

Tribal Kingdom or Segmentary State?

The Two Models of the Moabite State Formation Reexamined

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Figure 1: The Mesha Stele

Source: *Stèle de Mésha*, Photograph, Musée du Louvre, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010120339#>

† Tribal Kingdom

The idea of the tribal kingdom was first proposed by LaBianca and Younker (1995). They argue that Moab and other Levantine societies were polycentric, where power was dispersed between tribes, not fully concentrated in kingdoms. People within these kingdoms, primarily identified with their tribe, and were mostly independent of the king (Bienkowski and Van der Steen 2001: 35). Knauf describes tribal kingdoms as, “a state where a thin veneer of central administration hardly disguised the structure of a society that basically functioned on a level not penetrated by the state” (Knauf 1992: 52).

↘ Segmentary State

Contrary to the tribal kingdom model, Bruce Routledge argues that Moab would be best described as a “segmentary state” (2000: 247). Basing his perspective on the anarchist Antonio Gramsci, he argues that the state should be conceptualized as a hegemony. Hegemony is the use of both violence and consent to consolidate power through ideology. He argues that while Moab is not a state in the traditional definition, it is hegemonic. Routledge concludes that Moab was a segmentary state, where multiple identities below Moab, existed but their existence was not contradictory to Moabite identity itself. He argues identity was organized into a segmentary hierarchy, and that this hierarchy was present in the Mesha Stele (2004).

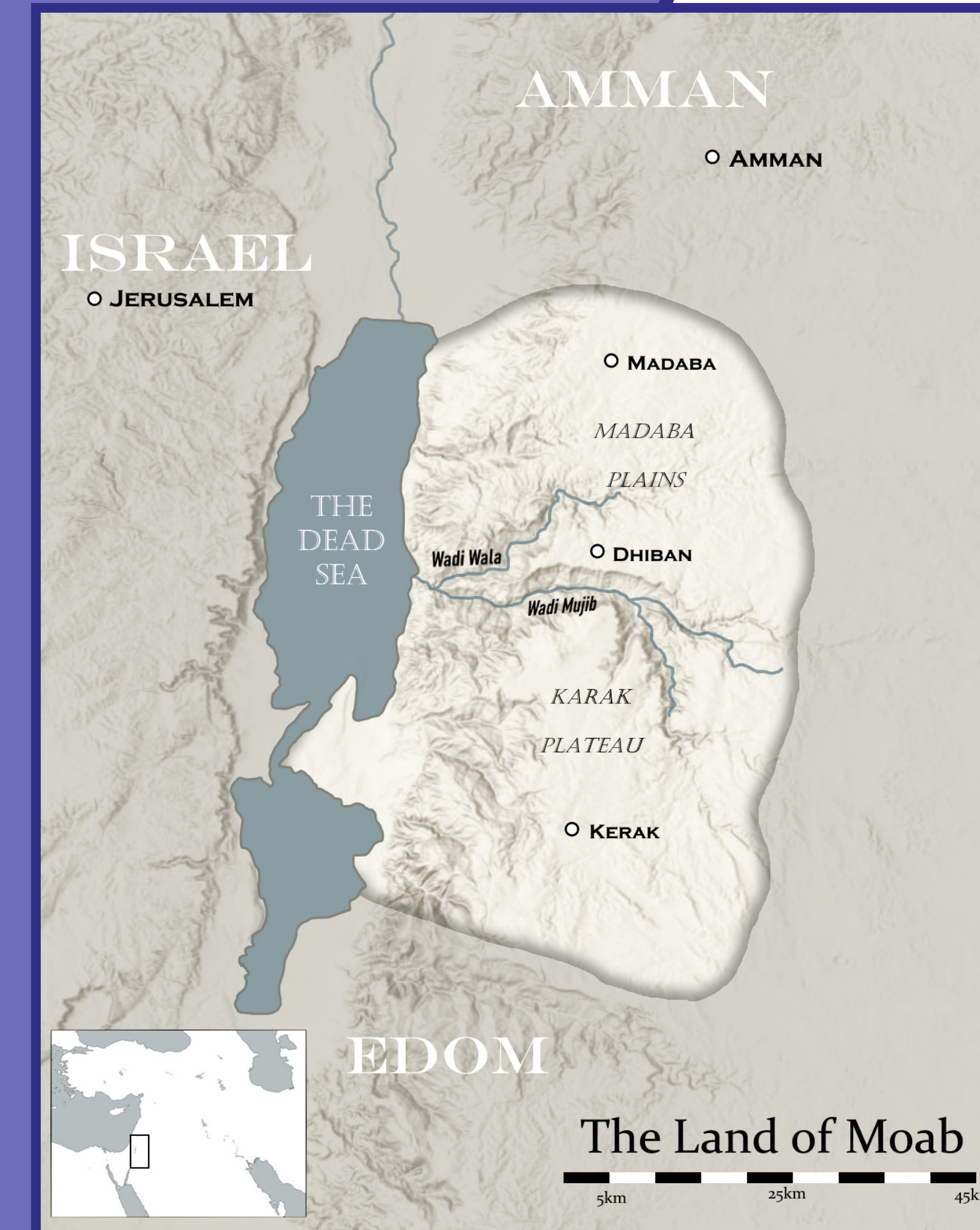


Figure 2: The Land of Moab (by author)

¶ Conclusion

With the data recounted and reexamined which model is best to conceptualize Moab? Both models have their flaws. The contrast between the state and “tribalism” in the tribal kingdom model has been heavily critiqued within anthropological theory (Sneath 2007: 15-16). Moab’s reach was very pervasive, and its political practices are impressed in the archaeological record throughout the landscape. Routledge’s concept of the “segmentary state” is largely outdated (Sneath 2007: 200). Segmentary structures are not pre-state social structures, but state projects (133). Furthermore, the available evidence seems to indicate there was not a segmentary structure in Moab, as described by Routledge. The available evidence seems to indicate there was no segmentary structure in Moab. Although, Routledge’s idea of hegemony could still be largely useful. In Routledge’s perspective, hegemony is the result of force and consent operating together, utilizing symbols and metaphors of identity and power to create the social perception of the state (2004: 37-38). This social process seems to have occurred in Moab. Discarding the segmentary framework and understanding Moab as a hegemonic state would provide a solid basis for future academic study of Moab.

1 Textual Material

One of the most contentious pieces of data in the textual record are the symbols of identity in the Mesha Stele. Mesha does not mention “Moabite” identity at all. While there are no Moabites in the Mesha Stele, there are references to other identities. For example, Mesha refers to himself as a “Dibonite” and even refers to other identities such as the “men of Gad,” “men of Makhrot,” and the “men of Sharon.” Bienkowski argues that this supports the tribal kingdom model, where people (even the king) identified with their “tribe” and not Moab as a whole (2009: 9-12). While, Routledge argues that this supports his segmentary model, with the Moabite state recognizing a hierarchy of identities in Moab (2000: 239).

But are these “identities” in the Stele actually identity groups? In the Ancient Near East, most identity groups were designated as בן (*bənē*), the “sons of [common ancestor]” (Routledge 2000: 237). However, in the Mesha Stele, the groups are designated as שן (*šš*), the “men of X.” The use of שן instead of בן has serious implications for the meaning of these groups, and in fact, deemphasizes their identity, rather than recognizes their identity.

Yet, where is “Moabite” identity? Nobody identifies as a Moabite not even the king. While it is not explicitly stated, Moabite identity is certainly implied and would have been understandable to the original audience. Moab’s identity was constructed around the symbol of land. Land was often a symbol of identity in the Ancient Near East often described as “the Sacred Landscape” (Pongratz-Leisten 1997: 325; Machinist 1993: 89). Moab is similar to this, as Mesha draws upon the previous notion of the land of Moab, redefines it, and changes its definition to create Moab as an identity, a sacred landscape dedicated to Kemosh (Routledge 2004: 150).

2 Archaeological Evidence

The archaeological record also displays the use of physical force in Moab. Building projects were conducted in cities such as Dhiban, Balu’a, Madaba, and KMT with the sites possessing gate complexes, impressive walls, statues, and large building complexes. This architecture found in Moab is associated with royal ideology, and perpetuate the presence of the king (Routledge 2004: 154).

The state was not isolated to the major towns in Moab, such as Dhiban, Balu’a, KMT, etc. Based on this evidence, Moabite political power was likely exerted outside the urban centers, as these fortifications were built primarily for the goal of extracting resources from the population and defending their interests, some of the key activities the state undertakes (Tilly 1985). However, Moab was not monolithic and all-powerful. In the ancient world, state power was fragmented and dispersed across the landscape. State power was unequally distributed across the territory and with varying degrees of political concentration (Smith 2005: 834). The state has to pick and choose its battles. Maintaining and managing the landscape is extremely difficult and it has to choose the most cost-effective way to govern and assert its power over a given territory (835). Moabite political power was less concentrated in the south, with sites primarily being concentrated around the King’s highway (see Figure 3).

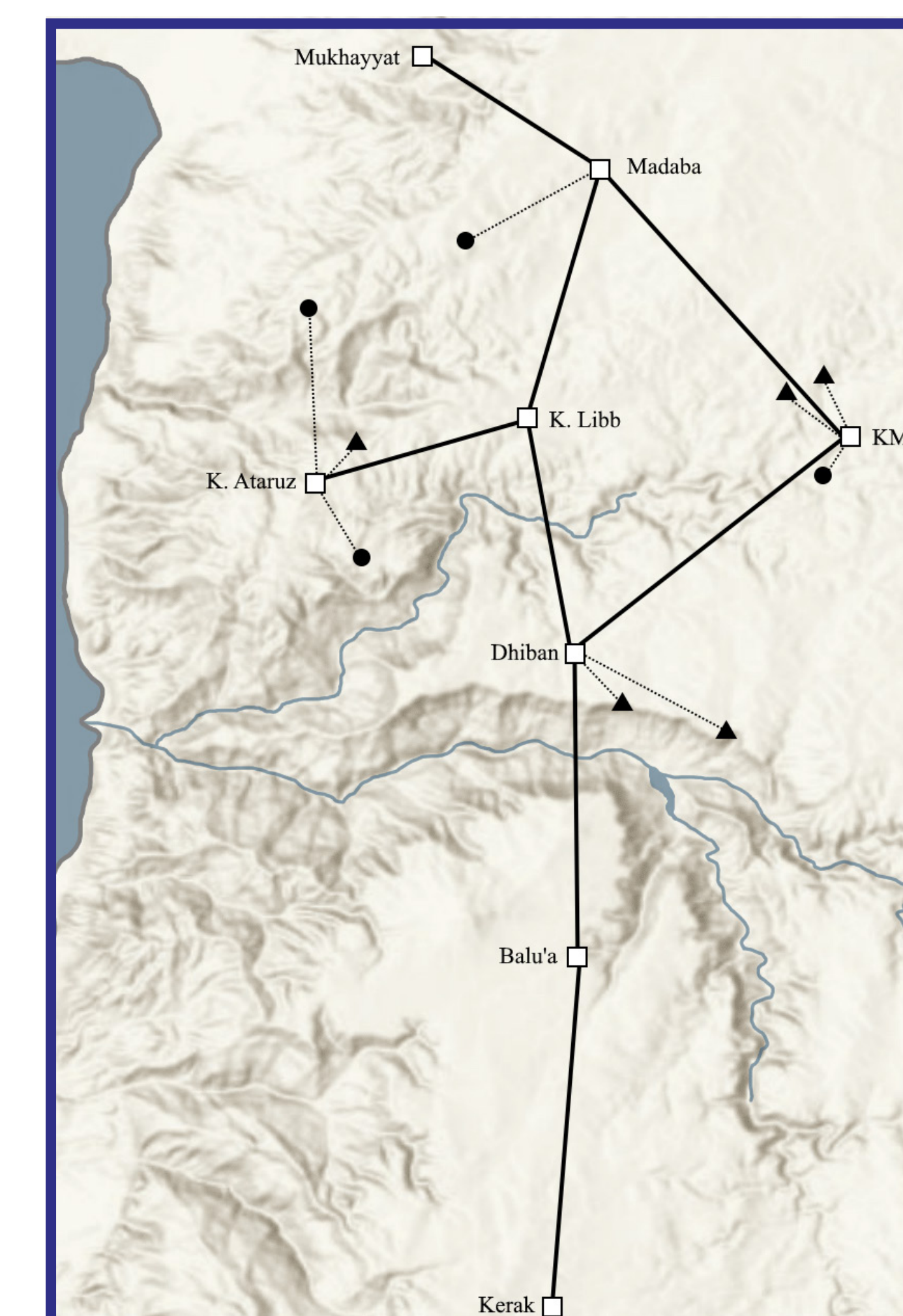


Figure 3: The Distribution of Power in Moab (by author)

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