

## Tribes and territories in Transjordan: the tribe of Gad according to Moab and Israel

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# Tribes and Territories in Transjordan

## The Tribe of Gad According to Moab and Israel

*Erasmus Gaß*

The biblical image of Moab shows both positive and negative facets. While the narrative of Ruth depicts a family idyll advocating friendly relations between Israel and Moab, elsewhere Moabite women are responsible for the seduction of the Israelites to the idolatry of Baal-Peor (Num 25). Between these two poles of esteem and intolerance, many gradations are possible. It comes as no surprise that the biblical testimony about Moab is a biased depiction representing only the Israelite perspective. As a competing neighboring culture, the Israelites depicted the Moabites as friends, but also as enemies. This was mainly driven by the desire to differentiate themselves in contrast to the Moabites. In this respect, the data of the Old Testament is not beyond all doubt from a historical perspective. As will be demonstrated in the following, it is not surprising that Israel and Moab struggled regarding territorial supremacy. Therefore, claims to ownership of northern Moab have always been virulent among Israel and Moab. These territorial interests had to be justified by both people in some form or another.

Although – at least in later times – Israel and Moab are associated with polities or states, neither of these names were initially political designations. First of all, the name Moab was a geographical term and only later a denotation of a political entity.<sup>1</sup> Even the toponym “Moab” itself appears to reflect geographical musings. In that respect, it was suggested that the toponym *Mō'āb* could be derived as a participial form from the Hebrew root *Y'B* (“to desire”). Accordingly, this toponym would refer to the desirable character of the landscape or the population. This matches perfectly with the fertile plateau of the Mishor north of the Arnon river. It is also possible that the name is connected to the Semitic root *W'B* (“to be wide”), so that the meaning of the toponym could be rendered as “breadth, width,” which can be connected to the landscape structure and would equally be a perfect description of the Mishor. Recently,

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<sup>1</sup> See Lipiński 2006, 319; Dearman 2009, 118f.; Weippert 2014, 140f.; Routledge 2016, 80; Frevel 2018, 122. According to Weippert 1998, 547 the geographical designation “Moab” refers first to the *Arđ el-Kerak* south of the Arnon river. Similarly, Lipiński 2006, 322 who labels this southern area as “original territory of Moab.” However, this is only the biblical perspective. Whether this is accurate, will be shown in the following.

however, it has been suggested that the name Moab is related to the Arabic lexeme *wa'ba* (“water-containing rock crack”). Such an etymology would allude to the incision in the East Jordanian tableland formed by the *Wādi el-Mūğib*. However, Moab is much more than the canyon of the river Arnon, so that this etymology explains only the most important geographical feature of Moab.<sup>2</sup>

The geographical designation Moab is used in the famous Moabite Mesha stela (*KAI 181*) as a collective term to construct national identity (lines 5, 6, 12, 20).<sup>3</sup> It seems that Mesha shifted the focus from local identities and alliances to the transregional level by using the collective term “land of Moab,” which was governed by him and by his dynastic god, Kemosh. In any case, “Moab” is the superior geo-political unit over several tribes living in the “Land of Moab.” By this, Mesha constructed his kingdom that subsumed and integrated regional polities with him as king, Kemosh as supreme deity and Dibon/Qarḥō as capital.<sup>4</sup>

In the following, the biblical depiction of Moab will be sketched first to demonstrate the Israelite perspective on Moab. In a second step the particular description of the Moabite king Mesha,<sup>5</sup> the founder of the “kingdom” of Moab, who forced the Omrides of Israel out of the fertile area north of the Arnon, or more precisely north of the *Wādi el-Wāle*, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE will be outlined. In a third point the allegedly “Israelite” tribe Gad will be evaluated critically regarding both perspectives.

## 1. The Biblical Depiction of Moab

Contrary to proposals locating Moab south of the river Arnon, the Moabite heartland has to be looked for in the north as will be shown in the following.<sup>6</sup> Even the biblical texts give some clear indications that Moab proper is to be found north of *Wādi el-Mūğib*, especially in the Mishor.

The toponym Mishor (*mīšōr* “plain”) is the biblical name for the fertile plateau north of *Wādi el-Mūğib* and east of the northern end of the Dead Sea.<sup>7</sup> The southern boundary of the Mishor is contested. Sometimes *Wādi el-Wāle* is considered to be its southern border.<sup>8</sup> In that respect, the “land of Dibon” was not

<sup>2</sup> For the different etymological derivations see Gass 2009, 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Harrison/Barlow 2005, 179.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Gass 2009, 53–59. Similarly Routledge 2000, 235–239; Harrison/Barlow 2005, 183; Doak 2020, 104–106.

<sup>5</sup> The name form Mesha employed by the Bible will be used in the following though the name originally was pronounced *Mōšī*, see Weippert, 2010, 245 n.9.

<sup>6</sup> For both proposals outlined side-by-side in Numbers see Frevel 2019, 263–268.

<sup>7</sup> See Na'aman 2018, 186.

<sup>8</sup> See Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 713.

part of the Mishor. For the purpose of the following discussion the major dimension of the Mishor will be assumed to consist of the “Land of Medeba,” the “Land of Ataroth,” and the “Land of Dibon.”

The area of the Mishor was claimed by a wide variety of powers – at least partially by the Israelites under Omri in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, by the Moabites in the 9<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and by the Ammonites in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Although the region changed hands several times, the tribes settling there remained the same. Therefore, the borders between competing powers were often changing and tribal affiliations were fluid.<sup>9</sup> The tribes of Dibon, Gad, Reuben, etc. settling in the Mishor were living in the “land of Moab,” but could be related to the kingdom of Israel, Moab, or even Ammon. Moreover, the Mishor was used for agriculture (cereal crops and herds) with a human population being predominantly mobile.<sup>10</sup> This meant that borders and state administration were shifting over time. Therefore, the relationship of the tribes living in the Mishor to one of the power houses claiming superiority on the Mishor was not fixed, but ambiguous. It will be shown in the following that the biblical tradition banning Moab south of the Arnon is a literary construction.<sup>11</sup>

### 1.1 Geographical Terms Related to Moab

First, the construct chain *‘arbôt Mô`āb*<sup>12</sup> has to be considered. The geographical term *‘arābāh* primarily denotes – according to the etymology of Arabic *garaba* (“to be remote”) – an area that is remote and avoided by people.<sup>13</sup> The lexeme *hā`arābāh* determined with an article specifically denotes the Jordan Rift Valley, its individual parts and its continuation south of the Dead Sea. Due to the literary context and the other geographical indications, the designation *‘arbôt Mô`āb* can only mean the eastern bank of the Jordan immediately north of the Dead Sea.<sup>14</sup> This location also fits the topographical qualifiers *me`ebær l`Yarden Y`reḥô* or *‘al Yarden Y`reḥô*. Accordingly, the *‘arbôt Mô`āb* correspond to that territory east of the Jordan on the level of Jericho. Thus, the *‘arbôt Mô`āb* is the Jordan plain at the foot of the Nebo massif.<sup>15</sup> Due to the construct chain *‘arbôt Mô`āb* relating these *‘arbôt* to *Mô`āb*, the east bank of the Jordan north of the Dead Sea must be interpreted either as part of the geographical or

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<sup>9</sup> See Tebes 2018, 286: “Like most of the small local political entities of this period, Moab did not have fixed boundaries but rather established areas of political hegemony or kinship relationships that fluctuated episodically, sometimes expanding and sometimes contracting.”

<sup>10</sup> See Dearman 1996, 204. For the excellent agricultural possibilities of the Mishor during the ages see van der Steen/Smelik 2007, 155.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed treatment see Gass 2009, 138–210.

<sup>12</sup> See Num 22:1; 26:3, 63; 31:12; 33:48, 49, 50; 35:1; 36:13; Deut 34:1, 8; Josh 13:32.

<sup>13</sup> See Schwarzenbach 1954, 98f.

<sup>14</sup> See Frevel 2019, 263.

<sup>15</sup> See Mittmann 2002, 47.

political area of Moab. This northern region cannot be associated with Mesha's campaign in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but even more so with his successors.<sup>16</sup> Though this area is contested between Israel and Moab, this northern area is related to Moab even by the biblical authors, which is remarkable.

The construct chain *šēdeh Mō'āb*<sup>17</sup> refers to both the fertile land and the territory of Moab, i.e., it is both an agricultural and a geographical term.<sup>18</sup> According to Num 21:20, the *šēdeh Mō'āb* are the region east of Mt. Nebo and thus could be identified with the "land of Medeba" mentioned by Mesha (line 7f.).

The construct chain *'æræš Mō'āb*<sup>19</sup> is the most comprehensive designation for the area that may be included in Moab. It can refer to the territory of Moab, but also to the population living there. According to the town list in Jer 48:21–24 *'æræš Mō'āb* has to be localized north of the Arnon. Likewise, the viticulture mentioned in Jer 48:33 is only possible in the area of Heshbon and Medeba, but not in other regions. Only in Judg 11:15,18 is *'æræš Mō'āb* located south of the river Arnon but this is due to the narrative logic of Judg 11, which tries to delegitimize Moab in the northern territories (see 1.3). So, this dissonant view can be explained.

The *gēbûl Mō'āb* is a difficult term since the lexeme *gēbûl* can be rendered in different ways. It is most commonly used to express the "border." But the "area" enclosed by this boundary line can also be described with the lexeme *gēbûl*. In the biblical texts *gēbûl Mō'āb*<sup>20</sup> apparently refers to the border of the territory of Moab. The *gēbûl Mō'āb* is to be identified with the river Arnon. However, according to the biblical data the river Arnon is the northern border, not the southern border that appears to be more coherent to all the other data outlined above. This misinterpretation is due to the Sihon narrative, a legitimating tradition to bolster Israelite claims for the Mishor (see 1.3).

All things considered, nearly all biblical geographical terms relating to Moab point to the area north of the Arnon, so that biblical Moab seems to be located mainly in the Mishor and its northern environs. Only the expression *gēbûl Mō'āb* defines the river Arnon as the northern border of Moab. But this term is used in contexts referring to the Sihon tradition. Thus, the deviations from the overall northern picture can be easily explained (see 1.3). It will be shown that this southern localization is a literary construct that cannot be used

<sup>16</sup> Lipiński 2006, 351 correctly maintains that this area was not part of Mesha's conquests.

<sup>17</sup> Gen 36:35; Num 21:20; Ruth 1:6; 2:6; 4:3; 1Chr 1:46; 8:8. As a plural term *šēde Mō'āb* is used in Ruth 1:1, 2, 6, 22. The plural expression *šēde Mō'āb* is a general term only used for a region in post-exilic times, as there was no longer a state of Moab, see Zwickel 2015, 244f.

<sup>18</sup> See Gass 2009, 165. According to Knauf, 2019, 284f *šēdeh* is the cultivable, but uncultivated land.

<sup>19</sup> Deut 1:5; 28:69; 32:49; 34:5, 6; Judg 11:15, 18 (2×); Jer 48:24, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Num 21:13, 15; 33:44; Deut 2:18; Judg 11:18 (2×); Isa 15:8.

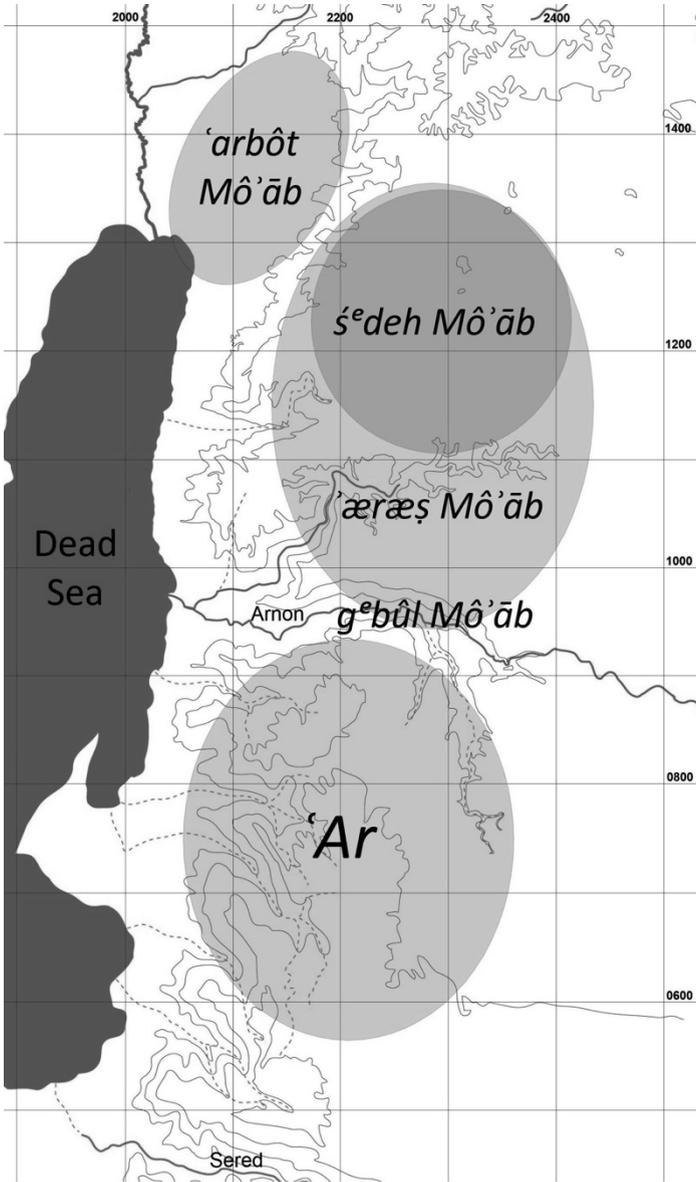


Figure 1: Geographical terms related to Moab

for historical reconstructions. All in all, the “Land of Moab” initially encompassed the area north of the Arnon, which was divided into ‘*arbôt Mô`āb* and *šēdeh Mô`āb*. Therefore, the core of Moab is situated not on the *Arđ el-Kerak*, but on the Mishor and its foothills. Only secondarily was the term Moab used for the area south of the Arnon as well.

### 1.2 Moabite and Israelite Toponyms

The Bible describes the territory of Moab with toponyms that are also associated with the Israelite tribes of Gad and Reuben. Therefore, it is difficult to make a definite statement about the Israelite occupation of Transjordan, since the biblical evidence is not only presumably late, but also contradictory.<sup>21</sup> Whereas the tribe of Gad ruled over territories north and south of Reuben according to Num 32:34–38,<sup>22</sup> the Gadite sphere of influence extends exclusively north of Heshbon according to Josh 13:24–28. Sometimes it is argued that this differing picture is due to the later prominence of Reuben so that the once large tribe of Gad settling in the whole of the Mishor at first was repressed to the north.<sup>23</sup> However, Josh 13 is a literary construction that depicts the Transjordan as an Israelite inheritance, meaning that it is far from certain to judge the delineation of these territories as historically trustworthy.<sup>24</sup> A territorial expansion of the elusive tribe of Reuben is only a literary invention to give this tribe more prominence. Similarly, the tribal inheritance of Simeon and Dan in Cisjordan was invented to get the fixed number of twelve Israelite tribes.<sup>25</sup>

Six toponyms associated exclusively with Moab lie north of the Arnon: Abel-Shittim, Beth-Diblathaim, Beth-Gamul, Kerioth, Holon, and Mizpeh-Moab, although the last two places are insecure.<sup>26</sup> All other places can be located nearly without fail to the area north of the river Arnon.

Another ten toponyms can possibly be found south of the Arnon: Dimon, Horonaim, Luhith, Zoar, Ar-Moab, Eglaim, Kir-Heres/Hareseth, Kir-Moab, Madmen, Nimrim.<sup>27</sup> However, their location is not always beyond doubt:

1. There is the possibility that Madmen and Dimon are not independent places due to formal and literary reasons, but alternative names of the northern place Dibon.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See also Dion/Daviau 2010, 208.

<sup>22</sup> According to Schmidt 2002, 510 the intention of Num 32:34–38 is to argue that the places founded by the Gadites and Reubenites belong to these two tribes.

<sup>23</sup> See Na`aman 2018, 206.

<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Na`aman 2018, 210.

<sup>25</sup> See Gass 2019, 136.

<sup>26</sup> See Gass 2009, 176–178.

<sup>27</sup> See Gass 2009, 178–184.

<sup>28</sup> See Gass 2009, 184 n.947.

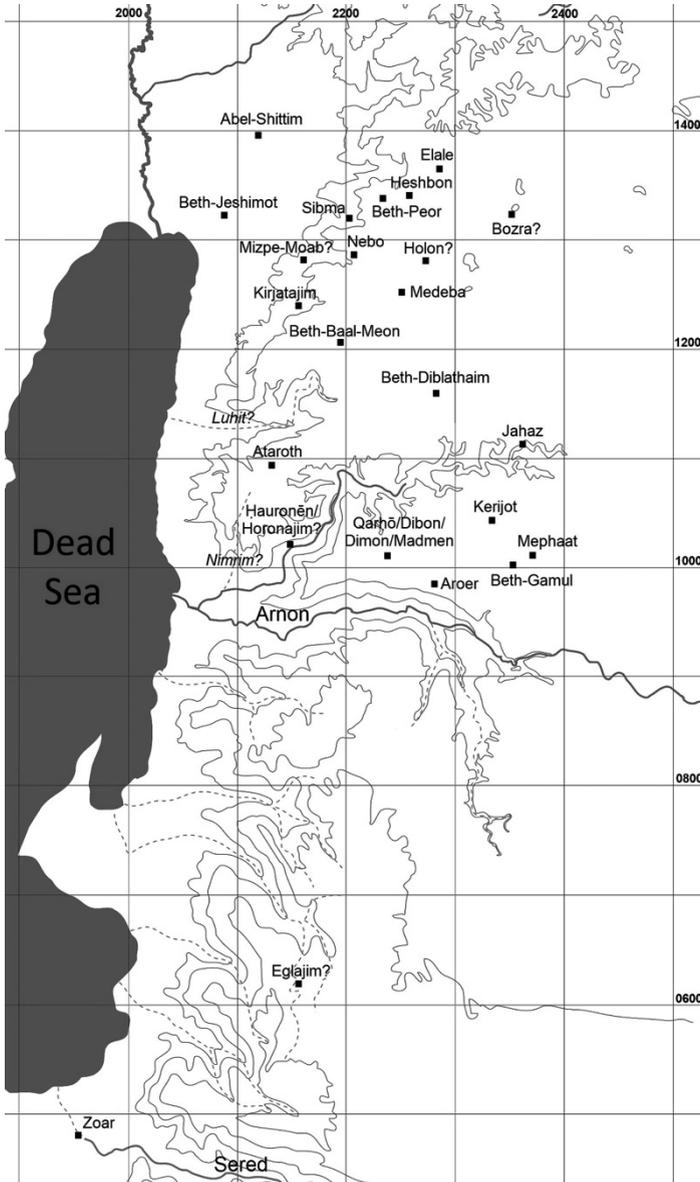


Figure 2: Biblical toponyms related to Moab

2. The place names with the *nomen regens qîr* (Kir-Heres, Kir-Hareseth, Kir-Moab) presumably designate one and the same place. This Moabite *qîr* does not necessarily have to be located south of the Arnon, since the southern localization of Kir-Hareseth, for example, is based only on the Targumic rendering of Kir-Hareseth as *krk' d=MW'B* pointing to the place *el-Kerak* (2170.0660). However, the consonantal change of  $q > k$  has to be explained. In contrast, Isa 16:6–11 in particular points to a location north of the Arnon. Kir-Hareseth, then, could be an alternative name for Kiriath-Huzot or Kiriathaim.
3. As to the exact location of Luhith and Horonaim no further reference is actually made in the biblical texts. Apparently, they are located on a road that leads down from the high plateau into the *Ġôr*. A northern location for Horonaim and Luhith seems equally possible.<sup>29</sup>

All in all, the only places that are likely south of the river Arnon are Zoar, Ar-Moab, Eglaim, and Nimrim, although compelling evidence for a southern location of both Eglaim and Nimrim is lacking. Only Ar-Moab and Zoar are most probably southern places. Therefore, nearly all places mentioned by the Bible as belonging to Moab are situated north of the Arnon.

A Moabite presence to the north of the Arnon is also supported by a number of toponyms that can be attributed to Moab, but also to Israel: Aroer, Beth-Jeshimoth, Beth-Meon/Baal-Meon, Beth-Peor, Bozrah, Dibon, Elealeh, Heshbon, Jahaz, Kiriathaim, Medeba, Mephaat, Nebo, and Sibmah.<sup>30</sup> All these data clearly show that Moab is mainly to be expected north of the Arnon.

To conclude: Almost all the toponyms associated with Moab by the Old Testament – and partly also with Israel – are located north of the Arnon,<sup>31</sup> whereas the hitherto proposed identifications for the toponyms south of the Arnon are extraordinarily vague. In addition, it is not at all certain whether these toponyms are actually located south of the Arnon, since some reasons for a northerly localization can also be put forward. Whether this problem can be explained by the biblical authors' ignorance or lack of interest in the topography of the *Arđ el-Kerak* is difficult to decide. An ideological displacement of the Moabites from the area north of the river Arnon would have been much easier for the biblical authors to resolve if they would have referred exclusively to southern toponyms, but this obviously did not happen. The biblical authors attest to the northern localization of Moab even against the literary intentions put forward by the Sihon tradition, legitimating the Mishor as Israelite territory. Therefore, the biblical evidence pointing to Moab north of the Arnon is remarkable.

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<sup>29</sup> See Gass 2020, 574–578.

<sup>30</sup> See Gass 2009, 185–188.

<sup>31</sup> See also Miller 1989, 27. This confirms best with the Mesha stela mentioning places north of the Arnon river, see Lemaire 1994, 37, with the possible exception of Ḥauronēn.

### 1.3 The Sihon Narrative in Num 21 and Its Legitimizing Power<sup>32</sup>

While the semantic (see 1.1) and topographical (see 1.2) picture for the localization of the toponym Moab is quite clear, certain biblical texts raise doubts against a location of Moab north of the Arnon. The key text for a southern localization of Moab is the Sihon narrative in Num 21:21–24\*, 25–26a, 27. The victory of Israel over Sihon as told in the Sihon narrative is the main basis for the land seizure in the whole of Transjordan, which extends from Gilead to the river Arnon. Thus, Israelite claims to ownership of northern Moab are repeatedly associated with the Sihon narrative. A Moabite settlement of this area is negated by help of this legitimating legend.

The Sihon narrative in Num 21 – originally an aetiology for the ruin of Heshbon – attempts to implicitly negate the Moabite claims of ownership in the area north of the Arnon by means of the assignment of this area to the Amorites. Thus, the Sihon narrative ideologically underpins Israelite settlement policy in Transjordan as the Israelites conquered the Mishor from the Amorites. It is not yet at issue here whether Moabites have ever lived in this area. Rather, the pre-population of the Mishor is labelled Amorite. And the dangerous Amorites can easily be expelled whereas the Moabites are closely related to the Israelites and therefore should not be displaced from their habitat.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the assignment of the Mishor to an Amorite polity is primarily ideologically motivated and most probably lacking historical reality<sup>34</sup> since it is contradicted by the biblical tradition (see 1.1–2 above) as well as the extrabiblical evidence (see 2 below).

Moreover, there is no historical basis that Sihon was ever an Amorite king. Sihon was most likely a toponym for the area around Heshbon at first, for which Jer 48:45 may speak. Even though this passage is obviously a secondary addition to the Book of Jeremiah, this does not necessarily speak against the originality of the used tradition. The *lectio difficilior* in Jer 48:45 (*mibbên Sîhôn*) is preferable and may give a clue to the correct interpretation of the name Sihon as a toponym. Moreover, the *parallelismus membrorum* Heshbon-Sihon hardly suggests a personal name Sihon, but a toponym. The proper name Sihon can be linked to the Arabic toponym *Šîhān/Sihān*, which has survived

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<sup>32</sup> See the more detailed discussion in Gass 2009, 190–210.

<sup>33</sup> Stordalen 2015, 249 sketches the canonical picture of Heshbon in the following way: “A canonical synthesis of the narratives would portray Heshbon and the surrounding area as originally Moabite, won by Sihon the Amorite, taken by Moses and the Israelites, partly inhabited by Gilead, won by Israelite tribes, claimed by Ammonites and re-conquered by the Israelites.”

<sup>34</sup> See also Na’aman 2018, 208.

south of the Arnon in the *Ġebel Šihān* (2200.0877)<sup>35</sup> or north of Heshbon at the site of *Sihān* (2216.1718) near to the river Jabbok. The place names *Šihān* and *Sihān* are Canaanite due to the ending *-ān*, especially since this ending was no longer productive in Arabic. The toponyms *Šihān/Sihān* thus date from pre-Arabic times,<sup>36</sup> so that the biblical Sihon can indeed originally have been a landscape name that survived into the biblical period. It seems that Sihon is only secondarily portrayed as an Amorite king. Maybe Sihon has to be understood originally as a toponym and later as a tribal name,<sup>37</sup> which is linked to the area settled by the tribe of Sihon.<sup>38</sup> All things considered, the Amorite king Sihon was most probably a fictive character that was derived from the toponym Sihon that is preserved up to now, but outside of the Mishor. In that respect the original toponym Sihon in Jer 48:45 is only secondarily portrayed as an Amorite king in Num 21. The territories claimed by the Israelites north of the Arnon were supposedly subject to this Amorite king. This ethnic assignment is explained solely by the fact that Israel did not want to drive the Moabites out of their land since the plateau just north of the Arnon had been Moabite in the past.<sup>39</sup> This modified territorial description corresponds closely to Deut 2:9, which forbids any conquest of Moabite territory. Since there were no Moabites in the Mishor – for the Arnon being the northern Moabite border –, the occupation of the Mishor is legitimate for the Israelites and especially the Omrides.<sup>40</sup>

All in all, one cannot reconstruct the Transjordanian history with the biblical Sihon narrative. Moreover, it is difficult to relate Sihon directly to the city of Heshbon since the toponym Sihon is not part of the environs of Heshbon. The proposed relationship of the toponym Sihon to new residents settling at Heshbon is hypothetical at best.

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<sup>35</sup> See Knauf 1990, 139–141. However, one must assume a change from *S* to *Š* for this etymological derivation since the Arabic *Š* in the name of the mountain *Ġebel Šihān* presupposes an Proto-Semitic *Š*. Maybe the Moabite toponym *Šihōn* was rendered *Sihōn* in Ammonite or Aramaic from which this name form entered Hebrew.

<sup>36</sup> For etymological derivations see Knauf 1990, 139f.

<sup>37</sup> See Stordalen 2015, 250. In contrast Na'aman 2018, 210 considers Sihon the city ruler of Heshbon who was defeated by the Omrides.

<sup>38</sup> This would be in accord with the “man of X” terms on the Mesha Stela.

<sup>39</sup> See Roskop 2016, 771. Against this background, it is unnecessary to interpret the Song of Heshbon (Num 21:28–29//Jer 48:45–46) as an Amorite victory song and to historically evaluate the events depicted in it. There was neither an Amorite conquest of former Moabite territory nor a warlike conflict between resident Amorites and Moabites expanding northwards. According to Na'aman 1997, 90 “the famous Song of Heshbon (Num. 21:27–30) must have been originally an Israelite song, probably composed after Omri's conquest of the territory between Heshbon and Arnon.”

<sup>40</sup> See also Frevel 2019, 284: “By relocating Moab's territory, Israel could remain innocent with regard to the command in Deut 2:9.” According to Dion/Daviau 2010, 208 it was “fair game to Israel once the Moabites had lost it to a third party.”

Nonetheless, the Sihon tradition is linked with a southern polity since an important political hub was formed in the eastern *Arđ el-Kerak* region around the center of *Hirbet Bālū 'a* (2242.0853) in the Iron Age I, close to the King's Road, which profited from the copper trade. Perhaps the southern landscape name *Ĝebel Šihān* (2200.0877) – only 5 km distant from *Hirbet Bālū 'a* – was related somehow to this early polity based in *Hirbet Bālū 'a*.<sup>41</sup> In that respect, it is regarded to be possible that the Sihon tradition reflects attempts of this polity to expand northwards. The ruler coming from the area of *Ĝebel Šihān* then became the Amorite king Sihon in the Bible. Maybe a peaceful settlement of immigrants from southern *Ĝebel Šihān* is equally possible. Therefore, the settlers who founded Heshbon might have originated in the area of *Ĝebel Šihān*.<sup>42</sup>

This historical reconstruction has to be critically evaluated in the following. At least, there was increased settlement activity in the Iron Age I in the northern part of the *Arđ el-Kerak* due to improved climatic conditions and the participation in copper production and trade.<sup>43</sup> There might even have been a political center at *Hirbet Bālū 'a* in the late Iron Age I, which was protected by a defensive chain of fortresses<sup>44</sup> located on isolated steep hills and fortified by casemate walls and moats. These sites were built and deserted nearly at the same time. This settlement might be due to copper production and trade, though there is no evidence for the transportation of copper in that area.<sup>45</sup> It was perhaps the Palestinian campaign of Pharaoh Shoshenq that brought an end to the flourishing of the southern Moabite polity,<sup>46</sup> even though this region was not directly affected, only economically neutralized. However, it is a debatable point whether there was a political center at *Hirbet Bālū 'a* in the late Iron Age I since the main settlement hub in the Mishor and beyond was around Medeba in Iron Age I, which spread out of the core to the periphery in the system of the Arnon and its tributaries.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the above historical outline of a *Bālū 'a* polity is hypothetical at best, using the unhistorical and literary Sihon tradition for reconstructing conflicts between north and south polities. Furthermore, the traditional – but not justified – view of locating the core of Moab in the *Arđ el-Kerak* demands a southern polity at *Hirbet Bālū 'a* or other places. In that respect, the reconstruction of a *Bālū 'a* polity is due to circular reasoning. In contrast, the land of Moab is to be looked for north of the Arnon river, whereas the

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<sup>41</sup> For the *Bālū 'a* polity see Frevel 2019, 269.

<sup>42</sup> See Knauf 1990, 141.

<sup>43</sup> See Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 713.

<sup>44</sup> For this interpretation see Finkelstein/Lipschits 2011, 142–144; Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 712f.

<sup>45</sup> See Finkelstein/Lipschits 2011, 145f.

<sup>46</sup> See Finkelstein/Lipschits 2011, 147–149; Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 723.

<sup>47</sup> See Routledge 2004, 93–108; Gass 2009, 297–300; Routledge 2016, 82f.

region between Arnon and Zered became part of Moab only after Mesha. Furthermore, the deathblow to a Moabite *Bālū'a* polity can be dealt by the following topographical reasoning. In all likelihood the southern region was designated 'Ar originally and not Moab. At least in Isa 15:1 'Ar was the name of the Moabite province south of the Arnon with Kir-Moab as capital. This conforms to Deut 2:29 since the Edomites are linked to Seir and the Moabites to 'Ar so that 'Ar is a region like Seir. Moreover, Deut 2:9 underlines the fact that the area of 'Ar is the real inheritance of the sons of Lot.<sup>48</sup> With this in mind, the *Arđ el-Kerak* is identical with 'Ar whereas the core area of Moab should be found north of the Arnon in the Mishor. Against this background the polity at *Hirbet Bālū'a* was not Moabite, but belonged to the region of 'Ar.

All things considered, the toponym Sihon – alien to Moab proper – was deliberately brought into the biblical texts in order to generate the tradition of the Amorite king Sihon of Heshbon, which in turn legitimized Israelite claims on the Mishor by relocating Moab to the area south of the Arnon. Moreover, the ruling polity of the Mishor was centered not in Heshbon, but in Medeba in the Iron Age I prior to the Omrides and Mesha. The rulers of Medeba most probably expanded to the area south of the Arnon since the southern sites were only temporarily settled. Therefore, it is impossible to establish an Amorite or Canaanite kingdom at Heshbon in the 10<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century ruling the Mishor prior to the Omride takeover since there was never a Heshbon polity, rather a polity in Medeba.<sup>49</sup> Whether there were strong polities in *Hirbet Bālū'a* – contemporaneous to the Medeba polity – cannot be said with certainty since the archaeological evidence for Iron Age I at *Hirbet Bālū'a* is ambiguous.<sup>50</sup> Since Mesha calls himself a Dibonite there is in any case no reason to assume that Mesha ruled from *Hirbet Bālū'a* south of the Arnon and that the *Bālū'a* polity was in conflict with the alleged dynasty of Daudoh in Ḥauronēn.<sup>51</sup> At least one thing is certain: One should refrain from using the Sihon tradition for historical reconstructions due to its literary intentions and historical improbability.

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<sup>48</sup> See Na'aman 2018, 187.

<sup>49</sup> See Frevel 2019, 277 contrary to Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 723.

<sup>50</sup> For the difficult archaeological record at *Hirbet Bālū'a* see Routledge 2004, 94, 234 n.27; van der Steen 2004, 133f.; Gass 2009, 233f. The casemate wall might also be dated to the Iron Age II.

<sup>51</sup> For this reasoning see Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 723f.

## 2. The Moabite Version

### 2.1 *The Moabite Territories and Beyond*

The Moabite perspective<sup>52</sup> regarding the territorial extent of Moab and the tribes settling within is described in the Mesha stela (*KAI 181*). This description is also interest-driven so that this extra-biblical data has to be analyzed critically as well. It is also not to be expected that the ethnic attributions are made correctly in the Mesha stela, especially since Mesha wants to justify his claims to the whole Mishor. Therefore, it would be misguided to favor the Mesha stela over against the biblical description and vice versa, since both traditions are guilty of forwarding their own agenda.

According to the Mesha stela the Omrides occupied the Mishor at least up to the line of Jahaz (line 18f.) – *Ḥirbet el-Mudēyine et-Temed* (2197.0932) – and Ataroth (line 10f.) – *Ḥirbet 'Aṭārūz* (2132.1094).<sup>53</sup> Both places show typical Omride architecture, consisting of an elevated podium, a casemate wall, a six or four-chambered-gate, a glacis, and a moat.<sup>54</sup> Though Omri occupied the area around Medeba, it cannot be concluded that this region was inhabited by Moabites or Israelites alone.<sup>55</sup> According to the Mesha stela, the population settling the Mishor in the period before Mesha's reign cannot be assigned to a uniform ethnic or political affiliation. It seems that different local identities living in the territory of Moab have been incorporated in Mesha's kingdom, not repressed. Moreover, this region was socio-politically divided into different groupings.<sup>56</sup>

1. 'rš "country" (Medeba, line 7f., Ataroth, line 10, maybe Moab, line 5f. and Dibon, line 28f.),
2. qr "city" (Baal-Meon, line 9, Qiryatēn/Kiriathaim line 10, Ataroth, line 11, qrn, line 29),
3. 'am "people" (Ataroth, line 11, Qarḥō, line 24),
4. 'š "man"<sup>57</sup> (Gad, line 10, Šaron, line 13, Maḥarot, line 13f., Dibon, line 28)

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<sup>52</sup> According to Harrison 2009, 31, the Mesha stela represents "a Dibonite perspective on the political struggle for control of the central highland region."

<sup>53</sup> See Frevel 2019, 272–276. For these identifications see Finkelstein/Lipschits 2011, 149.

<sup>54</sup> For Omride architecture in Moab see Finkelstein/Lipschits 2010, 34–36; Finkelstein/Römer 2016, 713.

<sup>55</sup> See Timm 1980, 24. The wording of line 8 only stresses the Israelite domination there expressed with *YšB*, not the actual settlement.

<sup>56</sup> See Routledge 2000, 235–239; Routledge 2004, 143–151; Becking 2017, 137f.

<sup>57</sup> The formulation 'š + X refers to ethnic groups identified by residence or tribal affiliation, see Weippert 2010, 246 n.28 who also refers to the overlap of residence and tribe since place/landscape can also have tribal significance.

Therefore, it is too simple to speak of Israel or Moab alone in that region. It appears that Mesha was able to unite the most diverse political and cultural entities with the help of the geographic designation “Moab” and the dynastic god Kemosh.<sup>58</sup> In the perspective of Mesha, Kemosh was the god of “Moab”<sup>59</sup> who could legitimate his claim of this territory north of the river Arnon.<sup>60</sup> The term “Moab” is the higher order entity that could be made up of smaller territories, like the “Land of Medeba,” the “Land of Ataroth,” and “Dibon”:

1. The “Land of Medeba” might be identified with the southern *el-Belqā’*, with the *Wādi Zerqā’ Mā’in* being the southern border.
2. The “Land of Ataroth” can be equated with the area of *el-Ġibāl* between *Wādi Zerqā’ Mā’in* and *Wādi el-Wāle*.
3. The territory of “Dibon,” the home of Mesha, can be related to the area of *el-Kūra* between *Wādi el-Wāle* and *Wādi el-Mūġib*.<sup>61</sup> Whereas Mesha speaks of *’rṣ* of the places Medeba and Ataroth, he uses “Dibon” as a political and territorial entity (line 20f.).

The various terms for the inhabitants and territories of Moab used by Mesha might be an indication that Moab consisted of a variety of tribes, inhabitants and territories that were united due to Mesha’s campaigns. Maybe Mesha consciously omitted the names of rival tribes and preferred territorial designations like “Land of Medeba” and “Land of Ataroth” linked to cities. The term *’rṣ* + city name probably signifies city-states or districts ruled by local tribal sheikhs that were independent before Mesha’s conquest.<sup>62</sup> Like “Moab” the term *’rṣ* “land” might be a superior territorial expression where different tribes could have settled.<sup>63</sup>

Mesha also differentiates between the territory of “Moab” and “Dibon,” since he annexed Jahaz to “Dibon” and not to “Moab” (line 20f.), which indicates the centrality of Mesha’s home Dibon.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Mesha annexed several cities (*qrn* line 29) to the “land,” which might be the “Land of Moab” though a reference to “Dibon” is equally possible. In that respect, there might be cities that were incorporated not necessarily into the smaller territory of

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<sup>58</sup> See Routledge 2016, 83–86.

<sup>59</sup> See Routledge 2016, 81.

<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Mesha mentions especially sites north of the river Arnon when speaking about Moab. According to Dearman 2009, 120 Ḥauronēn might be an exception. However, there are good reasons to locate Ḥauronēn north of the Arnon as well, see Gass 2021, 217–228.

<sup>61</sup> For these territories see Mittmann 2002, 46; Weippert 2014, 140.

<sup>62</sup> See Worschech 2009, 48.

<sup>63</sup> According to Becking 2017, 137 is *’rṣ* a “geographical entity around one or more ‘cities’.”

<sup>64</sup> See Becking 2017, 130. For the archaeological evidence in Dibon see Ray 2006, 30–37.

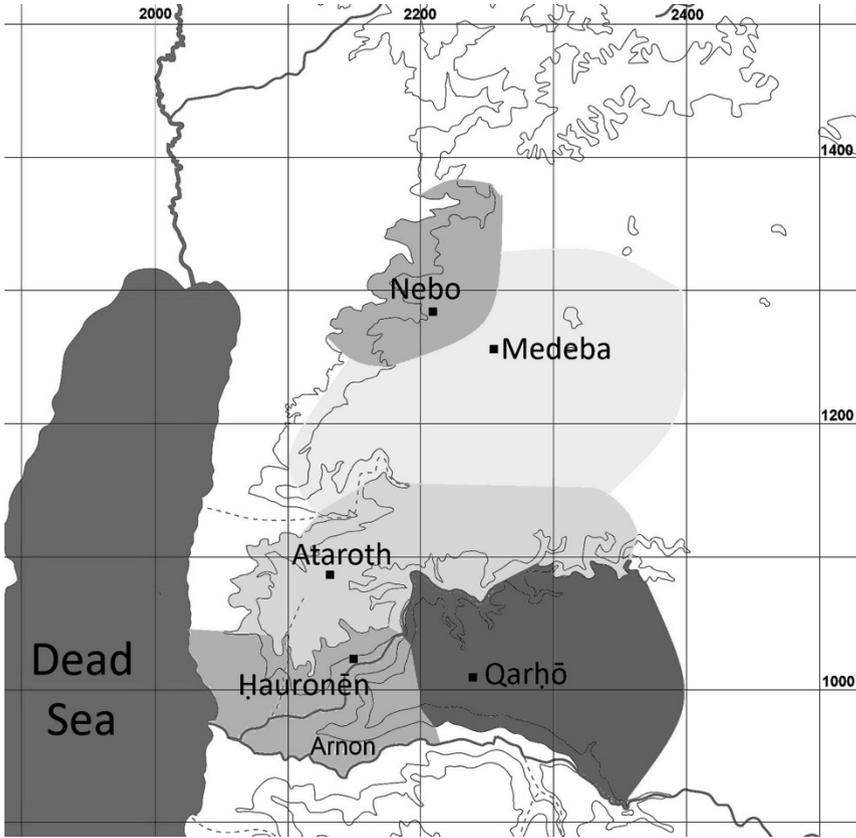


Figure 3: Territorial segmentation of Moab

“Dibon,” but into the greater area of “Moab.”<sup>65</sup> It appears that one has to differentiate between the geographical terms “Moab” and “Dibon,” with “Moab” being the greater territory including the “Land of Medeba,” the “Land of Ataroth,” and “Dibon” (see above).

It seems that “Dibon” – like “Moab” – was a geographical designation at first,<sup>66</sup> since Mesha does not use the name “Dibon” like a place name (lines 21, 28). Moreover, Mesha ruled from his capital Qarhō,<sup>67</sup> and not from a place called “Dibon.” Maybe the name of the city of Dibon was originally Qarhō,<sup>68</sup> since Mesha refers constantly to Qarhō as his capital but not to a city of Dibon. Thus, the toponym Dibon might refer to a region (lines 21, 28), rather than to

<sup>65</sup> See Green 2010, 119f.

<sup>66</sup> See Frevel 2018, 122.

<sup>67</sup> See van der Steen/Smelik 2007, 145.

<sup>68</sup> See van der Steen/Smelik 2007, 145.

a site. Only later Mesha's capital Qarḥō was called with the geographical or tribal term Dibon since this town was the center of the Moabite district Dibon.<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising that Mesha's building activities mainly took place in the area of "Dibon," as this constituted the core of his kingdom.

Even before the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, it can be assumed that the landscape of "Moab" extended over the Mishor since Mesha reports that it was due to the anger of Kemosh that the Omrides were allowed to expand into the "Land of Moab." The Omrides occupied the Mishor at least up to the line of Jahaz–Ataroth so that at least a part of "Moab" got lost ("Land of Medeba" and "Land of Ataroth"). Therefore, Mesha's campaign is a response to earlier Omride aggression and a restoration of the previous territory of Moab, for Kemosh restored (*ŠūB-H*)<sup>70</sup> the "Land of Medeba" in the time of Mesha (lines 8–9).<sup>71</sup> Since the Omride occupation presented a time of disorder due to the anger of Kemosh, Mesha established order again by bringing "Moab" under Dibonite control and under the rule of his dynastic god Kemosh.<sup>72</sup>

However, this is a propagandistic claim of Mesha so that maybe only a part of the "Land of Medeba" belonged to the realm of Mesha's father whereas the whole "Land of Medeba" belonged to Moab, the land of Kemosh. Since Mesha differentiates between his own political base at Dibon, the "Land of Medeba," and the "Land of Ataroth," these regions – though belonging to Moab – were different to his kingdom. All things considered, the narrative map of the Mesha stela is made up of four different regions:

1. Area of Dibon as first circle,
  2. Moab as second circle ("Land of Medeba" and "Land of Ataroth"),
  3. Ambiguous land as third circle that was ruled by enemies, but had to be conquered by Mesha (Nebo and Ḥauronēn),
  4. Inimical areas like Israel as fourth circle, which were respected by Mesha.<sup>73</sup>
- The "Land of Medeba" belonged to the area of Moab – and maybe also at least partly to a Moabite kingdom before – since it is restored by Kemosh (lines 8–9), whereas the areas of the third circle (Nebo and Ḥauronēn) were conquered

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<sup>69</sup> See Knauf 1990, 141; Weippert 2010, 243; Tebes 2018, 290. Contrary to Routledge 2000, 232.

<sup>70</sup> A reading of *YŠB* is not possible since *YŠB* is always constructed with *bh* and not with enclitic personal pronoun, see Gass 2009, 23f.

<sup>71</sup> See Na'aman 1997, 85. Weippert 2010, 248 n.51 points out that *ŠūB-H* could also refer to the annexation of foreign territory. Kratz 2008, 96 links everything to the deity: "It is the relationship of the king to his deity which moves history and also constitutes the historical connection between the individual scenes."

<sup>72</sup> See also Green 2010, 127: "The inscription manipulates narrative time and space in such a way as to present Mesha as the creator and intensifier of order and ideal domestic conditions."

<sup>73</sup> See Green 2010, 113–120; Becking 2017, 130.

by Mesha at the command of Kemosh.<sup>74</sup> It appears that the areas of the third circle were not dominated by the Dibonite clan of Mesha before. Since both Nebo and Ḥauronēn are annexed at the explicit order of Kemosh, both territories did not belong to the Moabite territory previously. Therefore, Mesha needed the divine legitimation to expand in territories which were not regarded as Moabite.<sup>75</sup> In that respect, Mesha was the first Dibonite/Moabite who has conquered the north-western part of the central Transjordanian plateau around Nebo.<sup>76</sup> Since Mesha implemented the ban on Nebo and did not explicitly resettle Nebo with Moabites, it appears that he even destroyed the city of Nebo.<sup>77</sup> In that respect, Nebo could not be used as a military base by the Israelites any longer. Maybe the ritual slaughter of the inhabitants of Nebo might be a terrorizing device to frighten the local Israelite and the indigenous population alike.<sup>78</sup>

It is sometimes argued that the territories of Nebo and Ḥauronēn previously belonged to Moab proper so that no divine command of Kemosh was necessary.<sup>79</sup> But the arguments are not convincing. Ḥauronēn was not restored by Kemosh (line 33) since the beginning of the sentence is lost and even if the lacuna is restored with *wyšb*, a reading “and it resided” is more probable since the prepositional compound *bh* indicates the stem *YŠB*. Furthermore, the command of Kemosh for conquering Nebo might not be due to the high risk of this military operation since Mesha apparently conquered the town of Nebo within one morning. The conquest of Nebo was a rather fast take-over. In addition, the explicit mention of the ban of the inhabitants of Nebo might argue for a foreign population there. There is no clear reason to massacre Moabites at Nebo. Thus, Nebo and Ḥauronēn most likely belonged to the third circle of foreign territory.

## 2.2 Tribalism or Segmentation

As seen above, the social identification is described on the Mesha stela by locality rather than by descent,<sup>80</sup> so that the genealogical criterium is meagre at best. The main device to arrange the region north of the Arnon is territorial with three overriding areas from north to south: the “Land of Medeba” (line

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<sup>74</sup> See Na’aman 1997, 85; Na’aman 2007, 152. Critically Jericke 2009, 150 n.46 since nothing is known about the territorial and political structure in pre-Omrīde times.

<sup>75</sup> See already Timm 1980, 26; Knauf 1991, 27: “Whenever Mesha’ sets out to conquer territories for which Moab could not take recourse to inherited titles and claims, he justifies his action by a command of his (and Moab’s) god, Chemosh.” Similarly Mittmann 2002, 47; Weippert 2010, 246 n.30; Weippert 2014, 147; Knauf/Niemann 2021, 201.

<sup>76</sup> See Knauf 1991, 26.

<sup>77</sup> See Weippert 2014, 148.

<sup>78</sup> See Dearman 1989, 207: “the ritual slaughter is at once an act of retribution, psychological warfare, and a cultic act with nationalistic overtones.”

<sup>79</sup> See Blum 2020, 212f. n.27.

<sup>80</sup> See Routledge 2004, 147.

7f.), the “Land of Ataroth” (line 10), and the area of “Dibon,” the home base of Mesha. The first two regions are named after the particular capital that has to be conquered. At least the “Land of Medeba” consists of several other cities, like Baal-Meon (line 9), and Qiryatēn (line 10). Maybe the “Land of Ataroth” covers an area of some other cities as well though this is not stated on the Mesha stela.

On an even lower level is the structuring of “Moab” by ethnic designations, like “man of Gad” (line 10), “man of Šaron” (line 13), “man of Maḥarot” (line 13f.), or “man of Dibon” (line 28). The expression *ʾiš + X* uses mainly geographical terms (Šaron, Maḥarot, Dibon). Only Gad seems to be a tribal name due to the biblical tradition. However, the geographical designation could overlap with tribal names and vice versa so that even Gad could be another geographical designation for the “Land of Ataroth.”

It is sometimes argued that Dibon was originally the name of a tribe.<sup>81</sup> However, the Mesha stela differentiates between *DYBN* (lines 21, 28) and the gentilic *DYBN-ī* (line 1f.) so that Dibon cannot be a tribal term. Thus, the gentilic form *DYBN-ī* makes it clear that Mesha is as a Dibonite, a resident of the area of Dibon.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, Dibon cannot be a tribal designation due to the name form Dibon-Gad, which connects the town of Dibon to the tribe of Gad.<sup>83</sup> It is unlikely that both terms (Dibon and Gad) are tribal designations so that the Dibonites are a subgroup of the Gadites (see also 3.3). Moreover, *DYBN* is used as a geographical or political entity on the Mesha stela (lines 21, 28). The *ʾiš DYBN* “man of Dibon” (line 28) is no proof for regarding *DYBN* as a tribal name since *ʾiš* is usually related with nontribal terms because Šaron and Maḥarot are most probably toponyms and not tribal names.<sup>84</sup> Both toponyms might refer to grazing areas from which Mesha took pastoralists and resettled them in Ataroth after the conquest.<sup>85</sup>

All in all, the tribal segmentation is the less important criterium compared to the territorial description though it is not excluded that the tribal designation is the basic social unit in the Mesha stela. This emphasis on the territorial level is elucidated by the note that the anger of Kemosh is directed against his own “land” (line 5f.) which must be “Moab” and not against the “man of Dibon” or

<sup>81</sup> See Steen/Smelik 2007, 145–147; Becking 2017, 129 n.27; Kühn 2021, 265.

<sup>82</sup> The population of Dibon might be in a special relationship of service to the Moabite king (line 28), see Timm 1980, 23, which is stressed by the annexation of Jahaz to the district of Dibon (line 20f.).

<sup>83</sup> See Weippert 2014, 145.

<sup>84</sup> See Gass 2009, 31f. According to Lipiński 2006, 340 Šaron might be the Moabite name of the Mishor and Maḥarot the area of one of the upper tributaries of the river Arnon called *Wādi el-Muḥēres*. Similarly, Worschech 2009, 48 who thinks that these people are pastoralists living in Šaron (area of agriculture, since *šrn* means “level country”) and in Maḥarot (valley of *el-Leḥūn* with the name preserved in *Wādi el-Muḥēres*).

<sup>85</sup> See Dearman 1989, 179f.

other tribal affiliations. In Mesha's perspective, "Moab" is the overall area he ruled with the legitimization of his dynastic god Kemosh. With "Moab" as high order entity based on geography Mesha unified the region north of the Arnon in opposition to Israel.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, Mesha united the smaller tribal and clan polities that were made up by pastoral and sedentary inhabitants with the territorial concept of "Moab" and legitimated it by his dynastic god Kemosh. It is a matter of debate whether these segments were based on genealogy or on geography,<sup>87</sup> but one thing is pretty clear: the geographical criterium seems to be crucial for Mesha.

All things considered, the Moabite "kingdom" might be interpreted as a segmentary state. The Mesha stela seems to underscore that "Moab" is a unitary land segmented into different territories ("Land of Medeba," "Land of Ataroth" and "Dibon"), owned by his dynastic god Kemosh and ruled by himself.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, the territory of "Moab" was also a culturally segmented entity, which is apparent in the linguistic diversity of the Moabite language, the different paleography and the distinctive local dialects, which is rather obvious regarding the whole Moabite corpus.<sup>89</sup>

However, a "segmentary state" presupposes a strongly hierarchical society with higher entities and lower segments being connected by the ruler. It is a matter of debate whether the social characterizations *'rs* and *qr* used on the Mesha stela are political entities that are hierarchically related to the basic unit of the tribe.<sup>90</sup> Since the Mesha stela does not really indicate a hierarchization of the individual entities or a political relationship between the elements,<sup>91</sup> the classification of the Moabite kingdom as "segmentary state" is not really satisfactory, which suggests that the concept of a tribal state would be more appropriate.

Therefore, it makes sense to discuss tribalism in the following.<sup>92</sup> The concept of a tribe is not fixed, but it is created due to the respective historical situation. It is based mainly on the concept of extended kinship and a network of relationships with other people. Tribes portray themselves as being interrelated. The claim for tribal affiliations might be historically correct, but it is equally possible that it is fictive and therefore generated. Tribes are located in

<sup>86</sup> See Routledge 2016, 82.

<sup>87</sup> See Tebes 2018, 287.

<sup>88</sup> For the interpretation of Mesha's kingdom as segmentary state see Routledge 2000, 235–239; Harrison 2009, 32; Routledge 2016, 84f.; Tebes 2018, 287.

<sup>89</sup> See Dion/Daviau 2010, 210f. According to Knauf 2019, 286 the language of the Mesha stela might be Omride Israelite. Moreover, the script of the Mesha stela is the Old Hebrew script, which might be borrowed by the Omrides due to their political and cultural domination over the Mishor, see Rollston 2016, 24.

<sup>90</sup> For this problem see Bienkowski 2009, 12.

<sup>91</sup> See Bienkowski 2009, 11f.

<sup>92</sup> For the following concept of tribalism see Bienkowski 2009, 17f.

a core territory but can expand and shrink. Tribes have a communal culture and ideology and work together in common projects. Strong and charismatic leaders will be able to unite tribal units to a supra-tribal entity or to a tribal kingdom by persuasion and honor. Therefore, tribal affiliations might be fluid and changing according to the historical situation so that one tribe could portray himself as Moabite or as Israelite, or could be regarded as Moabite or as Israelite from the outside.

It seems that the charismatic leader Mesha united different tribes settling in the area of “Moab” by using the geographical term “Moab” as a supra-tribal identity marker based on geography. Moreover, Kemosh – the dynastic god of Mesha’s clan in Dibon at first – ascended to Moab’s national god,<sup>93</sup> so that the triad “one ruler–one god–one land” could unify the different tribes. For that reason, Mesha also built temples for Kemosh in the conquered territories belonging originally to the “Land of Moab” (Medeba, Diblathaim, Baal-Meon, lines 29–31).<sup>94</sup> By the building of temples Mesha claimed ritual authority over local polities and legitimated political power. Furthermore, the reconquest of the “Land of Medeba” was related not only to the building of temples, but also to the resettlement of people and to further measures improving the infrastructure. Thus, he built the cities of Baal-Meon and Qiryaten in the “Land of Medeba” (lines 9–10), he transplanted men from the areas of Šaron and Maḥarot to Ataroth (lines 13–14), and he settled Dibonites in the town of Jahaz (lines 20–21). It is possible that Mesha settled especially poor people in Jahaz, since the idiom *kl ršh* can be related to the lexeme *rš* “poor.” Thus, *kl ršh* must not be changed to *kl r’šh* with the consonant *ʿ* being lost accidentally. With this regulatory action Mesha could have reduced the social pressure on his new kingdom since he provided accommodation and resources for the poor people.<sup>95</sup> Since the Mishor had previously been settled by mobile pastoralists, the establishment of permanent settlement was crucial for changing the social structure and the political organization and for founding a Moabite kingdom.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, neither temple building nor resettlement occurred in the territories of the third circle, which were not regarded Moabite previously.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See Jericke 2009, 154.

<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Na’aman 1997, 86f.; Routledge 2000, 244.

<sup>95</sup> See Na’aman 2016, 105.

<sup>96</sup> See Dearman 1989, 196.

<sup>97</sup> Nebo might not have been resettled by Mesha since it was banned before, see Na’aman 2007, 153; Na’aman 2018, 198.

### 3. The Gadites

#### 3.1 *The Tribal Affiliation of Gad*

The “man of Gad” (יִשְׁׁ גַּד, line 10) is often interpreted as an Israelite tribe<sup>98</sup> on the basis of the biblical evidence. However, there are at least two different localizations of the tribe of Gad in the Bible, which gives rise to serious doubts concerning the biblical picture of the Transjordanian tribes:

1. According to Num 32:34–38,<sup>99</sup> the Gadites built the towns of Dibon and Ataroth, whereas the Rubenites settled in Nebo and Baal-Meon. This description fits quite well to the Mesha stela who claims that the “man of Gad” (יִשְׁׁ גַּד, line 10) settled in the “Land of Ataroth” for ages. Furthermore, Mesha emphasized the extent of his accomplishments<sup>100</sup> by noting that he erased an Israelite tribe living there for ages.
2. In contrast, the literary fiction of Josh 13 apparently equates Gad with Gilead and therefore locates it north of Reuben. This was due to the literary requirement that the whole of Transjordan had to be distributed to the two and a half tribes (Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh). Therefore, the biblical depiction of the inheritance of neither Gad nor Reuben in Josh 13 is historically accurate, but only a literary fiction.<sup>101</sup>

Consequently, the biblical localization of the tribe of Gad is not consistent and conforms mainly to literary rules, but not historical circumstances.

The tribe of Reuben is only mentioned in the Bible alongside Gad. Maybe, this tribe never existed or was soon absorbed by other tribes.<sup>102</sup> In contrast, there is ample evidence in the Bible and beyond that Gad was a large tribe who settled in the Mishor.<sup>103</sup> But the relation to Israel is contested, as even two biblical references suggest:<sup>104</sup>

1. Possibly the list of David’s heroes indicates a certain ethnic independence of the Gadites, when Bani is explicitly listed as a Gadite (2 Sam 23:36) and not with reference to his place of origin, like the other Israelite heroes. This Gadite hero is mentioned before the Ammonite Zelek (2 Sam 23:37), so that

<sup>98</sup> See Worschech 1990, 107; Rainey 1998, 244; Routledge 2000, 238; Mittmann 2002, 46; Dearman 2009, 120; Petter 2014, 72f. According to Dearman 1996, 206 one has to differentiate between political and cultural identity.

<sup>99</sup> According to Schmidt 2002, 505 the city list in Num 32:34–38 describes the border of the tribal area of the Gadite settlement.

<sup>100</sup> See Petter 2014, 73. Since the Gadites lived on Moabite territory (“Land of Ataroth”), they are judged as subjects to Moabite rule by Mesha, see Dearman 1996, 206.

<sup>101</sup> See also Na’aman 2018, 200.

<sup>102</sup> See Dion/Daviau 2010, 208f.

<sup>103</sup> See especially Na’aman 2018, 201f.

<sup>104</sup> See Wazana 2005, 231f.

it appears that two non-Israelites were mercenaries in David's army. Therefore, the Gadites might not be an Israelite tribe.

2. Moreover, there is no indication at all of an infiltration of Gadites from the part west of the Jordan river to Transjordan, in contrast to the settlement process of the tribes of Joseph.

All things considered, neither the territorial expansion of the Gadites nor their affiliation with Israel is secure. It appears that the Gadites were originally a non-Israelite tribe that was only later incorporated in the twelve-tribe-system. According to the Mesha stela, the "man of Gad" were settlers who, as a local population, had lived for ages (*m'lm*)<sup>105</sup> in the Mishor and perhaps saw themselves neither as Israelites nor as Moabites. The "man of Gad" is more likely to be an autochthonous population that does not necessarily qualify as Israelite, even if the king of Israel built the city of Ataroth in their tribal area (line 10f.). Moreover, it is a matter of dispute for whom the site of Ataroth was built. As the new political overlord, the Israelite king either built Ataroth for his new subjects (the "man" of Gad) or for himself depending on how one interprets the prepositional compound *lh*, since the enclitic personal pronoun could refer either to the king of Israel or to the "man of Gad":<sup>106</sup>

1. In the first case, the Israelite king would have built or fortified the city of Ataroth for himself<sup>107</sup> and, accordingly, driven the Gadites to live outside of this city. This would mean that the Gadites were not Israelites, rather they were possibly a Moabite tribe (at least according to Mesha's perspective).<sup>108</sup> As non-Israelite people the Gadites were expelled. The displacement of the Gadites might explain Mesha's reference to the residence of the Gadites in the "Land of Ataroth" forever. From an ideological point of view, Mesha would not have mentioned the Gadites living in the "Land of Ataroth" forever if he considered them to be Israelite. This would counter his claim on the conquered land.<sup>109</sup> Due to his reconquest, Mesha restored the original order and gave the "Land of Ataroth" back to its rightful owners, namely to the

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<sup>105</sup> For the idiom *m'lm* see Petter 2014, 53. According to Blum 2020, 211 n.24 this idiom might be interpreted "in an absolute ('without beginning') or a relative sense ('ever since Moabites and Israelites settled in this region' or words to that effect)," but neither interpretation emphasizes the fact that the Gadites have a long right for ownership of the "Land of Ataroth."

<sup>106</sup> Timm 1982, 166 n.38. suggested a third possibility: the city was built for the "Land of Ataroth."

<sup>107</sup> See Timm 1982, 166; Lemaire 1994, 33; Na'aman 2007, 154. According to Timm 1980, 25 the Israelite king built Ataroth as the center of the "land of Ataroth."

<sup>108</sup> See Na'aman 1997, 87: "the men of Gad are presented here as Moabites, whom the king of Israel had driven from their ancestral town." See already Knauf 1988, 162 n.689; Hübner 1992, 142 n.71. Contrary to Timm 1980, 25 who considers Gad not a Moabite tribe.

<sup>109</sup> See Gass 2009, 59. Critically Green 2010, 116.

Gadites.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Mesha's reference to the immemorial residence of the Gadites in the land of Ataroth is not simply a proud boost for his conquering and annexing non-Moabite land.<sup>111</sup> However, one would have to explain why Mesha settled people from Maḥarot and Šaron there after the conquest of Ataroth, and not the Gadites who had always lived in the "Land of Ataroth," and whether the Gadites were driven out by the Omrides before. The first problem could be solved by identifying the population of the two regions of Maḥarot and Šaron with Gadites.<sup>112</sup> But it is conspicuous that Mesha did not indicate this tribal affiliation to clarify things. The second problem is hypothetical since there is no reference to the displacement of the Gadites. Moreover, Mesha could have expressed a reflexive relationship ("for himself") better with a reflexive verbal stem than with the prepositional compound *lh*. Thus, the first solution doesn't commend itself, therefore the second interpretation is preferable.

2. In the second case, the king of Israel would have fortified the city of Ataroth for the "man of Gad" living there.<sup>113</sup> Against this backdrop the Gadites could have been Israelites, Moabites, or another autochthonous population.<sup>114</sup> The evaluation of the Gadites as an autochthonous tribe on the Mishor might be reflected by the Mesha stela (line 10) referring to the immemorial presence of the "man of Gad" in the land of Ataroth. That indicates that the Gadites had been settling in the "Land of Ataroth" before the Omride conquest. In that respect, Mesha tried to underscore the fact that there is no legitimate Israelite right for this territory since there lived Gadites of old.<sup>115</sup> As the autochthonous Gadites were living in "Moab" proper ("Land of Ataroth") they are regarded as a Moabite tribe, at least from Mesha's perspective.

Perhaps, one must take account of the context of the Mesha stela as well. If Mesha actually regarded the Gadites as an Israelite tribe, then it is all the more incomprehensible that he refers in his inscription to their having lived in this

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<sup>110</sup> See Na'aman 2018, 201.

<sup>111</sup> For this interpretation see Blum 2020, 213 who refers to line 28f. where cities have been annexed by Mesha. However, the term *'rš* (ln. 29) might be related also to Dibon, and not to Moab, so that the annexation of non-Moabite cities is not confirmed. Furthermore, the translation "And I became king of hundreds of cities" is not possible syntactically since the Moabite reads *w'nk mlkt[ʔ...h]m't bqrn* (ln. 28f.).

<sup>112</sup> See Na'aman 1997, 88; Weippert 2014, 149.

<sup>113</sup> See Rainey 1998, 245; Lemaire 2007, 140; Doak 2020, 103.

<sup>114</sup> According to Dion/Daviau 2010, 209 the Gadites have been "a separate, native ethnic group." Sometimes the Mesha stela is used for a rather detailed reconstruction of the settlement processes in Transjordan. In this context Gad was a large tribe whose clans settled in the Mishor since time immemorial. Due to the Omride expansion this tribe might have been split in two parts whereby the northern part was judged as Israelite and the southern part was estimated a Moabite tribe, see Na'aman 2007, 153; Na'aman 2018, 202.

<sup>115</sup> See Blum 2020, 217 n.38.

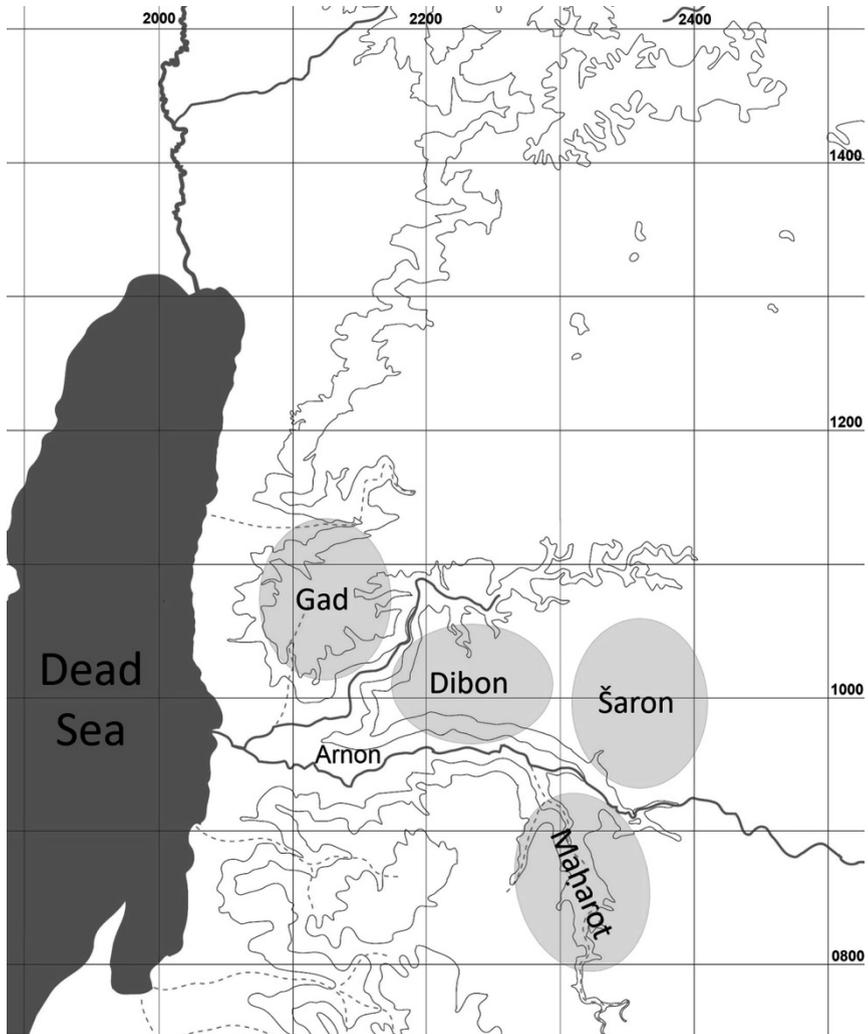


Figure 4: Settlement areas of tribal groups in Moab

area for many years. He would thereby implicitly concede Israel's claim to this territory, since the Omrides merely incorporated their own Israelite ethnic group into their territory. Mesha would then have to justify the attack on the land of the Gadites with an order from Kemosh, since he would have encroached on foreign territory. Accordingly, the Gadites cannot be an Israelite tribe at least from Mesha's perspective. It makes more sense to suppose that Mesha regarded the tribe of Gad as Moabite. With the reference to Gad's

immemorial presence in Ataroth Mesha wished to emphasize that Omri had unjustifiably taken Ataroth from its legal owners.<sup>116</sup>

All things considered, the Gadites were probably a population group that Mesha counted as belonging to Moab rather than to Israel, even though perhaps the Gadites themselves did not feel ethnically or genealogically affiliated to either political entity. The Gadites most probably were a third party in the area around Ataroth, which was contested between Israel and Moab.<sup>117</sup> Since genealogical relationships in tribal societies are changing consistently due to different reasons of loyalty and historical circumstances (see 2.2), the Gadites could be incorporated at times into Moab or into Israel to legitimate claims on their territory.<sup>118</sup> For the Gadites living in the “Land of Moab” they could be rated as Moabite and subject to Mesha’s kingdom.

### 3.2 The Problem of the Massacre of the “People of Ataroth”

The massacre of the “people of Ataroth” (line 11: *kl h ‘m*) is problematic since it might also affect the “man of Gad” residing there. This tension becomes even worse if one assumes that Mesha considered the Gadites to be Moabite when maintaining that the “man of Gad” was living in the “Land of Ataroth” since time immemorial (line 10). This reference is hardly a proud boast for annexing non-Moabite land and killing the local population,<sup>119</sup> which might be Israelite or non-Moabite. In contrast, the “Land of Ataroth” belongs to the second circle of truly Moabite territory that belongs to Kemosh and Moab (line 12). Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the city of Ataroth did not belong originally to the realm of Mesha’s dynastic god Kemosh (line 12)<sup>120</sup> and that it only became the property of Kemosh and Moab after Mesha had conquered Ataroth and massacred the people (line 11). This interpretation of lines 11–12 is not necessary at all, for the syntactic construction with *x-qatal* in line 12 could refer to a rather familiar statement like “the city is known to belong to.”<sup>121</sup> Thus, line 12 is a corroborative statement that the land of Ataroth always belonged to the deity Kemosh and to the region of Moab. Therefore, an inchoative meaning “to pass into somebody’s possession” is not necessary in line 12. The construction *x-qatal* is kind of a résumé motivating the further measures done by Mesha in the following. All in all, the “Land of Ataroth” was always part of Moab and the reference to the Gadites shows that Mesha considered the Gadites to be Moabite.

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<sup>116</sup> See Na’aman 2007, 154; Finkelstein/Lipschits 2010, 32.

<sup>117</sup> See Wazana 2005, 231.

<sup>118</sup> See Tebes 2018, 291.

<sup>119</sup> For this interpretation see Blum 2020, 213.

<sup>120</sup> See Rainey 1998, 245.

<sup>121</sup> See Totsche 2021, 187. In that respect, this sentence is not a case for *Literarkritik* coming too late, as Blum 2020, 212 thinks.

However, the question arises as to why Mesha killed the local population of Ataroth. Therefore, the identification of *'m* with the Gadites who have lived there since time immemorial is doubtful. There is no reason to kill the Gadite population of Ataroth since Mesha did not consecrate Ataroth to Kemosh.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, it appears that this massacre was not a ban of the local inhabitants of Ataroth, since the ritual slaughter is expressed differently in the case of Nebo (lines 14–18).<sup>123</sup> To be sure, a dedication of Ataroth might be expressed by the word *ryt* (line 12), but here the reading *hyt* is preferable<sup>124</sup> so that there is no hint of a sacral obligation. On the whole, there was no ritual slaughter of the *'m* at Ataroth.

Against this background, it is far from secure, whether *'m* is a normal term for Gadite inhabitants of Ataroth. Maybe this lexeme could refer to the Israelite military force being stationed at Ataroth.<sup>125</sup> In that respect, it has been suggested that only the warriors defending Ataroth were killed.<sup>126</sup> All things considered, the slaughter of *'m* at Ataroth might refer only to the Israelites, who had driven out the Gadites who had been living there since time immemorial.

Nevertheless, the interpretation that Mesha killed only the Israelite warriors stationed at Ataroth is not obvious at all. The lexeme *'m* is used on the Mesha stela elsewhere for the proper population (line 24) since Mesha orders the inhabitants of Qarḥō to create cisterns in each house. It seems that the population of a specific city can be called *'m* “people” (Ataroth line 11f.).<sup>127</sup> Since Ataroth was a central place of the tribe of Gad, who had always lived in this region, it is unlikely that no Gadites lived there such that only Israelites and no Gadites would have been affected by this massacre. Rather, it can be assumed that numerous Gadites also lived in Ataroth at the time of Mesha’s take-over.<sup>128</sup> Against this background Mesha might have decimated a Moabite tribe.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, the resettlement with men from Šaron and Maḥarot presupposes the massacre of the original population living in Ataroth,<sup>130</sup> since Mesha could have settled Ataroth with local Gadites.

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<sup>122</sup> See also Green 2010, 103 n.32.

<sup>123</sup> See Weippert 2010, 246 n.23. In contrast, Dearman 1989, 190 n.143 thinks that the inhabitants of Ataroth had some kinship with Israelite tribes and were treated harshly on account of that.

<sup>124</sup> See Gass 2009, 25f.; Lemaire 2021, 145.

<sup>125</sup> See Weippert 2014, 149.

<sup>126</sup> See Na’aman 1997, 87; Na’aman 2007, 147 n. 3; Weippert 2014, 148f. According to Park 2009, 163–166, *kl htp* “all small children” should be read instead of *kl h'm*.

<sup>127</sup> According to Becking 2017, 137 is *'m* a “coherent group of kinsmen and could be rendered with ‘tribe.’”

<sup>128</sup> Contrary to Knauf 1991, 26 indicating that it is nowhere stated that the inhabitants of Ataroth slaughtered by Mesha were Gadites.

<sup>129</sup> See further Dearman 1989, 190 n.143.

<sup>130</sup> See Blum 2020, 212.

Perhaps Mesha massacred the autochthonous Gadites residing in Ataroth as retribution for their cooperation with the Omrides or as retaliation against a minority segment within the population of the Mishor.<sup>131</sup> Though the Gadite tribe, as a whole, was considered to belong to Moab, it cannot be ruled out that the Gadites in Ataroth were deemed disloyal for collaborating with the Israelites settling there and so were killed. This interpretation can solve all problems sketched above.

### 3.3 *Dibonites as Gadites?*

It has at times been suggested that the Dibonite Mesha himself might have belonged to the tribe of Gad.<sup>132</sup> In the biblical tradition, Dibon is occasionally referred to as Dibon-Gad (Num 33:45f.), so that the hometown of the Dibonite Mesha might always have belonged to the tribal area of the Gadites. In order to avoid confusion with a place of the same name, some biblical place names also bear a tribal name, such as Kedesh-Naphtali (Judg 4:6) or Gibeah-Benjamin (1 Sam 13:2, 15f.; 14:16). Therefore, the name Dibon-Gad certainly corresponds to biblical conventions. In that respect, Dibon could be related to the tribe of the Gadites. The Dibonite Mesha would then be a Gadite.<sup>133</sup>

However, the biblical relation of Dibon and Gad is not without problems. This theory presupposes in particular, that the priestly itinerary in Num 33 is based on ancient traditions and does not reflect later post-exilic circumstances. Since tribal affiliations are rather fluid, this designation holds true at best for the time of the author of Num 33, but need not refer to an accurate historical setting. Furthermore, the place Dibon is otherwise always listed in the Bible without the designation Gad.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the term Dibon-Gad presupposes that this Dibon would have to be distinguished from some other Dibon, but this is not very likely since there is just one site with the name Dibon. There are no indications in the Bible for two places named Dibon that would need to be differentiated. In addition, there are other places, which bear the name element “Gad,”<sup>135</sup> but geographically cannot be connected with the Transjordanian tribe of the Gadites so that the additional classification “Gad” need not be related to the tribe of Gad. Presumably the lexeme *gad* “luck” is used to better define these places, so that the “Gad”-cities are excellent places of luck. In addition, the biblical term Dibon-Gad might not be in conformity with the Moabite perspective.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See Dearman 1989, 206.

<sup>132</sup> See Knauf 1991, 26; Na’aman 2007, 153f.; Weippert 2010, 246 n.22; Weippert 2014, 145.

<sup>133</sup> See Knauf/Niemann 2021, 201.

<sup>134</sup> Num 21:30; 32:3, 34; Josh 13:9, 17; Isa 15:2; Jer 48:18, 22; Neh 11:25.

<sup>135</sup> Baal-Gad (Josh 11:17; 12:7; 13:5) and Migdal-Gad (Josh 15:37).

<sup>136</sup> See Blum 2020, 211.

All in all, it is rather unlikely that the Dibonites were a subgroup of the Gadites. Mesha most probably was a Dibonite, but not a Gadite. In his stela Mesha refers to two identities: He is clearly a Dibonite and as a resident of the region of Moab also a king of Moab.<sup>137</sup> But he refrains from a self-designation as a Gadite.

#### 4. Conclusion

All things considered, the core territory of Moab has to be looked for in the Mishor north of the Arnon river and not on the *Arđ el-Kerak* since this area is called ‘Ar previously. This is made clear by construct chains with the toponym Moab and by sites related to Moab. In contrast the Sihon tradition modified the original northern localization of the area of Moab to legitimize Israelite claims for the Mishor and therefore defined the river Arnon as the northern border of Moab.

Moreover, the Gadites were an independent, though not entirely foreign, population group that was either counted as part of Israel or – which is much more likely – as part of Moab at least according to Mesha. Therefore, the Gadites were probably a tribe that, in Mesha’s view, belonged to Moab, the land of Kemosh, like the Dibonites. Accordingly, Mesha emphasizes that the “man of Gad” are not settlers who invaded the land of Kemosh from the outside, but had always settled there and consequently had a right to live there. The Gadites are therefore an indigenous population of the Mishor. Moreover, the Gadites were probably a tribe that was not directly ethnically connected to the population of the Dibon region. Dibonites like Mesha are therefore not Gadites. The Gadites living in the city of Ataroth were massacred for their disloyalty and cooperation with the Omrides.

In any case, one must distinguish between cultural and political identity. Even if the Gadites belonged to the Moabite domain, this does not necessarily mean that they were also Moabites culturally, genealogically and ethnically. But they could have been appropriated as Moabites by Mesha since they were living in the region of Moab. After Mesha’s campaign against the Omrides the Mishor was definitively Moabite – also in a political sense – regardless whether there were clans that felt a relationship with Israel.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> For both identities see Kühn 2021, 266.

<sup>138</sup> See also Dearman 2009, 121.

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