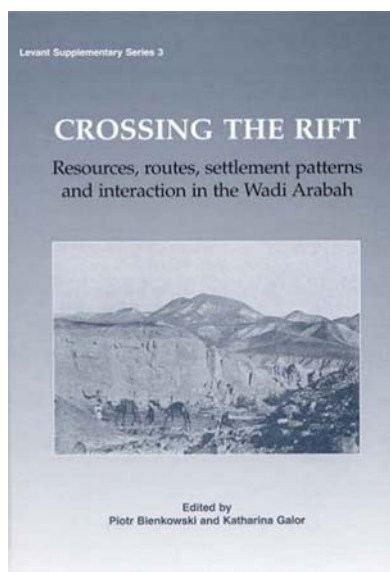


Bienkowski, P. & K. Galor. Eds. 2006. Crossing the Rift. Resources, Routes, Settlement Patterns and Interaction in the Wadi Arabah. – Oxford, Oxbow (Levant Supplementary Series Volume 3)

Book review¹ by J.M. Tebes



The view that the archaeology of the Ancient Near East, and specifically its well known cousin, the ‘Biblical Archaeology’, are completely outside the recent developments of the archaeology, is now (fortunately) mostly outdated. However, new studies on the archaeology of the Near East are not only following the trends of the archaeological studies in other fields, but are also incorporating approximations that have been current for decades in other disciplines, most notably history. Piotr Bienkowski and Katharina Galor’s ‘Crossing the Rift. Resources, Routes, Settlement Patterns and Interaction in the Wadi Arabah’ is a most perfect example of this trend.

The book is the proceedings of the Conference ‘Crossing the Rift’, held in Atlanta, Georgia (USA) on November 19, 2003. The conference was aimed at studying the archaeology and history of the Wadi Arabah, that long, arid area that extends between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba (Gulf of Eilat for the Israeli’s), and that nowadays forms the international boundary between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The main objective of the conference book was twofold: first, to provide a comprehensive review of the archaeological/historical evidence of this area in ancient and modern times; second, to offer a new approximation on the socio–historical development of this area. Concerning this latter point, the editors call attention to the fact that the Wadi Arabah has often been seen as a barrier between two areas, *i.e.* the Negev and southern Jordan (the biblical Edom). But this view, as the authors convincingly demonstrate, originally arose out of the geopolitics of the Near East of the early 20th century: the Arabah has been only a political limit since 1922, when the Council of the League of Nations created Transjordan as a separate entity from the British Mandate of Palestine. Before this year, the Arabah was a bridge, rather than a barrier, between the Negev and southern Jordan.

The first article is a thorough study of Bienkowski on the archaeology of landscape of the Arabah (‘The Wadi Arabah: Meanings in a contested landscape’). Following the steps of Braudel’s *long durée*, Bienkowski makes an interdisciplinary study of the Arabah based on the geography and the archaeology of settlement patterns, between the Palaeolithic and the Islamic periods. While this combination of the Braudelian long duration and the “New Archaeology” is certainly valuable, the most salutary contribution appears in the second part, where Bienkowski, commendably using a phenomenological approximation derived from Heidegger’s *Dasein* (Being–in–the–World) approach, studies how the ancient people perceived the landscape of the Arabah. For, whatever we think of the long periods implicated, Bienkowski argues that there are certain cultural trends (most notably, but not restricted to, the sacred landscape) that were shared by the peoples that inhabited this area in very different periods. There is evidence, for example, that the pastoral groups of the Middle–Late Bronze Ages (to which I would add those of the Iron Age) used the cultic sites that had been erected during the Neolithic–Early Bronze Age.

¹ Second version, updated 3 January 2007.

Following Bienkowski's introductory work, there are several articles that focus on specific aspects of the Arabah. Thus, the papers of Hendrik Bruins ('Desert environment and geoarchaeology of the Wadi Arabah'), Moti Haiman ('The archaeological surveys in the Arabah reconsidered: Data and metadata'), Uzi Avner ('Settlement patterns in the Wadi Arabah and the adjacent desert areas: A view from the Eilat region'), and Burton MacDonald ('The southern Ghors and north-east Arabah: Resources, sites and routes') draw attention to the general geoarchaeology, geography and settlement patterns of the Wadi Arabah.

Another group of articles studies the successive archaeological periods that shaped the history of the Arabah, starting with the work of Donald Henry ('Cultural and geological influences on prehistoric site distributions in the Wadi Arabah'), and following with the papers of Yuval Yekutieli ('Aspects of an Early Bronze Age II–III polity in the Dead Sea region'), Andreas Hauptmann ('Mining archaeology and archaeometallurgy in the Wadi Arabah: The mining districts of Faynan and Timna'), Russell Adams ('Copper trading networks across the Arabah during the later Early Bronze Age'), and Michael Jasmin ('The emergence and first development of Arabian trade across the Wadi Arabah'). What these papers have in common is economics: the Arabah is the richest copper zone in the Levant, with copper nodules that appear in the famous mines of Timna (in Israel) and Faynan (in Jordan). Being either in the hands of the local people or under the hegemony of foreigners (especially, the Ramesside exploitation in Timna during the 13th–12th centuries BC), the Arabah mines stood as the central economic resource until the 8th century BC, when the area became a major artery of movements of goods in the trade networks of the Southern Arabian incense.

With the first written source that refers specifically to the Arabah (the Hebrew Bible), we enter in the realm in which the historical sources supplement the archaeology. This is the case of the papers of John Bartlett ('The Wadi Arabah in the Hebrew Scriptures'), Tali Erikson-Gini ('Down to the Sea': Nabataean colonisation in the Negev Highlands'), Yizhar Hirschfeld ('The Nabataean presence south of the Dead Sea: New evidence'), Orit Shamir ('Textiles, basketry, cordage and fruits from 'En Tamar: Preliminary report'), Benjamin Dolinka ('The Rujm Taba Archaeological Project (RTAP): Results of the 2001 survey and reconnaissance'); Benjamin Isaac ('Roman organisation in the fourth century AD'), S. Thomas Parker ('Roman Aila and the Wadi Arabah: An economic relationship'), Ze'ev Meshel ('Were there gold mines in the eastern Arabah?'), Donald Whitcomb ('The Wadi Arabah during the early Islamic period'), Eveline van der Steen ('Nineteenth-century travellers in the Wadi Arabah'), and Clinton Bailey ('Relations between Bedouin tribes on opposite sides of the Wadi Arabah, 1600–1950'). Bailey's paper on the modern Bedouin tribes highlights, and also confirms, what the previous archaeological works had already suggested: that the groups living east and west of Arabah had strong links, and that in fact these groups should be treated as belonging to one cultural unit. Whereas Bailey focuses the attention on the Bedouin oral traditions for showing how tribes on either side of the Arabah maintained relationships of both hostility and friendship, the Hebrew Bible itself (and more specifically the Book of Genesis and 1 Chronicles, as I have argued elsewhere [Tebes, 2006]) seems to reflect oral traditions concerning the relationships between Southern Jordanian "Edomite" pastoral groups and 'Judaean' inhabitants living in the Negev.

The text is accompanied by a number of maps, tables and photographs that make the book very readable. I duly recommend this book for several reasons. First, it is the first work that takes the Wadi Arabah as a single geographical, economic and cultural unit, and studies how the societies that lived and wandered through it evolved. Very importantly, 'Crossing the Rift' comprises the updated works of scholars that, until now, had worked in many ways separately of each other. Second, this book offers both a fresh view of an ancient periphery and several ways of how peripheries can be studied. For this reason, 'Crossing the Rift' can be seen as a good example of what the interdisciplinary studies and the *long durée* approach can accomplish. An example that it would be advisable to replicate in other areas.

Bienkowski, P. & K. Galor. Eds. 2006. *Crossing the Rift. Resources, Routes, Settlement Patterns and Interaction in the Wadi Arabah.* – Oxford, Oxbow (Levant Supplementary Series Vol. 3). 288 pp. ISBN: 1–84217–209–3. Price \$ 90.00 (hardback)

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