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Archaeological digs bolster biblical record

Ancient Edomite settlement shows advanced society

By Scott LaFee

STAFF WRITER

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In the 10th and ninth centuries B.C., the kingdom of David and later of his son, Solomon, spanned much of what is now Israel, Palestine, Syria and Jordan. It was a vibrant and expansive empire, but also one beset by enemies, among them the neighboring kingdom of Edom, south of the Dead Sea.

Or so the Bible says. Over the decades, archaeologists have found little tangible proof that the Edomites were anywhere close to an organized society capable of seriously threatening the Israelites of David and Solomon. Most scientists presumed the story of Edom was just that – a story rewritten so many times over the centuries that it became mythology.

“The Bible was put together in the fifth century BCE (before the common era),” said Thomas Levy, an archaeologist at the University of California San Diego. “It was thought that any allusions to history before the fifth century must be pure myth.”

But in a paper published yesterday in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Levy, who directs UCSD's Levantine Archaeology Lab, and colleagues in Jordan and England write that the biblical story of Edom might contain nuggets of historical fact.

Ongoing excavations of an ancient Edomite settlement in southern Jordan have unearthed evidence that the site was a center of industrial-scale mining and metalworks during the 10th and ninth centuries B.C. The discovery indicates that Edomite society was sufficiently advanced to have posed a threat to the reigns of David and Solomon.

Khirbat en-Nahas lies in the desolate, arid lowlands south of the Dead Sea in what is now Jordan's Faynan district. For several years, Levy and others have been digging there, probing through stratified layers of human habitation. In their latest paper, they report finally reaching virgin soil after excavating more than 20 feet of industrial smelting debris or slag.

Recovered artifacts, organic materials and high-precision radiocarbon dating indicate that metallurgic activity at Khirbat en-Nahas, which means “ruins of copper” in Arabic, spiked during the ninth century B.C., or roughly the period when Solomon reigned.

Was Khirbat en-Nahas a real-life version of King Solomon's (copper) mines? Levy's findings don't provide a conclusive answer, but he says they do make asking the question legitimate.

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“I think it throws the question back out there,” he said.

Khirbat en-Nahas was the largest Iron Age copper manufacturing site in the region, Levy said. “The level and scale of production was industrial by ancient standards. There are networks of trails and mines, whole wadis loaded with mines. Some extend 40 meters (131 feet) into hillsides, others go down 30 meters (98 feet) into underground galleries.

“This was serious work. Khirbat en-Nahas is hyperarid desert. It’s like Anza-Borrego at its driest. The only reason to be here is to mine or conduct archaeological digs.”

But maybe not for much longer. Levy is collaborating with the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature in Jordan to have Khirbat en-Nahas declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

“There’s still copper here,” he said. “And as world copper prices rise, there’s a danger that the area might be remined.”

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