

# In Search for Aram and Israel

Edited by  
OMER SERGI, MANFRED OEMING  
and IZAAK J. DE HULSTER

*Orientalische Religionen*

*in der Antike*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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Politics, Culture, and Identity

Edited by  
Omer Sergi, Manfred Oeming,  
and Izaak J. de Hulster

Mohr Siebeck

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## Preface

This volume comprises papers presented at a colloquium held in Heidelberg, 1–4 September 2014 on the subject of “Aram and Israel: Cultural Interaction, Political Borders and Construction of Identity during the Early Iron Age (12<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE)”.

The aim of the conference was to discuss the political and cultural interaction between Aram and Israel among archaeologists excavating throughout the Levant, epigraphers, and biblical scholars addressing the image of the Aramaeans in the Hebrew Bible. In the light of the different approaches employing material culture, images, and texts, this group of scholars met to highlight the question of social and cultural identity within the territorial kingdoms of the Iron Age Levant and to redefine the role of the Kingdom of Israel within the ‘Aramaean’ world. The reasoning behind this approach is to be found in the fact that throughout its history the kingdom of Israel interacted with the Aramaean kingdoms to its north. Contemporary studies of the process of state formation in the early Iron Age Levant further suggest that it occurred in Israel and in some Aramaean kingdoms quite contemporaneously (10<sup>th</sup>–early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) and through constant interaction between them (for further details see Sergi and de Hulster, this volume). In spite of that, most of our knowledge regarding the kingdom of Israel is derived from the Hebrew Bible, which reflects quite strong Judahite and even Judean perspectives. Therefore, and in light of the recent scholarly attention given to Aram and the Aramaeans, this volume contributes an approach examining the cultural interaction between them in reference to recent excavations in the region, to the broader archaeological and historical context, and to the memories of Aram and Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

The main arenas of political (military) but also social and cultural interaction between the kingdom of Israel and the Aramaean polities were at the central and northern Jordan Valley (and its extension into Lebanon) and in the highlands of Gilead and Ammon, in Transjordan. The archaeological exploration of these regions was therefore at the focus of the conference, in an attempt to highlight the role of material culture in interpreting social and cultural interaction. Two further aspects of the Aram-Israel interaction were discussed – the political one, expressed by the constant struggle for political hegemony in the southern Levant; and the question of constructing social identities – whether within the different polities of the Iron Age Levant (Aramaean and Israelites alike) or whether in the cultural memory – namely, the way the interaction between Aram and Israel was memorized within biblical traditions.

For that reason experts in the fields of the archaeology and history of the Levant and in the field of biblical studies gathered in Heidelberg for four days of what turned to be stimulating and fruitful discussions. Important part of that was the convenient platform provided by the conference to bring together archaeologists working on different sides of the current borders in the Middle East. These kind of meetings are, unfortunately, too

rare but nevertheless important in any attempt to ponder the nature of the Iron Age Levant. The result of all this is presented in this volume.

The introductory chapter to the volume (Sergi and de Hulster, 'Some Historical and Methodological Considerations Regarding the Question of Political, Social and Cultural Interaction between Aram and Israel') offers some methodological and historical insights on the subject at hand. A brief summary of the socio-political evolution that occurred throughout the Levant in the early Iron Age forms the background for discussing the nature of political formations (territorial kingdoms), social identity (Israelites vis-à-vis Aramaeans) and border zones (changing political borders and the 'local' sense of belonging).

The first part of the book, '*Aram and Israel: Political Relations, Political Borders*', focuses on the political interaction between Israel and Aram-Damascus. This part contains three articles that bring new insights on the archaeological and historical research in order to reconstruct the political relations between Israel and Aram-Damascus during the 10<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

*Israel Finkelstein* ('Israel and Aram: Reflections on their Borders') addresses the geographical-history aspect of the Israel-Aram relationship – the location of their political border. Through thoughtful examination of both archaeological data (i.e., architectural features, settlement patterns, destruction layers and occupational gaps) and textual information from biblical and extra-biblical sources Finkelstein reconstructs the borders between Aram and Israel in four different periods: the formative period (pre-Omride Israel), the Period of Omride rule over Israel, the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE and the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. He concludes the discussion with some insights regarding the cultural and ethnic affiliation of Tel Rehov, the political and territorial organization of the northern Jordan Valley, the early historical memories embedded within the biblical literature and the nature of biblical narratives regarding the Aram–Israel border conflicts.

*Erhard Blum* ('The Relations between Aram and Israel in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE: The Textual Evidence') examines the Tel Dan Stele based on fresh epigraphical and philological analysis and proposes some new readings. These confirm that the preserved text contains Hazael's self-presentation as the successor of Hadadezer, king of Aram-Damascus, and his report of one specific war against Joram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah (also reported in 2 Kings 8:28–29). A critical examination of further biblical and epigraphical sources (*inter alia* from Tell Deir 'Alla) allows outlining the relations between the kingdoms of Damascus and Samaria that involve major changes in political dominion and territorial expansion.

*Assaf Kleiman* ('The Damascene Subjugation of the Southern Levant as a Gradual Process [ca. 842–800 BCE]') re-examines the archaeological evidence for the Damascene subjugation of the Southern Levant. He argues that three main stages, which differ from one another in date and nature, may be identified in the territorial expansion process of Aram-Damascus: (1) early conflicts with Israel in the Gilead during the final days of the Omride dynasty; (2) the annexation of the Israelite territories in the north after the Assyrian withdrawal from southern Syria in ca. 838–837 BCE; and (3) remote campaign(s) to the southern districts of Canaan, which were conducted toward the end

of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Kleiman further argues that the gradual nature of the territorial expansion of Aram-Damascus under the rule of Hazael seems to attest to the calculated and structured policy taken by the Aramaeans; the execution of such a policy supports the idea that Hazael intended to establish permanent hegemony over the Southern Levant.

The second part of the book, *'In Search of Aramaean Material Culture'*, raises the question of material culture in the context of the political and cultural interaction between Aram and Israel. This question is addressed by discussing the archaeological finds from sites located within the so called 'border zone' between Aram and Israel (throughout the Jordan Valley) and by discussing specific aspects of material culture like glyptic and epigraphic finds.

*Aren Maeir* ('The Aramaean Involvement in the Southern Levant: Case Studies for Identifying the Archaeological Evidence') discusses the practical and methodological difficulties in defining the existence of Aramaean-related finds (from conquest to actual presence) at selected sites (Tell es-Safi/Gath, Dan, Hazor and Kinrot). He attempts to delineate how and when such identifications can be safely suggested.

*Amihai Mazar* ('Culture, Identity and Politics Relating to Tel Reḥov in the 10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> Centuries BCE, with an Excursus on the Identification of Tel Reḥov') presents conclusions relating to the Iron IIA (10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) strata in Tel Reḥov, the period most widely exposed in the excavations of the site (1997–2012). The subjects discussed include the geopolitical situation of the city, the stratigraphic sequence, continuity and change in the local material culture and aspects of architecture. In this context the issue of the ethnic identity of the population and the question when and how the Canaanite city became Israelite are addressed. Mazar further discusses the possible connections of the site with Syria and Anatolia based on the discovery of Anatolian bees in the industrial apiary discovered at the site, as well as on pottery altars similar to ones known from the Northern Euphrates albeit 300 years earlier. The possibility that the city was the home town of the Nimshi family and Jehu is raised and it is postulated, based on an inscription found in a unique building, that Elisha was present at this city close to its destruction. The violent and severe destruction of the Iron IIA city is attributed to Hazael, between the years 840–830 BCE. An excursus deals with recent suggestions made by I. Finkelstein concerning the identification of Reḥob/Reḥov in 2 Samuel 6–8 in relation to Tel Reḥov.

*Jutta Häser, Katja Soennecken and Dieter Vieweger* ('Tall Zirā'a in north-west Jordan between Aram and Israel') deals with the question, whether the inhabitants of Tall Zirā'a in north-west Jordan were affiliated during the Iron Age to Aram or to Israel. This question is addressed in three categories (politically, culturally/religiously, and ethnically) and accordingly three statements are pointed out: first, the destruction layer of the walled and rich Late Bronze Age city shows no signs of a military invasion and that the re-settlement followed almost immediately probably by the same inhabitants (not excluding the possibility that people from the surrounding became residents on the Tall as well); second, the cultural, religious, and economic orientation to the north and west continued from the Bronze to the Iron Ages as demonstrated by pottery, small finds and

architectural features; Third, in the absence of written sources and archaeological material which is usable as ethnical marker – despite the strong connections to the cultures in the west and north – it is impossible to specify the political and ethnical affiliation of the inhabitants of Tall Zirā‘a in the Iron Age.

*Nava Panitz-Cohen and Robert A. Mullins* (‘Aram-Maacah? Aramaeans and Israelites on the Border: Excavations at Tell Abil al-Qameḥ (Abel-beth-maacah) in Northern Israel’) discuss the recently initiated excavations at Tel Abel-beth-maacah, located on the Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian border. The site provides fresh data with which to explore the issues of Aramaean involvement at the site itself and within the broader context of Israelite-Aramaean relations in the Hula Valley. A brief summary of the excavation results of the first three seasons is presented and discussed in light of these issues.

*Yifat Thareani* (‘Enemy at the Gates? The Archaeological Visibility of the Aramaeans at Dan’) discusses the Iron IIA city of Dan, situated at the crossroads of Assyrian, Aramaean and Phoenician spheres, and illustrates the complex relationships the city maintained with neighboring kingdoms. Thareani discusses the archaeological remains from Iron IIA Dan, which yielded a material culture crucial for understanding the complexity of the Aramaean presence in the city *de facto*, and she further questions the current suppositions regarding the extent of the Aramaean involvement in constructing the city.

*Benjamin Sass* (‘Aram and Israel during the 10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, or Iron Age IIA: The Alphabet’) addresses the earliest archaeological evidence for alphabetic writing in the Aram–Israel border zone, and for the implementation of the alphabet among the Aramaeans overall. He demonstrates how the wholesale adoption of the alphabet in its Proto-Canaanite form in the Levant and the Jazira soon after its move out of Philistia in the second half of the tenth century, and its transformation into a cursive in the first half of the ninth, may be related to the wave of state foundations, Aramaean and other West Semitic, at that time.

*Izaak J. de-Hulster* (‘Material Aramaeisms? Sphragistic Reflections on the Aram-Israel Border Zone through a case study on Hazor’) examines the possibilities to relate certain material expressions, especially in seals (shapes, motifs, style, etc.) with ‘Aramaeans’. Acknowledging the challenges of defining ‘Aramaean’ and the complications due to the particulars of studying cultural influences through small glyptic finds (e.g., related to the mobility of miniature art), de Hulster cautions against drawing too strong conclusions. Thus, with thoughtful reference to the portable nature of small finds (as precious objects worn on the body) and to the issues involved in studying identity, de Hulster turns to the glyptic material at Hazor (in the Northern Jordan Valley) and, in comparison with the material from Megiddo, carefully concludes a northern influence in Northern Israel. For Hazor this could be (still cautiously) exemplified with the find of imitated Luwian hieroglyphs, moon imagery, and a hammer seal. The comparison with Megiddo further suggested that the striding lion and the winged sun disk had become part of a larger stock of motifs shared throughout the Levant (*koine*) in the Iron Age.

The third and last part of the book, *'Aram and Israel: The Question of Identity'*, raises the question of social identity in the Iron Age Levant and its relations to political formations on the one hand and to the shaping of cultural memory on the other.

*Guy Bunnens* ('Confrontation, Emulation and Ethno-genesis of the Aramaeans in Iron Age Syria') discusses the emergence of the Aramaeans as part of the reconstruction process that started in Syria about a century after the collapse of the Late Bronze Age political system. In a first stage, a group, which might have identified itself as "Aram(aean)", progressively differentiated itself from the larger conglomerate of the Aḥlamû. Kin-based groups, mercenaries and individual adventurers were marauding along the traditional communication routes in the Euphrates valley, in the Jezirah and across the desert. In a second stage some of them seized power in existing polities or founded new ones. They began to be individualized and often referred to by a name of the type *Bīt* followed by a personal name. Such names may have designated a kin-based group (a "tribe"), or, as dynastic names, they may have referred to the sole ruling families. "Aram" in this context seems to have been any place where there were Aramaeans. Aramaean identity was forged through this reconstruction process. Competing with existing or emerging ethnic groups, Aramaean rulers asserted themselves as urban elite on a par with other urban elites, imposed their not yet standardized language as the administrative language of their polities and adopted forms of government as well as propagandistic art borrowed and adapted from an old Syrian tradition.

*Stefania Mazzoni* ('Identity and Multiculturality in the Northern Levant of the 9<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> century BCE: With a Case Study on Tell Afis') addresses the question of identity in the Iron Age Levant. Following a review of the many difficulties stemming from the attempt to define identity through material culture, she suggests a further distinction between implicit and explicit identity. The former is inherent to the social context of the individual and is predisposed by tradition; the latter is inherent to an intentional and declared act. Using test cases from the Iron Age Levant, Mazzoni demonstrates the multicultural aspect of both implicit and explicit identities, which makes any attempt to define them through artefacts or material culture speculative. Thus, she suggests comparing the cultural orientation of the material assemblages of successive phases of occupation of a site, i.e. their cultural horizons on an inter-regional scale. This allows singling out distinct social dynamics of inclusion and separation that may reveal specific implicit identities. This method is consequently applied to Tel Afis, which demonstrates three different cultural orientations throughout the LBII–IAIII.

*Herbert Niehr* ('The Power of Language: Language situation and language policy in Sam'al') provides an overview of the languages spoken and written in Sam'al. A catalogue of all the published material according to the languages comprises three Luwian, two Phoenician, six Sam'alian and twelve Old Aramaic inscriptions. This catalogue which demonstrates the language situation in Sam'al is to be supplemented by some unpublished inscriptions which, however, do not change the overall impression. As concerns the language policy the following points become clear: Luwian played only a minor role at the royal court. Phoenician was used as a prestigious language *ad intra* and as a trans-regional language *ad extra* during the time of King Kulamuwa (ca. 840–810 BCE). Phoenician was gradually superseded by Sam'alian which was during the time of

King Bar-Rakkab (ca. 733–713/711 BCE) replaced by Old Aramaic which opened a way to both inner Syria and also towards the Assyrians on whom he depended.

*Omer Sergi* ('The Gilead between Aram and Israel: Political Borders, Cultural Interaction and the Question of Jacob and Israelite Identity') discusses the geographical region of the Gilead (in northern Transjordan) as a place of military conflict but also cultural interaction between Aram and Israel. This is done by discussing the political history of the Gilead on the one hand, and the social organization and cultural interaction of the region's inhabitants on the other. Accordingly it is demonstrated that politically, the Gilead was more affiliated with Damascus than it was to Israel. It is further demonstrated that the highlands east and west of the Jordan with the Jordan Valley between them may be viewed as a single cultural unit within which agro-pastoral sedentary communities and local nomadic population maintained constant interaction. Due to the geographical and political proximity to Syria, groups living in northern Transjordan and especially in the highlands of Ammon and the Gilead were more influenced by Aram-Damascus (and more broadly by Northern Levantine culture) than those who resided in the highlands west of the Jordan. These conclusions set the base for discussing the place of the Gilead in the Israelite cultural memory, as it is reflected by the Jacob story (esp. Genesis 29–32) and by the story of Gideon's pursuit of the Midianites (Judges 8: 14–21), both attributed to Israelite narrators from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

*Angelika Berlejung* ('Family Ties: Constructed Memories about Aram and the Aramaeans in the Old Testament') argues that the process of creating a collective memory and collective biography for 'Israel' included the Aramaeans in prominent places within the book of Genesis. She demonstrates how the genealogies construct a myth of origin which claims a primordial common affinity of 'Israel' and 'Aram'. The pre- and non-P (presumably Genesis 10:22f), the priestly layer (Genesis 11:27–32) and post-P (Genesis 22:20–24) texts construct an 'Israel-Aram-connection' as an interwoven *Eigengeschichte*. This collective Israel-Aram biography emphasizes similarities, veils different origins and hides fractures on two levels: the historically existing differences of the different cultural and socio-political entities 'Israel' and 'Aram', and on the literary level the complex literary history of text units from different provenances and dates. The book of Genesis is not only constructing a myth of origin and continuity (for Israel and Aram), but also a myth of discontinuity, disrupting any closer links between Israel and Canaan, Egypt, Philistia, or Sidon (sons of Ham). The interplay between continuity and discontinuity drives the process of Israel's identity formation forward.

*Nili Wazana* ('Ahaz and the Altar from Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–16): Literary, Theological, and Historical-Political Considerations') deals with religious ties between Israel and Aram as reflected in the Deuteronomistic History, focusing primarily on the story of Ahaz and the altar from Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–16), while considering two other stories – that of Naaman the Aramaean army general (2 Kings 5), and that of the meeting of Elisha and Hazael (2 Kings 8:7–15). In the story of Ahaz copying the Damascene altar, Ahaz is not condemned, nor is it claimed that it had anything to do with foreign cult. Wazana suggests that the story belongs to the genre of reconstruction and reinstatement of an existing cultic object. The underlying assumption is that the Dama-

scene altar was Yahwistic. Historically, a Yahwistic cult founded at the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE in Damascus is highly plausible. Literary-wise, all three stories emerged at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, after the downfall of Aram and Israel. The replacement of the altar in Jerusalem, the stories of Israel-Aram religious ties and the roots of a Damascene Yahwistic altar in Israelite soil in former days cater to the needs of the refugees pouring in to Judah from the north, as well as to those of the Israelites and Aramaeans who remained in the north in the aftermath of the Assyrian destruction and deportations.

*Manfred Oeming* (“And the King of Aram was at war with Israel” History and Theology in the Elisha Cycle 2 Kings 2–13’) discusses the Elisha stories (1 Kings 19:15–2 Kings 13:24) as they are embedded within a wider context of narratives about the conflicts between the Israelites and the Aramaeans. Following a review of the dating and literary character of these stories, Oeming concludes that even if the stories bear witness to a popular healer and miracle doer from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in its final form the Elisha cycle belongs to the Persian period. Accordingly, there is not a great deal of historical reality reflected within it. Departing from the historical question, Oeming now analyses the deep theological intentions of the text and demonstrates how the Elisha stories are transformed into parts of a highly theological concept: prophecy is now an element in Israel’s history with Aram. He further demonstrates the changing attitude towards the Aramaeans; while the texts’ overall attitude is hostile, the prophet has to learn that God himself uses the Aramaeans as a tool against Israel in order to punish and educate. This is the same strategy employed to deal with catastrophes as seen in other prophetic books like Amos, Habakkuk, or Jeremiah. The war between the king of Aram and Israel is symbolic of YHWH’s control.

Before concluding this preface, we would like to thank the many people and organization that enabled the realization of the Heidelberg Colloquium and of the present book. We would like to thank the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (Grant for International Scientific Events) and the *Fritz Thyssen Foundation* (grant for international conferences) for supporting and financing the Heidelberg Colloquium. We would like to thank the *Karls-Ruprecht Universität Heidelberg* for the warm hospitality and support of the event. Special thanks to the wonderful staff of the *Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg* that hosted the discussions as well as to the participants of the conference. In addition to that we would like to thank Dr. Gabriela Rodrigues for the administrative organization of the colloquium and David Gropp, Dr. Verena Hug, Carolin Kloss, and Benjamin Sitzmann (Heidelberg) for their assistance in the preparation of the indices. Each of us, editors, expresses appreciation to his local and international academic environment for enabling and sustaining our research projects. Lastly, we would thus like to thank the *Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung* that supports the long standing cooperation between scholars from Tel Aviv University (Israel) and Germany.

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## List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AfO	Archiv für Orientforschung
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AThANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BN	Biblische Notizen
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBOT	Coniectanea biblica / Old Testament series
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
DMOA	Documenta et monumenta Orientis antiqui
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FAT II	Forschungen zum Alten Testament / 2. Reihe
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
HdO	Handbook of oriental studies = Handbuch der Orientalistik
HeBAI	Hebrew bible and ancient Israel
ICC	The international critical commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic languages
JSOT	Journal for the study of the Old Testament
JSOTS	Journal for the study of the Old Testament / Supplement series
LAS	Leipziger altorientalistische Studien
NEA	Near Eastern Archaeology
NEAEHL	The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land (ed. Ephraim Stern)
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
PIHANS	PIHANS: uitgaven van het Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten te Leiden
RIMA	The royal inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian periods
RIA	Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie
SJOT	Scandinavian journal of the Old Testament

TA	Tel Aviv
ThZ	Theologische Zeitschrift
TUAT	Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments
UF	Ugarit-Forschungen
VO	Vicino Oriente
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VTS	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins



# Some Historical and Methodological Considerations Regarding the Question of Political, Social and Cultural Interaction between Aram and Israel in the Early Iron Age

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## Introduction

Throughout its history, the Kingdom of Israel interacted with the Aramaean kingdoms to its north, and especially to Aram-Damascus. Constantly changing relations – from rivalry and military conflicts to alliances and military cooperation – affected the history of the Levant as a whole, and left marks on both biblical and extra-biblical sources.

Until now studies of Aram–Israel relations have concentrated mainly on reconstructing the political history of the Levant.<sup>1</sup> And since most of our knowledge about the Kingdom of Israel is derived from biblical historiography, these reconstructions strongly reflect the Judahite, and not the Israelite or the Aramaean points of view. In light of this we suggest an approach that takes into account the geo-political setting of Israel within the Aramaean world. This approach is able to consider the two groups' cultural and social interaction, and can focus not only on the struggle for power, expressed by the ongoing endeavour to define and re-define the borders between different political entities, but also on their cultural interaction – highlighting their shared traditions as against the construction of (sovereign) political or cultural identities.

## 'Aram' and 'Israel' in their Socio-Political Context

The Late Bronze Age Levant was characterized by a system of regional powers (such as the Egyptian and the Hittite kingdoms) that held political and, to a certain extent, economic control over local powers.<sup>2</sup> These 'local powers', which formed the basic unit of the social fabric, were mostly constituted by a territory, dominated by a city, in which there was a palace symbolizing the centralized institutions.<sup>3</sup> The retreat of the regional powers from the Levant and the (partial) demise of the city-state system

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<sup>1</sup> There is a vast literature on this subject, and we cite here only the latest monographs: Reinhold 2016; Ghantous 2014; Hasegawa 2012; Robker 2012; cf. Hafþórsson 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Liverani 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Bunnens 2000:13.

(13<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) that followed resulted in a re-formation of political organization, which in the early Iron Age (12<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) took the form of territorial kingdoms. Bryce defined the Levantine territorial kingdom as: “independent kin-based political entity, ruled by a local dynasty whose capital served as the administrative centre of the whole kingdom, and to which other urban centres were subjugated”.<sup>4</sup> This definition, as will be shown below, captures both the political and the social change that occurred in the Levant with the transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age.

The political and territorial aspect of the Iron Age Levantine kingdom is highlighted by the assertion that its “capital serves as the administrative centre of the whole kingdom, and to which other urban centres were subjugated”. Examples from the Kingdom of Israel are Megiddo and Hazor, which were in the Late Bronze Age the traditional seats of local rulers who controlled their immediate surroundings; by the early 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE they probably maintained their former political role, albeit they were now integrated within a complex political-economic system, ruled from a centralized administrative centre, located in the highlands of Samaria.<sup>5</sup> If we adopt the counter point of view – that of the ruling dynasty that resided in Samaria (defined by Bryce as ‘local’, and see below), the formation of the territorial kingdom was, in fact, a process of extending political power by integrating different territories, communities and polities under centralized rule.<sup>6</sup>

However, Bryce’s definition makes it clear that the act of ‘extending political power’ was only the political reflection of a much wider social evolution; the nature of which is highlighted by the assertion that the Levantine territorial kingdoms were ‘kin-based political entities, ruled by *local* dynasties’. In the past, it was assumed that the territorial kingdoms were formed by invaders – Hittites/Luwians in northern Syria, Aramaeans in Syria and Israelites in Canaan, who invaded/migrated into the Levant in the 13<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and brought about the end of the Late Bronze regional systems.<sup>7</sup> However, not only does this theory raise some serious historical difficulties,<sup>8</sup> archaeological studies conducted in the last decades highlight the continuity in many aspects of the material culture throughout Syria and Canaan.<sup>9</sup> This continuity may also be observed in some cultural aspects of the social life, like the use of language or the system of beliefs.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore agreed today that ‘the Israelites’, ‘the Aramaeans’ or ‘the Luwians’ were not invaders or migrants, and certainly not foreign, but rather they were the indigenous population of the Levant in changing social conditions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bryce 2012:202–204 and cf. Sader 2014:11–13.

<sup>5</sup> Niemann 2006. Cf. Finkelstein 2011a.

<sup>6</sup> Routledge 2004:27–40, esp. 37–38.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Unger 1957:38–46; Albright 1975:532.

<sup>8</sup> Bunnens 2000:15–16.

<sup>9</sup> Sader 2014:17–20. For further discussion see: Schwartz 1989; Bunnens 2000; Mazzoni 2000a: 31–35; Bryce 2012:163–165, 202–204. For Canaan, see: Finkelstein 1988; 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Zadok 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sass 2005:63. But note the larger cultural background, e.g., the relationships between the Levant and Egypt, see: Staubli forthcoming.

The demise of the social structure of the Late Bronze Age generated new (or renewed) forms of socio-political organizations, like ‘tribes’ or ‘clans’ which presupposed a familial relationship between members of the community. Consequently, it is the collapse of the Late Bronze Age hierarchy with its former urban elites that enabled the rise of ruling elites which originated in the newly formed socio-political groups. State formation in the Iron Age Levant should therefore be considered as a social evolution, a process during which the ruling elite – related to the former city-state system and to the regional powers – was replaced by new elite, of different origin, who found its legitimacy in a different social structure. Bunnens puts it well in discussing the Aramaeans, asserting that “the Aramaization of Syria results less from the conquest of the region by Aramaean invaders than from the emergence of new elite, whose legitimacy had its roots in the tribal system...”<sup>12</sup>

Going back to the example of Israel, the Omride palace in Samaria, the centralized political centre of the newly formed territorial kingdom, was in a way reviving the former ‘palatial’ system of the Late Bronze Age, probably as it was the traditional political and economic model. Having said that, the Omride palace in Samaria was also lavishly built on what was previously an agricultural estate that had no preceding urban or monumental tradition; it was also located fairly close to (and somewhat above) the region’s traditional ruling centre in Shechem.<sup>13</sup> Thus, on the one hand, it reflects some political continuity from the Late Bronze Age; on the other, it reflects the social evolution that occurred in the early Iron Age: the Omride palace manifests the power and wealth of newly emerged political elite that chose to reside in an entirely newly built political centre and not in the former, traditional one. In other words, though it adopts a pre-existing political model (palace economy), the palace in Samaria reflects a newly acquired political authority within a new form of socio-political organization.<sup>14</sup> This social evolution also bears an important cultural aspect, as creating new political structures must have been involved with the construction of new social identities, defining the bonds between different members of the groups integrated under a new centralized rule.

Another expression of this social evolution may be observed in the use of language and script: during the Late Bronze Age communication between local rulers and regional powers was made in the Akkadian language and through the cuneiform script. This communication system fell out of use in the Iron Age and was replaced with the earliest attempts to have the local spoken languages committed to writing through specific scripts. Various local dialects are directly attested since the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. They acquired the status of written official language as a result of state formation.<sup>15</sup> From the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century we see in the epigraphic finds the earliest appearance of local dialects like Hebrew, Aramaic, Moabite or Ammonite

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<sup>12</sup> Bunnens 2000:16.

<sup>13</sup> For the Omride palace in Samaria, see: Stager 1990; Franklin 2004; Niemann 2007; 2011. For a different opinion, see: Ussishkin 2007; Finkelstein 2011b.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the role of the Omride palatial architecture in Israelite state formation, see: Sergi and Gadot forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> Gzella 2015:20–22.

committed to writing through specific and differentiated script.<sup>16</sup> These finds reflect an apparently conscious attempt at shaping official royal language.<sup>17</sup> The shaping and the ongoing use of a standardized royal language and script must have contributed to a sense of self-awareness. This awareness, however, was restricted mainly to the ruling and intellectual (literate) elites, and not necessarily shared with the entire communities that came under their political control.

In this sense we should also view the use of royal display inscriptions made by the rulers of the Levantine territorial kingdoms from the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE and on. The appearance of Levantine royal inscriptions goes hand in hand with the emergence of new centralized polities that had autonomous scribal education and central administration.<sup>18</sup> It marks another difference between them and their Late Bronze Age predecessors, as no such inscriptions were found in the Late Bronze Age Levant, when writing seems to have been largely restricted to administrative purposes. The appearance of royal inscriptions, a tradition probably adopted from Assyrian royal propaganda,<sup>19</sup> was therefore a rather new media chosen by new rising elite as another source of their political legitimation. The content of these inscriptions creates the notion of culturally and politically unified territorial kingdoms, under the rule of a local dynasty.<sup>20</sup> It demonstrates the further employment of writing and script in the service of state formation, and in a much broader sense – in the construction of new political identities and cultural memories, at least among the ruling elites.<sup>21</sup>

In light of all the above, what, then, are we talking about when we talk about ‘Aram’ and ‘Israel’? Apparently when we talk of ‘Aram’ we have in mind the entire region from north Canaan and up to the Jazira and the upper Euphrates. Yet this region was a composite of territorial polities that used different dialects and script traditions, the populace did not share the same ‘religion’, and there is no specific material culture that could be assigned to them.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, perhaps we should ask to what extent it was the adoption of the Aramaic language and script by the Assyrian administration, and the consequent rise of Aramaic to the status of the Levantine *lingua franca* that facilitates our modern conceptions of ‘Aram’ and ‘Aramaeans’? A very brief review of the use of this term in ancient sources will clarify the problem.

The ‘Aramaeans’ first appear on the historical stage in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser I and his heir Ashur-bel-kala (in the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), where they seem to be a component of a quite complex composite of a group of so-called ‘Aḥlamu’; according to these inscriptions, they occupied a vast area and they mani-

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<sup>16</sup> Finkelstein and Sass 2013; Sass, this volume.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Niehr, this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Gzella 2015:60–61.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Naaman 2000; Sass 2005:56.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance: Routledge 2004:133–153.

<sup>21</sup> This subject is discussed at length in Sergi 2015, with further literature.

<sup>22</sup> Niehr 2014; Bonatz 2014; Bunnens, this volume. See also the discussion of archaeological evidence from sites in northern Israel and northern Jordan by Mazar, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, Thareani, and Häser in this volume. For further discussion of material culture, see: Maeir, Sass, and de Hulster, in this volume.

fested themselves in different social and political forms.<sup>23</sup> Still, it should be asked to what extent these inscriptions reflect the Assyrian point of view, namely the way in which the Assyrians labelled different groups that might have had different identities and traditions, in order to define their own identity and role within the complex society they encountered.<sup>24</sup> Later in the Iron Age, with the appearance of the Levantine royal inscriptions the term ‘Aram’ is employed to designate the Kingdom of Damascus (in the Zakkur inscription) or the Kingdom of Bit-Agussi/Arpad (in the Sefire Stele).<sup>25</sup> In biblical historiographic narratives the designation Aram refers in most cases to the Kingdom of Damascus. Only in 2 Samuel 10 is it employed to designate other ‘Aramaean’ polities (Aram-Zoba, Rehob), but such entities were in the vicinity of Damascus and to a certain extent were also under its political hegemony. In this regard, it is interesting that Zakkur, king of Hamath and Luath, who bears a Semitic, if not Aramaic, name and who was taken in the past to be an Aramaean usurper of a Luwian dynasty from Hamath,<sup>26</sup> used the term ‘Aram’ in order to identify his enemy, the king of Damascus.

To sum up this point, historical sources dated to the Iron Age II – both biblical narrative and royal inscriptions – reflect quite a limited concept of the designation ‘Aram’ that seems to be used in a more geographic or political sense (and less ‘ethnic’) to define specific territory/kingdom ruled by a king. This is already different from the earlier (Assyrian) sources referring to ‘Aram’ in the Iron Age I in a more ethnic sense, defining a group, located all over the northern Levant. The written sources therefore attest to the fluidity of the use of the term ‘Aram’ which was by the Iron Age II employed in the service of state formation in order to construct new political and social identities. Whatever the original meaning of this term was, by the Iron Age II it was lost and reloaded with a new one.<sup>27</sup>

Coming back to the question of material culture, and to be more specific to the material culture related to the ruling elite, it is clear that ‘Aramaean’ dynasties, especially in north Syria and in the upper Euphrates, adopted local Hittite traditions of monumental art and royal culture in order to manifest their own political power (probably so too did the so called ‘Luwian’ rulers of Hamath).<sup>28</sup> In other words, rulers (or ‘new elites’) – regardless of their ‘ethnic’ origin or social identity – employed a pre-existing and prestigious royal tradition in order to manifest their newly acquired political power. Both examples – that of the different use of the term ‘Aram’ and that of the use of Hittite monumental art in the service of Iron Age state formation – attest to the rather transferrable nature of cultural traits as a mean to construct social or political identity. Namely, different manifestation of ‘identity’, or for that matter, political power, could

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion see Bunnens, this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Fales 2013; 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Bunnens 2015. Another common interpretation of the term ‘upper and lower Aram’ in the Sefire Stele is that it refers to the geographical region of north and south Syria (Sader 2014:15–16), but see the reservations of Bunnens, also in this volume.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Bryce 2012:137.

<sup>27</sup> A similar case may be argued for the term ‘Israel’ since its appearance in the Merenptah Stele and till its use as a designation of the northern kingdom in Iron Age II sources.

<sup>28</sup> Bryce 2012:60–61,134; Bunnens 2013.



be borrowed and adopted when they acquired a certain degree of prestige, and therefore they were transferable in time and space.<sup>29</sup>

These examples demonstrate that the appearance of new ‘ethnicities’ or rather identities in the Iron Age Levant,<sup>30</sup> was the result of new social and political bonds – usually on the local political level – that in the absence of a dominant elite (as was the case in the Late Bronze Age) employed symbols of social identity from a set of prestigious cultural traits that were available to them whether inherited from the Late Bronze Age or newly constructed in the Iron Age. In many aspects, the construction of these new identities (i.e., Israel, Aram, Moab) may also be seen as an intellectual product of state formation. Namely, as the outcome of the constant need to form politically and socially unified structure under centralized rule, on the one hand, and to legitimize and manifest the power of this centralized rule on the other.

All this leads to the conclusion that ‘Aram’ and for that matter the ‘Aramaeans’ (and also the ‘Israelites’) are social and cultural constructs, the result of a social evolution with its far reaching political implications that occurred in the early Iron Age. Such a social construct was mainly the product of a kingdom’s ruling and intellectual elite, and was not necessarily shared by all the communities that came under the rule of this elite. Even if these terms (Aram, Israel) previously had some ‘authentic’ meaning that can be historically traced and located, it is clear that by the Iron Age II they were already symbols employed in the constant process of state building and social construction. The fact is that the terms ‘Aram’ and ‘Israel’ continued to be employed – yet in different meanings – also in much later periods.<sup>31</sup>

### State Formation in the Iron Age Levant and the Place of Aram and Israel within It

Adopting a generalized ‘bird’s eye view’ of the social evolution that occurred throughout the Levant in the 12<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, we may describe it as a threefold process.

The earliest phase (12<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) is usually identified with the emergence of the so called ‘Luwian/Neo-Hittite’ kingdoms in northern Syria and southeast Anatolia.<sup>32</sup> The fact is that some of the former Hittite political centres (Karkemish and Melid) survived the transition to the Iron Age and maintained their former political power, thus providing the entire region of northern Syria and southeast Anatolia with a political model.<sup>33</sup> The first stage of state formation in the Iron Age Levant is, therefore, characterized by the centralization of political power in the hands of local dynas-

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Mazzoni, this volume.

<sup>30</sup> For some reservation from the term ‘ethnicity’ see: Sherrat 2005; Wimmer 2007; 2008a ;2008b; 2013. See also de Hulster, this volume.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gzella 2015 for the cultural history of Aramaic. For the evolution of the term ‘Israel’, see the recent study of Weingart 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Mazzoni 2000a:35–37; Bryce 2012:195–204.

<sup>33</sup> Mazzoni 2000a:37–41; Bryce 2012:195–196.

ties from north Syria and southeast Anatolia that adopted Hittite traditions to manifest their newly acquired political power.<sup>34</sup> This is regardless of whether some of them belonged to ‘Luwian speaking’ dynasties or not. There should be little doubt that some of these dynasties originated in the former Hittite ruling class. However, and generally speaking, the ‘Luwian’ nature of these kingdoms, which was expressed mainly in royal inscriptions and royal art, has nothing to do with the ‘ethnicity’ of the ruling dynasties and even less to do with that of the local inhabitants.

The second phase (10<sup>th</sup>– early 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) is characterized by a similar social evolution that occurred in the regions of central and south Syria. The formation of the kingdoms in north Syria together with the Assyrian pressure from the east, in a period that saw the gradual growth of international trade (11<sup>th</sup> century BCE) were probably the main generator of this second phase: rural society, that settled throughout the 12<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE in the Syrian hinterland and the central Canaanite hill country,<sup>35</sup> clustered around local elite families, who translated their agricultural surplus to political hegemony. As the political and economic status of this sector grew in strength, it engaged in a relentless effort to expand both strategically and economically, extending its political power by integrating different territories and communities under centralized rule. Archaeologically, this process is marked in the rapid urbanization of Syria and Israel in the 10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.<sup>36</sup> The dynasties rising to power throughout Syria in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE are usually identified as ‘Aramaeans’ based on their Semitic names, and thus the second phase of state formation may be attributed to the emergence of the so called ‘Aramaeans kingdoms’. As we have seen above, there is nothing particularly ‘Aramaic’ about those kingdoms, which used different dialects, script traditions and material objects. However, unlike their northern neighbours, the dynasties rising to power in central and south Syria did not make use of Hittite royal art in order to manifest their newly acquired power, but elaborated on the local Syrian traditions (e.g., the palace in Samaria) while constructing some new ones (like the adoption of royal display inscriptions).

The third and last phase of state formation in the Levant occurred during the 9<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE when centralization of political power became realized in the more arid regions of southern Canaan. From the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE these regions saw the emergence of territorial kingdoms on the desert fringe: Judah in southern Canaan and Ammon, Moab and Edom in Transjordan.<sup>37</sup>

This, indeed, rather generalized description of Levantine state formation places the formation of Israel together with that of the so-called ‘Aramaeans kingdoms’ to its north and northeast, and probably contemporaneously with the formation of Aram-Damascus. Israel and Aram share much in common in respect to their formation – not only in regard to their chronology, but also in their means of social evolution. The fact that Israel and Aram-Damascus emerged as territorial polities contemporaneously

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<sup>34</sup> Mazzoni 2000a:35–41.

<sup>35</sup> Mazzoni 2000b:121–124; Sader 2014:17–20, and cf. Finkelstein 1988.

<sup>36</sup> Mazzoni 2000a:41–47; 2000b:125–130; Sader 2014:21–27. For Canaan and Israel, see: Finkelstein 2011a.

<sup>37</sup> For Judah, see: Sergi 2013. For Transjordan see, for instance: Routledge 2004.

(10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE) explains the nature of the conflict between them, but it also clarifies the nature of their social and cultural interaction. It also sheds light on the construction of these new identities.<sup>38</sup> In this respect, much significance should also be given to the fact that from the early 9<sup>th</sup> century the ruling elite in Samaria claimed and re-claimed its political hegemony over the basin of the Sea of Galilee and the northern Jordan valley. During the Bronze Age, these regions maintained close cultural connections with the northern Levant (e.g., Hazor); during the Iron Age II these regions were the hub for urban centres whose rulers had to shift their loyalties between the kings of Damascus and those of Samaria.<sup>39</sup> All this demonstrates that there is a good reason to locate the Kingdom of Israel within the so called ‘Aramaean’ world, and thus to re-define the nature of interaction between Israel and Aram-Damascus. This, however, leads us to the question of the borders between them.

### Border Zones?

If we look at a map of the period, we might get the impression of the Iron Age (political) world was an ordered whole. However, the rather modern concept – that political hegemony is equally distributed within a given territory marked by borders – could hardly be applied to the Iron Age Levant. Rather, the Iron Age Levant is characterized by more of a patchy, variegated political authority, which constituted a form of territoriality in which authority was not evenly distributed across the landscape, nor contained within a fixed border.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, continuity of land and settlement was not a necessary requirement for political control, as is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that the Kingdom of Israel controlled in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE the remote desert site of Kuntillet Ajrud.<sup>41</sup>

This nature of territorial-political authority was in many aspects the result of state formation as a process of extending political power. Namely, borders were the result of political acts, not necessarily of social or cultural ones. This act culminated in different groups, having different social structures and cultural practices that were brought together under the same centralized rule. Such a reality is reflected, for instance, by the Mesha Inscriptions,<sup>42</sup> and by the archaeological evidence from the Judahite Negev.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, under these circumstances the formation of political borders was the result of loyalty bonds and client relationships between local leaders (of a tribe, community, and town) and the new political powers, which further implies the borders’ fluidity. This fluidity may be demonstrated again by the Mesha Inscription, which describes the ‘men of Gad’ as the indigenous residents of the Madaba plain, now brought under the newly formed Moabite polity; while in biblical literature the

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<sup>38</sup> On this issue see the articles by Sergi, Wazana, and Berlejung in this volume.

<sup>39</sup> Sergi and Kleiman forthcoming.

<sup>40</sup> For discussion see: Osborne 2013.

<sup>41</sup> For details see: Finkelstein 2013: 135–138; Ornan 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Routledge 2004: 133–153.

<sup>43</sup> Thareani 2014.

Gadites were considered to be an Israelite tribe, definitely not Moabite. In other words, the fluidity of borders also bears on the construction of communal identity.<sup>44</sup>

In light of that, it is also clear that the very existence of a political border does not negate the constant interaction (on the economic and thus also social and cultural levels) between groups affiliated with the political hegemony of different rulers.<sup>45</sup> In other words, not only were borders fluid, in the sense that they were a reflection of struggle for political power, but they were also transparent, in the sense that they were not fixed barriers, separating different groups from one another by preventing social and cultural interaction. Borders, even when they exist on the political level, can hardly mark any clear cultural or social differentiation between groups living side by side.

This brings us to the question of border zones. The very nature of border zones comprises numerous approaches and angles, and it is not our intention here to review the vast literature on the subject.<sup>46</sup> As the subject at hand focuses on political, social and cultural interaction between Aram and Israel, it is sufficient to briefly review the status of the basin of the Sea of Galilee and the northern Jordan Valley as a border zone. These regions were the hub of local urban centres (Hazor in the Late Bronze Age, Kinrot and Abel-beth-maacah in the Iron I, et-Tell in the Iron II) that exhibited strong contacts to the northern Levant (especially Late Bronze Age Hazor, Iron I Kinrot and Iron II et-Tell).<sup>47</sup> On the political level, they were probably more autonomous polities in the Iron I while in the Iron II their rulers had to shift their loyalties between Aram-Damascus and Israel.<sup>48</sup> The groups residing in these regions were by no means culturally or socially unified. They were brought together under centralized political rule, which in many cases was remote, not stable, and hardly affected the daily life of most of the individuals. In this regard, it should be asked – to what extent can we talk about such regions as ‘border zones’? The local inhabitants and the local ruling elites in the basin of the Sea of Galilee may have been more related – economically and thus also socially and culturally – to Aram-Damascus, even when they were politically affiliated with Israel. In that case, they were only considered as a ‘border zone’ from a Samaritan (Israelite) point of view, and probably less so when examined in their own

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<sup>44</sup> ‘Communal’ identity is also expressed with the words ‘social’ or ‘collective’ identity; cf. Feldman 2014:2.

<sup>45</sup> Such for instance are the economic ties between Jerusalem and Gath in the first half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, recently confirmed by the archaeological evidence (Uziel, Szanton and Cohen-Weinberg 2015; Maeir, personal communication), in spite of the fact that the Philistines (and those from Gath particularly) were remembered as the arch-enemy of Ancient Israel.

<sup>46</sup> Usually applied to contemporary issues, e.g., in the *Journal of Borderland Studies* (e.g., Konrad 2015; and with various perspectives: Custred 2011 linguistics; Zhurzhenko 2011 memory; Meier 2015 identity) as well as the handbooks D. Wastl-Walter 2011 (esp. Paasi 2011 and Newman 2011, cf. 2003; Van Houtum 2011) and Wilson and Donnan 2012 (with references). For an archaeological perspective, e.g., Mullin 2013 (cf. also Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Kletter 1999; Parker 2006; Bunimovitz and Lederman 2009: esp. 119).

<sup>47</sup> For Late Bronze Hazor, see: Ben-Tor and Zuckerman 2008; Zarzecky-Peleg and Bonfil 2011. For Iron I Kinrot, see: Münger 2013. For Iron I Abel-beth-maacah, see Panitz-Cohen and Mullins, this volume. For Iron II et-Tell, see: Arav 2004.

<sup>48</sup> Sergi and Kleiman forthcoming.

view. Furthermore, if the inhabitants of such zones were already organized in some pre-existing social structure (like the tribe or the city), and if it was only their ruling elite switching loyalties between the regional political powers, then their self-identity and image were probably more focused on the local level. Namely, their own community was conceived as the basic unit of the social structure and the main source of identity. Hence, in spite of the fact that the basin of the Sea of Galilee and the northern Jordan Valley switched hands between Aram and Israel, or even because of that, these regions should be first and foremost examined as their own social and cultural units and only subsequently should their political affiliation and its implications be considered.

To conclude, borders in the Iron Age Levant were not a line drawn in the sand that created a clear geographical distinction between diverse political, cultural, ethnic or even administrative entities. Moreover, borders were not a physical barrier preventing the social and cultural interaction between groups inhabiting different polities. Therefore, it seems to be more useful to talk about political affiliation vis-à-vis the social and cultural structure on the local level. Borders, in this respect, are useful as a means to conceptualize the extent of political authority, and even then the nature of political authority in the Iron Age territorial kingdoms should be considered, namely: that it was not equally distributed within a continuous territoriality.

## Conclusions

Examined from the political point of view, state formation in the Iron Age Levant was effected by the local elite, which extended its political power beyond its core community and integrated other groups within a centralized political structure. From the social point of view, it was a process of replacing an old elite with a new one: the former Levantine elite, whose legitimacy was rooted in the city state system and the dominating regional powers, was replaced by new elites, most of which originated in a rural background, and found their legitimacy in new forms of social structures (like the tribe or the clan). The constant effort of these new elites to extend their political authority, which resulted in the emergence of Levantine territorial kingdoms, culminated in the construction of new social and cultural identities, by forming the notion that different communities coming under centralized rule were not only politically but also culturally unified. Hence, the Israelites and the Aramaeans (and for that matter also the Moabites, Judahites, etc.) were not pre-existing cultural and historical monolithic groups, but rather – they were more of a social construct, constantly in the making, the result of political formation. This does not mean that the attempt to trace the origin of these social-constructs is futile, but only highlights the fact that as a group they were fluid. Collective identity given to large scale political and social communities was conceived mainly by the ruling and intellectual elites of the territorial kingdoms. Thus, instead of looking for ‘Aramaeans’ or ‘Israelites’ in the historical and archaeological research of the Levant, it is constructive to focus on the local level, i.e., the local

community and its interaction with other neighbouring communities vis-à-vis the centralized political powers.

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