When tribes are in charge: Tribal societies in the 19th century and in the Bible.

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See Also: *Near Eastern tribal societies during the 19th century: Economy, society and politics between tent and town* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013)

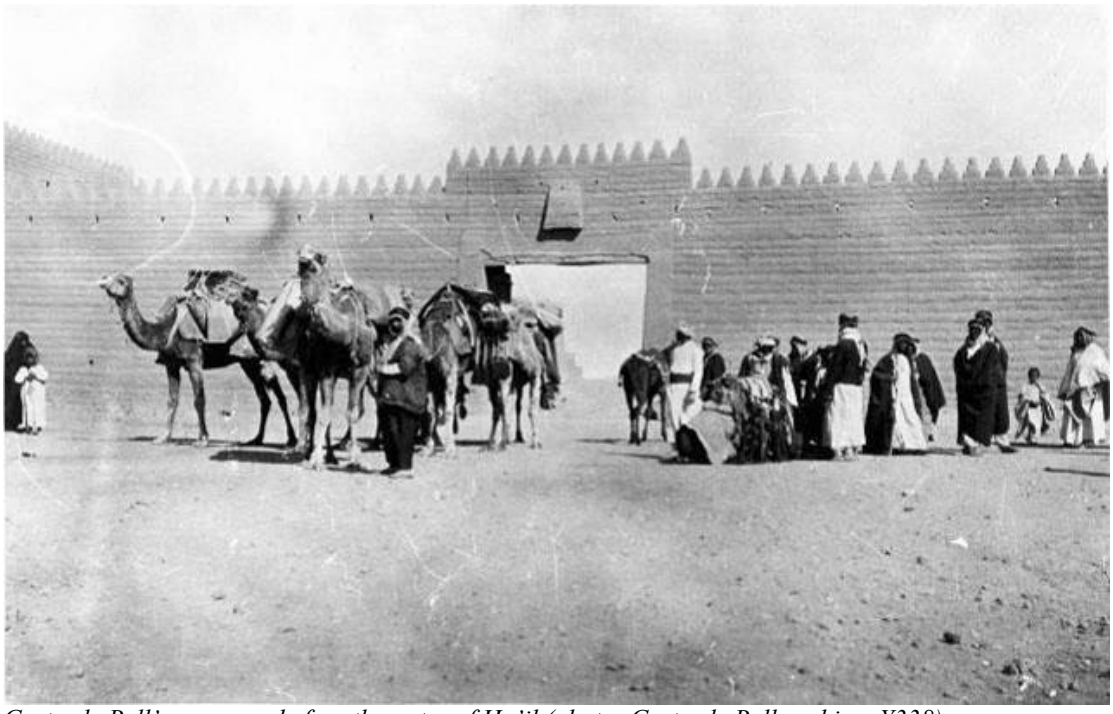
By Eveline van der Steen
School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology
University of Liverpool
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During the course of the 19th century first a trickle, then a stream, and finally an avalanche of travel books about the Near East appeared, all over the western world but particularly in Britain. Most of these covered one small part of the region: Palestine - the Holy Land[1]. As a result of this over the course of the century Palestine became one of the fashionable holiday destinations for the wealthy, a phenomenon that generated even more travelogues.

Partly this was the consequence of Napoleon's expeditions into Egypt and the Levant and the accounts they generated of the rich cultures of the East. Partly it was triggered by a new perception of the relationship between science and religion and a desire to scientifically explore the 'Lands of the Bible'.

For most of these explorers, gathering information and treasures to take home, encounters with the local population were a practical necessity, and often a nuisance.

[1] Reinhold Röhricht (Berlin, Reuther 1899) lists more than 5000 publications about Palestine between 1800-1877, and Richard Bevis, Bibliotheca Cisorientalia, records 3000 English books on Palestine published between 1500 – 1915, most of them in the 19th century. (Bar-Yosef 2005: 95 note 120)



Gertrude Bell's caravan before the gates of Ha'il (photo: Gertrude Bell archive: Y338)

At the same time, many of them saw in the wild roaming tribesmen the reflection of the Biblical patriarchs and their tribes. Their treatises and travelogues contain descriptions that can still throw light on the Biblical stories of the Early Israelites. Archaeologists and historians often derive their ideas about socio-political organization from modern tribal societies. The main problem with that approach is that seismic changes in technology, economy and communication in the 20th century, and political marginalization, particularly after World War I, have changed these tribal societies radically. 19th century tribal society in the Levant and the Arabian may therefore be a more reliable tool when it comes to interpreting the ancient Near East, even though a straight comparison between ancient and more recent tribal communities must be treated with caution.

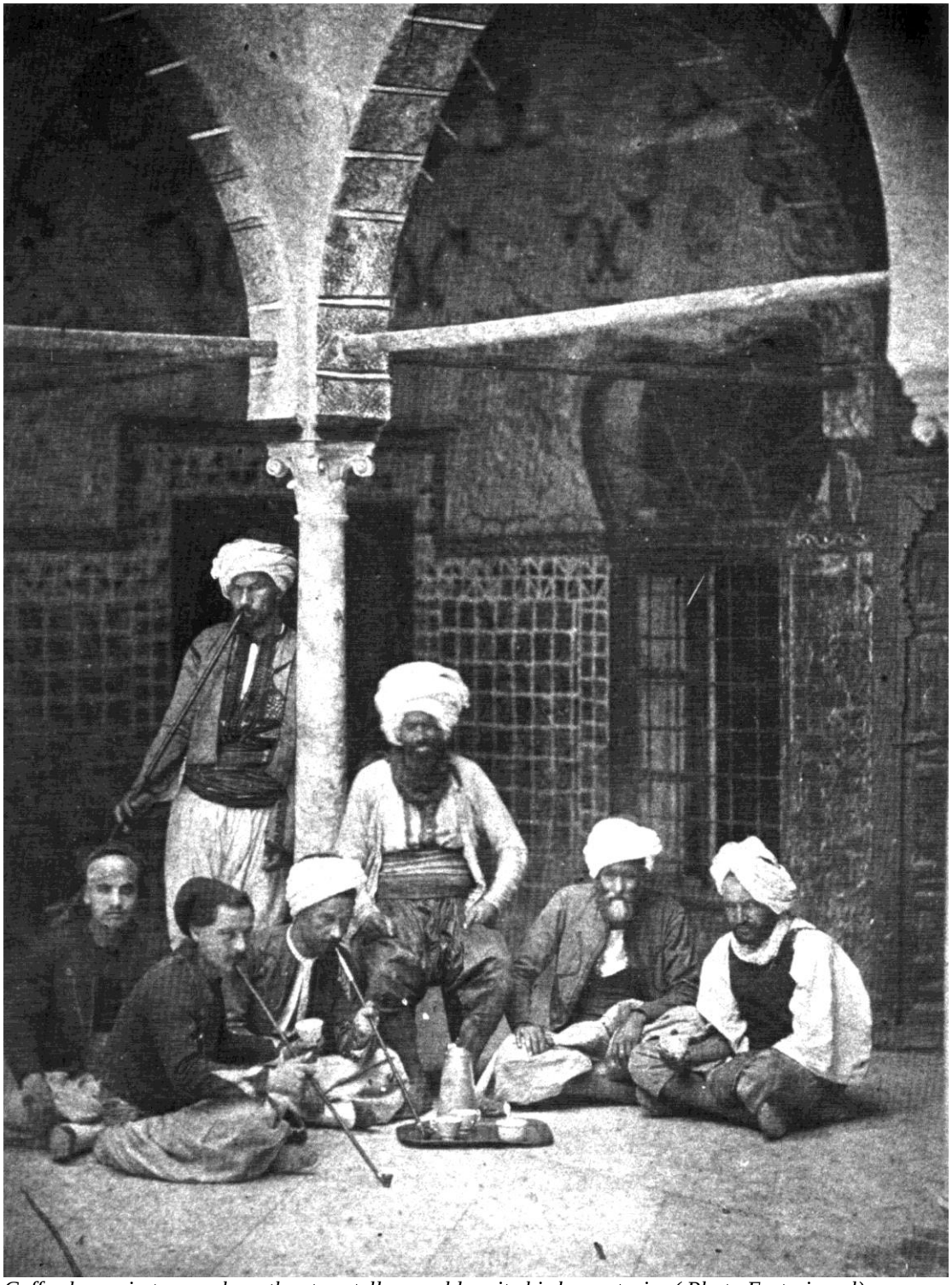
In the 19th century the Ottoman empire was crumbling. Napoleon's expedition had been a reality check, leaving the Ottoman forces largely helpless in the face of a struggle between the French and British giants. Several efforts were made to regain control over the vast empire, but it was too little, too late, and the desintegration continued until the empire finally collapsed in the first World War. The lack of control, particularly in the more outlying areas, the region south of es-Salt in Jordan, and Jerusalem in Palestine, had given the local tribes free range. This was a society where large and powerful tribes, such as the Anaze, the Beni Sakhr and the Shammar competed for control of the land, the people and the economy.

Thanks to the many travellers who journeyed through this society, on horseback, camel, donkey or on foot, encountering, engaging with and occasionally battling these tribes, eating their food, drinking their (often foul) water, sharing their fleas and generally their way of life, and then writing it all up, we gain insight into a society that has largely disappeared, but that provides a better understanding of a more distant past, as well as some of the underlying causes of the present conflicts in the region.

In the 19th century the main tribes fighting for control in the southern Levant were the Beni Sakhr, the Adwan, the Huwaytat, and the Rwala east of the Jordan, and the Terabin and Tiyaha in the deserts south of Jerusalem. Smaller tribes lived among them, occasionally rising to power of their own accord, or changing their allegiance, and upsetting the balance of power in the region. It was a society that was stable and fluid at the same time, with power relations changing all the time, while the general mechanisms of power remained the same. The Ottoman empire, in its attempts to regain control, was a player in this power game, trying to manipulate the loyalties of the tribes, with varying success. This was how society had functioned since the early days of Islam and before, with a patchwork of tribes interacting with each other and with the government of the day.

Many of the 19th century tribes claimed ancestry from the legendary tribes from the early days of Islam: the Beni Hilal, the Tay or the Beni Lahm. A noble ancestry was of major importance for a tribe. In a society that was largely oral, this was reflected in an abundance of tribal hero-tales, genealogies and poetry that celebrated the heroic deeds of the ancestors. Each tribe had its own collection or in the case of general traditions, its own versions. As a source of historiography these traditions are less useful, but they provide a fascinating insight into the purposes of history creation in tribal societies. They defined power relations and could themselves be a source of conflict. This was aptly demonstrated in the 1980s when a new national awareness in the Arab world created an interest in the old traditions, and the old stories and poems were cited on prime time radio. The problem this increased popularity created was illustrative of the tribal society itself: while singing the praise of one tribe, the stories and poems could be scathing and insulting towards others, and so they had to be carefully screened in order to avoid conflicts (Ingham 2006).

Heroic epics were a popular form of oral tradition. The most famous were the Sirat (song of) Antar, the Sirat Beni Hilal, and the Sirat Baybars, but there were many more. Heroic epics originated as short adventure stories involving various heroes, which were woven together, often by a professional storyteller, into a long epic story. The various adventures were interchangeable, and depended on the preference of the audience, the repertoire of the storyteller, and the social context of both. Sometimes, in the coffeehouses in the towns, these stories were continued night after night, and the telling of them could last well over a year (Lane 1871:359-60). Semiramis was the ultimate storyteller.



Coffee house in town, where the story teller would recite his hero-stories.(Photo Eretzyisroel).

Conflicts between tribes were often about territory or access to water and grazing grounds. The land itself was, in the perception of the tribe, not something you could 'own'. When you were present you could dominate it, or share it with other tribes, and have 'first rights' to its bounty.

While the group cohesion that defined a tribe, the '*asabiyyah*' is primarily based on the perception of kinship (whether real or manipulated), a tribe could also have a

strong bond with its territory, as the land of its ancestors, its roots. Kinship and territory were closely connected.

There were various ways of claiming a territory. Boundary stones were one. Burial sites, which bonded the dead ancestors to the living tribe, were another. The shape of a tent camp was often an indicator of a tribe's relation to the territory. If a tribe felt insecure, it would camp in a circle (a *duwar*) or a double row (a *nazal*) of tents.

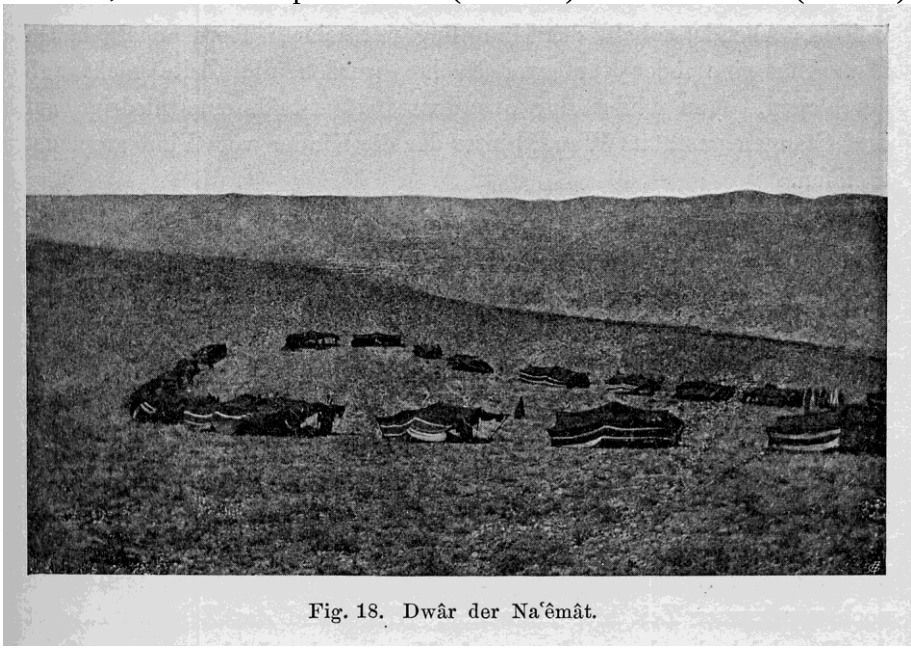


Fig. 18. Dwâr der Naʿêmât.

Duwar of the Na'emat tribe. (Photo: Alois Musil)

If, on the other hand, the tribe felt secure in its territory, tents could be dispersed over a wide area. The Beni Sakhr and the Rwala often camped in this manner (Seetzen 1854-59/II:298; Buckingham 1825:400,506; Musil 1928a:77).

Villages were often originally built as a *duwar*, an enclosure, a phenomenon that has also been observed in Bronze and Iron Age villages. Because of the fluid and largely emotional relationship to the land, tribes often did not realize that by selling 'their' land to the government, they relinquished their rights to it, and as a consequence, their traditional means of existence. In the 20th century, when the Jewish Agency was buying up land in Palestine, later Israel, a Palestinian warned his brothers against selling their land:

> *Your sale in the end is of roots you'll have torn*
> *You'll yet wander 'tween Egypt and Sham till you're worn.*
> *The land that was spacious, yet narrow will be,*
> *You'll find nowhere to rest 'tween the hills and the sea.*
> (translated by Bailey 1991:362)

Asabiyyah, the sense of belonging, is what binds a tribe together. It is the sense that the tribe is all-important, and determines each member's identity. As said above, it defines the concept of territory. It is instrumental in the glorious deeds of tribal heroes, and shapes the purpose of tribal history. Western travellers found this group ethic either baffling, or were drawn to it, particularly in the second half of the 19th century, with its Victorian spirit that valued private enterprise and personal aspiration above all. This group ethic, in order to survive and thrive, needed to leave space for personal

aspiration, which is where the concepts of honour and reputation come in. Members of the group needed to be able to distinguish themselves, create their own niche within the group. There were various ways of doing that. Skill as a poet was one way of distinguishing oneself. Many of the great heroes and leaders, such as Antar, or Nimr al-Adwan, the legendary 19th century leader of the Adwan tribe, were also renowned poets.

Generosity was also an important way of establishing one's reputation. Excessive generosity could lead to bankruptcy, but this would only enhance the respect with which the individual in question was viewed.

Heroism in battle was another way to distinguish oneself. It was a legitimate reason for waging war on another tribe and gave the young men an opportunity to distinguish themselves[2]. Raiding and robbing, particularly of other tribes, had the same purpose of showing off one's skills, as well as determining power relations between tribes. As a means of subsistence, these raids were very inefficient The Tiyaha set out every year with 1000 guns on a 20 day journey to raid the Anaze. They often got away with a number of Anaze camels, but equally often they were overtaken by their pursuers, and had to relinquish them again. If the raiders managed to reach their tents with the loot, the raided party would organize a revenge raid and try to rob their property back, with interest (Trumbull 1884:247). Worst off were the camels and sheep and goats, who were relentlessly driven hundreds of miles, and sometimes back again. On the other hand, the raiding and protection of caravans was a regular and significant source of income for many tribes.

Protection fees, paid by a weaker party to a stronger one, in exchange for protection, were called *khawa*, brotherhood, thus symbolizing the concept of kinship that pervaded all tribal relationships. Sometimes it was coercive, but often the weaker party entered into the agreement on a voluntary basis, and was free to change its alliance to a different tribe. The 19th century travellers had to pay protection to every tribe whose territory they crossed. Some paid willingly, but many complained about the greed of the tribes.

Charles Doughty, who spent two years wandering through the Arabian Peninsula, searched for what he called the 'Great Semitic Law, unwritten' (Doughty 1888/1921: preface). He referred to the universal tribal law system, which determined the relationship between the individual and his tribe, and between tribes. Because the acts of tribesmember reflected on the tribe as a whole, and because most tribes did not have the means to enforce punishment, the law was maintained through social pressure, rather than coercion. Fines and sentences were geared towards restoring balance in the group, rather than punishment or improvement. *Thar*, or blood revenge, one of the more conspicuous aspects of tribal law, was meant to restore balance, and could be bought off according to complex rules which differed in each tribe.

An important aspect of tribal and intertribal interaction was the concept of honour. An individual's actions reflected on his tribe. He could elevate the honour of the tribe, by being courageous or generous, but he could also shame the tribe through his actions.

[2] Anthropologists regularly quote tribes who state this as a reason for warfare. Of course the reasons given to the anthropologist are not always the real reasons.

In that case the honour of the tribe had to be restored, by punishing, expelling or even killing the individual. So-called honour killings, unfortunately all too common even today in societies with a tribal background, reflect this ethos.

Tribes were never static, or timeless concepts. They developed, grew or shrank, their socio-political structure changed in the interaction with other tribes and with the state. Very often the fate of a tribe was linked to the appearance of a charismatic, strong leader, the right man at the right time. This was the case, for example with the Henadi, a group of Egyptian mercenaries, who were transformed into one of the most powerful tribes in the Galilee by the leadership of Akila Agha. After Akila's death the tribe's power dwindled, and it became one of many small tribes in the region (Oppenheim 1943:30-34; Macalister and Masterman 1906; Hepworth Dixon 1885:109-116; Finn 1878:411-433; Lynch 1849). On the Arabian peninsula the Abda tribe, belonging to the Shammar confederation rose to power under the leadership of Abdallah Ibn Rashid, and became effectively the rulers of the peninsula. Their emirate continued for 80 years under several strong leaders, but dwindled, and disappeared after the first World War (al-Rasheed 1997; 1991 with references; Oppenheim 1952:37-45; Musil 1928b passim; Doughty [1888]1921/II:13-18; Blunt 1880: 99,194-206; Palgrave 1873:84-94; Wallin 1852/1979:66-68). These histories of rise and decline are but two examples of the vicissitudes of tribal interaction and power plays. The struggle for hegemony between the Beni Sakhr and the Adwan, or between the Huwaytat and the Rwala, and the continual shifting of power and territories, is an age-old phenomenon, that has reflections in ancient sources such as the Old Testament.

While the power relations between tribes were in constant flux, their status in the tribal hierarchy was remarkably stable. The nobility of a tribe was determined by its glorious history, its honourable behaviour, and its noble ancestors, and independent of its actual power or wealth. A tribe could be reduced to the status of a clan within another tribe, and still claim a greater nobility than its master tribe. This was the case, for example with the Uhedat in the Negev Desert. They had lost all their power in the rebellion against Ibrahim Pasha in 1834, and attached themselves to the Terabin. But once a year, on the Day of the Sacrifice, the Terabin officially honoured the Shaykh of the Uhedat.

The importance of a noble ancestry was such that many tribes resorted to the rewriting of history. The Huwaytat, who were originally an Egyptian tribe, and therefore not very noble, claimed to be Ashraf, descended from the Prophet. Other tribes claimed the Beni Hilal, or the Tay as their ancestors and created stories to back up their claims.

The perception that pastoralist tribes, particularly camel breeding tribes, are more 'noble' than settled or agricultural tribes, was more ideological than real. The pastoralist Bedouin lifestyle was seen as superior by the Bedouin themselves and also by those who considered themselves 'noble' whilst not living in a tent, such as the Sharifs, wealthy townspeople and village shaykhs. The education of many 'upper class' town boys consisted in being sent to the desert, to be brought up, for a time, in a Bedouin tribe.

But the Adwan, a farming tribe in the Belqa, were considered noble, while the Shererat, a pariah tribe in the Shera, were famous camel breeders. The complex hierarchy of the tribal society was based on 'blood': the nobility of its ancestry, and

on independence: the Adwan received *khawa* from most of the tribes in the region, while the Sherarat had no territory of their own, and had to pay *khawa* wherever they went.

Tribes and Israelites

The tribal ethos, territorial conflicts and power relations described here, are strongly reminiscent of Old Testament narratives. Without making claims about historical accuracy (never a strong point of tribal historiography), I will expand on one episode in the Early Iron Age, the Dark Ages that saw the first beginnings of Early Israel.

During the preceding period, the Late Bronze Age, the Egyptians controlled a trade route from Egypt, through Canaan, across the Jordan and through Gilead, along the Zerqa river, to the east and north. The town of Sahab, at the end of the Zerqa on the Plain of Ammon, functioned as a transit market.

The end of the Late Bronze Age saw the disintegration of the Egyptian Empire, and with it the end of the Egyptian trade route. The infrastructure that supported, and was supported by the trade collapsed. On the plain of Ammon, while other villages and centres disappeared or shrank, the town of Sahab suddenly grew beyond its walls. This population influx may well have been triggered by the growing insecurity in the region, and attacks by marauding tribes from the surrounding countryside.

The archaeological evidence in the eastern Jordan Valley suggests that groups of people from the Plain of Ammon migrated into the Valley. The pottery repertoire in the region changed significantly, resembling more the pottery from the Ammon Plain. The influx of new people into the region caused territorial stress, and a change in the settlement patterns in the region. New sites sprang up, many along the banks of the Zerqa and the other Wadis. But some older sites disappeared, notably villages and hamlets occupied since the first half of the Late Bronze period. Simultaneous changes in settlement patterns and pottery repertoire west of the Jordan suggest an influx of groups of people from across the river, possibly refugees from the chaos that followed the collapse of the trade network, into the heartland of what was to become early Israel.

Displacement of tribes and clans by expanding or moving tribes from elsewhere was common in the tribal society before the 20th century. To name but one example: in the 18th century the Adwan, encroaching on the lands west of the Belqa, pushed the Beni Mehdi out of their territory, and eventually chased them across the Jordan to the west. In the following period the Beni Sakhr were gradually forced out of their territories in the Arabian Peninsula by the Wahabi expansion, and started to infiltrate the Adwan territories in the Belqa. Eventually they all but expelled the Adwan and took over the Belqa. Within their new territories, tribes could prosper, and become powerful, displace other tribes and create new alliances.

I propose that some of the earliest Israelite tribes, the tribes in what later became known as Ephraim and Manasse, originated east of the Jordan, and were expelled by tribes from the Ammon plain in a major territorial shuffle. They allied themselves to tribes from the region and from elsewhere, and eventually created the confederation that became known as Israel (van der Steen 2004; 2013).

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