



Three Pioneers of Archaeology in the Arabah: Fritz Frank, Nelson Glueck and Beno Rothenberg

Joseph Greene | Harvard University

Brigitte Treumann | Independent Scholar

History of Archaeology

Sunday, November 15, 2020

This narrative of 20th-century archaeology in the Wadi Arabah focuses on three notable personalities, each with different—though connected—motives, mindsets and research objectives: Fritz Frank, Nelson Glueck, Beno Rothenberg.

Fritz Frank, German Templer, civil engineer and explorer, undertook extensive minutely recorded geological and ethnographic investigations along the Arabah between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba in 1932 and 1934. It was he who first identified Tell el-Kheleifeh with Biblical Ezion Geber.

Nelson Glueck, student of Albright and charismatic American biblical archaeologist, conducted innovative archaeological surveys in Eastern Palestine in the 1930s. In 1938–1940 he excavated Tell el-Kheleifeh on the northern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, a site he identified, following Frank, as Solomon’s Red Sea port of Ezion Geber. He interpreted the large Iron Age structure he found there as a huge copper smelter.

Beno Rothenberg, self-taught archaeologist and “founding father of archaeo-metallurgy,” began work of the western Arabah in the late 1950s. His emerging interests focused on the Timna Valley and the abundant but unexplored evidence there for ancient copper mining and smelting. Rothenberg challenged Glueck’s interpretation of Kheleifeh, a re-interpretation that Glueck ultimately accepted.

In the 20th century, Frank, Glueck and Rothenberg developed their own separate understandings of the archaeological chronology and historical significance of the Arabah. In this century recent research by Erez Ben-Yosef, building on the pathbreaking work of Frank, Glueck and Rothenberg, has broadened our understanding of the region.