Crossing Sacred Landscapes: Contacts and Continuities in the Desert Cults and Beliefs of Ancient Northern Arabia and the Arid Southern Levant



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Contacts and Continuities in the Desert Cults and Beliefs of Ancient Northern Arabia and the Arid Southern Levant

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Cover: External view of the shrine of Jabal Hārūn, southern Jordan. Photograph: J.M. Tebes.

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Ilkka Lindstedt

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Preface

I rose and climbed a mountain dry,
the greenery there had still not shown;
So putting shoes to both my feet,
I sought a spot where pasture had grown.
When I came to high Ghadir,
that mountain thick with shrubbery lay;
So we broke camp, got under way,
and stopped at Asbah's tomb to pray.
Bedouin Poem (from Bailey 1991: 46–47, no. 1.9)

Crossing different landscapes and periods has been a major feature of the desert cults and beliefs in the Middle East, from prehistory to modern times. This volume brings together a group of top-level international scholars to discuss different case-studies informing the sacred landscapes of northern Arabia (modern Saudi Arabia) and the southern arid margins of the Levant (modern Israel and Jordan) in ancient times throughout the *longue durée*, adopting an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection between archaeology, history, epigraphy, rock art research, and digital humanities. Scholars present thirteen case-studies with synchronic and diachronic analyses of the cultic and mortuary traditions of the region from the Neolithic to the early Islamic period.

The volume is particularly concerned with phenomena of cultural continuity in cultic and ritual manifestations throughout large geographical spaces. These cults and beliefs cut across different landscapes and periods. Crossings were synchronic, with religious traditions, oral narratives, cultic material culture, and funerary architecture, crossing diverse geographical landscapes and socio-cultural entities of different complexity. Crossings were also diachronic, with certain features of the material culture and architecture crossing through different temporal periods.

The papers contained in this volume present theoretical discussion of the possibility of cultural transmission over different periods and landscapes, drawing from old and new pieces of evidence. Discussion includes large-scale historical questions such as:

How did the ancient desert cults and beliefs navigate between different geographical landscapes and socio-political settings? Did these settings represent 'barriers' or 'bridges' in the transmission of cultural features?

What were the roles played by trade and cultural interconnections in the diffusion of religious ideas in preindustrial societies? More generally, how can archaeology trace the passage of bodies, objects, and ideas in arid environments?

Did the cultural transmission across different periods entail religious conservatism, or involve innovation and adaptation? How did it correlate with the religious, social, and political processes over time?

How were the ancient cults and mortuary traditions related to the landscape? More specifically, were ancient desert shrines re-visited and re-used centuries after their construction? If so, did they maintain their original symbolic significance?

When did ancient sacred journeys emerge in the area? When did they become institutionalized (pilgrimage)?

How were the religious experiences shaped by the interactions between the local cults and emerging Christianity and Islam? And, conversely, what desert traditions found their way into the local Christian and Islamic practices?

The beginning of this volume goes back to a hybrid seminar organized by Juan Manuel Tebes (British Academy Visiting Fellow[1]) and Michael C.A. Macdonald (University of Oxford and Fellow of the British Academy) in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of University of Oxford on the 5th and 6th December 2023, entitled 'Crossing

[1] Juan Manuel Tebes wants to express his gratitude to the British Academy for awarding him a Visiting Fellowship that allowed him to carry out research at the University of Oxford in 2023–2024.

Ancient Sacred Landscapes: Contacts and Continuities in the Ancient Desert Cults and Beliefs of Northern Arabia and the Arid Southern Levant'. The lecturers were Juan Manuel Tebes and Michael C.A. Macdonald, Bill Finlayson, Steven Rosen, Jérôme Rohmer and Josselin Pinot, Melissa Kennedy, Uzi Avner, Maria Guagnin, Lena Dubinsky, Meinrat O. Andreae, Ahmad Al-Jallad, Jérôme Norris, Fokelien Kootstra-Ford, Nicolai Sinai, Ilkka Lindstedt, Harry Munt, Aleksandra Kubiak-Schneider, Michael Fradley, Wael Abu Azizeh, and Marta Luciani.[2] Most of the papers presented in the seminar are contained in this volume, plus a number of other papers by scholars who were invited to contribute thereafter. To all of them, a big and sincere thank you!

Juan Manuel Tebes
Michael Macdonald

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[2] For more details, see Tebes 2024. Most of the presentations can be seen in the YouTube channel of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0NmHAD4hO0UefBgaxIeCFbXVp_CauBc->