

The Pottery from Khirbet en-Nahas: Another View

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The question of the Edomite pottery has recently gained relevance with the preliminary report of the pottery found by the excavations at Khirbet en-Nahas in the Faynan area, directed by T.E. Levy. The site consists of over one-hundred building complexes and over thirty-four massive slag mounds. The most prominent feature is a large square fortress with a one four-chambered gate. In 2002 and 2006 part of the gate complex of this fortress was excavated (Area A) and a sequence of four main strata (A4–A1) was established associated with evidence of copper production. Fifteen radiocarbon dates taken from the site apparently place its construction at the beginning of the 10th century and its end at the 9th century B.C.E. Excavation and radiocarbon dates from a nearby metalwork building (Area S) revealed a longer period of settlement, between the 12th and 9th centuries B.C.E. (Strata S4–S2) (Levy et al. 2004).

The conclusions reached by Levy's team have been criticized by several scholars. I. Finkelstein (2005) has focused on some apparent weaknesses of the radiocarbon dating, particularly the supposed small number of samples taken from occupational layers and the phenomenon of the "old wood" effect. Most importantly, he suggested that the earliest ¹⁴C dates from the fort area came from industrial waste and fills (Strata A4–A3–A2b) located *under* the fort, whose floors have not been preserved. Therefore, in Finkelstein's opinion the fort was apparently constructed *later* than the copper production activity at the site, probably in the late 8th century B.C.E. (Finkelstein and Singer-Avitz 2008; Finkelstein and Piasezky 2008). In a similar vein, E. van der Steen and P. Bienkowski (2006) have strongly criticized the use of Bayesian calibrated ¹⁴C dates by Levy's team, inasmuch as they reach dates considerably earlier than the original calibrated radiocarbon dates. Levy defended his interpretation of the stratigraphical evidence, denying that the fortress had been constructed upon earlier archaeometallurgical remains. Concerning the radiocarbon dating, he pointed out that none of the ¹⁴C dates available to date demonstrate any human activity during the 8th–7th centuries B.C.E., the "classical" Edomite period (Levy and Najjar 2006; Levy, Najjar and Higham 2007).

It is important to note that this debate took place while the pottery from Khirbet en-Nahas was still unpublished (except for the Midianite pottery, published in Levy et al. 2004). Now that the pottery was published by N.G. Smith and T. Levy (2008) it is possible to crisscross both the radiocarbon and the ceramic data. A succinct analysis of the ceramic types presented by this report suggests that the material assemblage retrieved from Khirbet en-Nahas is different and most probably earlier than the Edomite pottery.

The following pottery types retrieved at Khirbet en-Nahas seems to be earlier antecedents of Edomite pottery types (the numbers correspond to Smith and Levy's classification):

Bowls:

(1) BL3: *Triangular-section rim bowls* (Smith and Levy 2008: Figs. 12:2; 13:1–4; 14:1–2; 15:5; 16:1–2; 17:1)

These bowls with a characteristic triangular-section rim are characteristic of sites in Transjordan and Cisjordan in the entire Iron Age II. However, the painted decoration, in the form of

black concentric lines on the interior of the vessel and lines long the rim, occurs less frequently. While it is a common feature of the Edomite pottery found at Buseirah (Bienkowski, Oakeshott and Berlin 2002: Fig. 9:17), no exact painted parallels can be found in Late Iron Negev sites. However, a family of small bowls with short black strokes in the rim does occur in Iron Age II Cisjordanian sites, such as Ashdod IX–VIII (Dothan and Freedman 1967: Figs. 36:13,17; 42:3,5,6), Tel Beersheba VI (Brandfon 1984: Fig. 26:4) and ‘Ain el-Qudeirat, where they are very common throughout Strata IV–II (Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007b: Pls. 11.1:9; 11.24:10; 11.26:4–5; 11.27:16–18; 11.30:16–20; 11.41:11; 11.42:5; 11.50:18; 11.54:15–16; 11.59:10; 11.63:5; 11.92:12; 11.129:5).

(2) BL12: *Thin, round-walled fine-ware bowls with tapered rim* (Smith and Levy 2008: Fig. 12:3)

The “Edomite” feature of these bowls is their bichrome design. They are related to the decorated “fine ware” bowls (Oakeshott’s Bowls J), although the tapered rim only occurs in vessels from Buseirah (Bienkowski, Oakeshott and Berlin 2002: Fig. 9.25:1,11,13).

(3) BL21: *Wide-necked bowls with globular body and plain rim* (Smith and Levy 2008: Figs. 15:1; 16:15)

This deep globular bowl type presents a carinated, short flaring neck; painting occurs sometimes as black concentric lines in the neck and rim. Smith and Levy (2008: 71) relate this bowl type to the carinated deep bowls present in the Late Iron Edom and Negev (Oakeshott’s Bowls M). However, Bowls M are almost twice as large in size and present a shorter neck than the two vessels published from Khirbet en-Nahas. If anything, this type is a precursor of the family of Edomite carinated bowls (Oakeshott’s Bowls J, K, N and M).

(4) BL22: *Shallow, sharply carinated bowls with straight, flaring out, tapered, or rounded rim* (Smith and Levy 2008: Figs. 12:4–6; 13:8–11; 16:6)

This is the most problematic of the pottery types present in Khirbet en-Nahas. Smith and Levy are ready to discourage any connection between this carinated bowl and the “Assyrian-imitation-style bowls” (Oakeshott’s Bowls K) that are present in Late Iron Edom and Negev sites: the latter are finer, while the body below the carination bends outward significantly (Smith and Levy 2008: 72). Van der Steen and Bienkowski (2009), however, have contended that the BL22 bowls “are to all intents and purposes identical to other imitation Assyrian bowls”. Yet, the BL22 bowls, in contrast with Bowls K, do not present the decoration that is common in the Edomite ceramics. The basic shape—but not the “Edomite” decoration—of the imitations of “Assyrian bowls” was copied throughout Cisjordan and Transjordan (Singer-Avitz 2007). Without more parallels to work with to date, there is no other alternative but to follow Smith and Levy’s suggestion that this form may have been superseded by the later bowl as the local potters were under the influence of the Assyrian ceramic styles (Smith and Levy 2008: 72).

Kraters:

(5) KR1 (Smith and Levy 2008: Fig. 15:13)

This is a krater with a short, erected or slightly inward neck. Horizontal lines are painted over and below the exterior rim. No exact parallels could be found, but the rim and decoration bear some resemblance with the later Edomite kraters (Oakeshott’s Bowls N).

Jars:

(6) JR6: *Long, everted rim with slight depression in the middle of the lip* (Smith and Levy 2008: Figs. 15:4; 16:14–15)

Parallels for this rim appear in Buseirah (Bienkowski, Oakeshott and Berlin 2002: Fig. 9.52:1), ‘Ain el-Qudeirat IVb (Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007b: Pl. 11.8:5) and Barqa el-Hetiye in the Faynan area (Fritz 1994: Abb. 10:7).

Cooking pots:

(7) *Ridged-rim cooking pots* (Smith and Levy 2008: Figs. 18:1,6–7)

Some of the ridged-rim cooking pots found at Khirbet en-Nahas bear resemblance to Oakeshott’s Cooking pots A (Smith and Levy 2008: Fig. 18:1) and B (Smith and Levy 2008: Fig. 18:6–7), but no identical specimens could be found among the published vessels. It is possible that at this stage the cooking pots had yet not developed as a distinct type from the common ridge-rim cooking pots present in the southern Levant.

It is obvious that the material assemblage from Khirbet en-Nahas opens a new perspective on the origins of the Edomite pottery. The following are preliminary conclusions on the pottery already published, bearing in mind that the final publication of the complete ceramic assemblage might change our perspective in many respects:

(1) Several pottery types, which are not the bulk of the material assemblage, seem to be earlier antecedents of Edomite ceramic types. In this respect, Khirbet en-Nahas is the first well-stratified site in southern Transjordan showing the beginnings of the Edomite pottery tradition. The new data now helps to connect the earlier antecedents of the Edomite pottery with vessels already published from sites west of the Arabah that before this excavation lacked good parallels in southern Transjordan;

(2) One should also note what was *not* found in Khirbet en-Nahas: there is not one exact parallel in the Edomite pottery. It could be argued that the geographical location of Khirbet en-Nahas and its role as mining center would have prevented the arrival of most of the vessel types that were characteristic of the Edomite pottery assemblage. This model, however, does not stand criticism, because the Faynan lowlands were easily accessible from Buseirah (through the northern access of the Wadi Dana). Also, we should expect to find at least the most common table wares (e.g., Oakeshott’s Bowls A) or cooking wares (Oakeshott’s Cooking pots A and B), which does not happen. Painted vessels, albeit very rare, can be found in substantial proportions in some inaccessible mountain-top sites in the Edomite highlands, such as Ba’ja III (Bienert et al. 2000);

(3) These two points therefore support the 10th–9th century B.C.E. dates advocated by the Khirbet en-Nahas’ excavators. If there was occupation contemporary with the wave of settlement in the Edomite highlands in the late 8th–6th centuries B.C.E., it was not found by the dig;

(4) It is important to note that the early antecedents of the Edomite pottery seem to have appeared at the same time in Cisjordan and Transjordan. In fact, bowls with black strokes painted on the rim (Khirbet en-Nahas’ BL3 type) are more preponderant in ‘Ain el-Qudeirat throughout its Iron Age history. This demonstrates that southern Transjordan cannot be considered the “cradle” of the Edomite pottery: on the contrary, this pottery tradition developed at the same time both east and west of the Arabah;

(5) Khirbet en-Nahas also provides the “missing link” between the painted Edomite pottery and the earlier Iron Age painted pottery traditions of the southern Levant. I wish to postulate that the “Edomite” painted decorations developed out of the painted vessels that were produced in southern Cisjordan during the Iron IIA. In fact, in ‘Ain el-Qudeirat bowls with black strokes on the rim appeared already in Stratum IV and lasted until Stratum II, thus being contemporary with “true” Edomite ceramics (Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg 2007a: 133). Other source of influence seems to have been, as repeatedly suggested before, the Midianite pottery, which appear both in Khirbet en-Nahas and ‘Ain el-Qudeirat (Oakeshott 1983: 62; Dornemann 1983: 86 n. 12; Zeitler 1992: 172; Tebes 2007).

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