquity. In other cases, patterns of nomadic behavior might reflect responses to the demands of mobility itself, which Porter sees as the fundamental feature of pastoral nomadism that contributes to shaping social structure. Hole’s response cautions us that although new approaches to ancient pastoral nomadism are both necessary and often fruitful, we must be careful not to stray too far from understanding nomadism as much more than an adaptive response to generally stable environmental factors.

There was also discussion of what constituted a “tribal state,” and whether such a thing could have existed at all. Barfield suggested that what some referred to as a tribal state was more likely a situation in which a tribal leader, by means of military advantage and charisma, became the leader of a state, but did not maintain tribal traditions or organizational structures. Whitcomb suggested that Mu’awiya, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, was indeed the ruler of a tribal state, but that this was short-lived, having devolved as a result of political factionalization. Although we came to no consensus, this was, as one participant pointed out, perhaps partly the result of the

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differing definitions of tribal states, one of the very problems that the conference intended to address. That this issue surfaced near the end of the second day of the conference should remind us that semantic disagreements may underlie similar debates about ancient pastoral nomadism and tribe-state interactions. If we are to continue to make progress in understanding the ways tribes and states interacted in the ancient Near East, we must strive to be unambiguous in our terminology and specific in our analysis.

One of the more significant outcomes of the conference is that, in many ways, it turned the notion of tribe-state interdependency on its head and demonstrated that in some cases not only can tribes act entirely independently, but states can sometimes be dependent on tribes. At other times, many of the features of nomadic tribes begin to look very state-like, which suggests that we will need to continue to wrestle with our definitions of tribe and state. It is likely that the line between tribes and states will continue to blur, as several participants argued that nomadic tribes can take a rather sophisticated role in regional interactions, industrial and administrative organization, the development of urban centers, and state-formation. Many papers also stretched previous ideas concerning what tribes were capable of. Construction of urban sites, monumental architecture, and the formation of powerful kingdoms turn out to be well within the realm of tribal accomplishments. Each of the contributors raised vital questions that future research will need to address. One of the more exciting questions these papers raised is whether we are only just beginning to identify nomadic tribes as the agents of significant social change in the ancient Near East, changes we had previously thought were instigated by states or even empires. If so, in how many other cases have we overlooked the autonomous role of nomads or tribes in regional developments?

The proceedings of the conference will be published as the fifth volume in the Oriental Institute Seminar Series (OIS). The publication of the 2007 seminar was available by the start of this year's conference, and I am optimistic that the same remarkable turnaround will be possible this year. I am honored to have had the opportunity to organize this conference and to have received such warm hospitality from the Oriental Institute faculty and staff. I thank Arthur and Lee Herbst for their generous support. I am also thankful for the guidance, diligence, and graciousness of everybody in the Publications Office, Tom Urban, Leslie Schramer, and Katie L. Johnson. Mariana Perlinac and Kaye Oberhausen provided invaluable logistical and moral support. I am also grateful to Seth Richardson, Don Whitcomb, and Abbas Alizadeh, who helped shape the intellectual framework of the conference, and I am especially grateful to Gil Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute, for his unfailing enthusiasm, advice, and support over the past year.

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