Temples and Cult Places in Iron Age Transjordan
By Margreet L. Steiner

In 1981 Ziony Zevit published a book of more than 800 pages titled The Religions of Ancient Israel in which he described and analysed all cult places and cult objects found in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. His research showed that the cult places of Ancient Israel were quite diverse. There were small cult rooms and corners in towns and near the gates, temples and large temple complexes inside and outside the towns, as well as open-air sanctuaries and cult caves. Not one building was identical to another one.

But what was the situation across the River Jordan, where the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab and Edom were flourishing? Many fewer excavations have taken place there than in ancient Israel. Nonetheless several cultic complexes have been unearthed: three in the Jordan Valley (part of ancient Ammon), four in Moab, and one in Edom. What do these tell us about cult practices among Israel and Judah’s rivals?

Map of sites mentioned in the text.
Deir Alla

In 1967, a large text painted on the plaster of a wall was found in a small building at Tell Deir Alla in the Jordan Valley. The text refers to the seer Balaam, son of Beor, known from the Bible (Numbers 21–24). The plaster was found in two heaps east and west of the wall on which the text was supposedly written, thrown there when an earthquake struck the village around 800 BCE. Although the prophet Balaam is the main character of the text, the deities mentioned are not Israelite as in the biblical text but Canaanite; the text mentions the deities El, Ashtart and Shagar as well as the Shadday gods. The room in which the text was set up had benches on four sides. Benches in a building are often seen as a sign of its cultic nature. Interpretations of the benched room vary from a Balaam height or cultic cave where people could come into contact with the gods while dreaming to a shrine for the goddess Shagar or a classroom for the teaching of scribes.

Damiyah

Southeast of Deir Alla and closer to the Jordan lies the small tell of Damiyah, near a ford in the river. Excavations start in 2014 and have unearthed a 14 × 6 m mudbrick building with one or two platforms. This partially excavated building and the street south of it so far yielded several terracotta horse figurines and female figurines as well as a pottery stand, two headless terracotta anthropomorphic statues and the head of another statue. On the floor of the building two cattle skulls had been carefully positioned. The pottery dates the shrine to the late 8th–early 7th century BCE The buildings were destroyed by a fierce fire.
Pella

Some 30 km north of Deir Alla and on the edge of the highlands lies Pella, where a temple complex has been excavated with six superimposed temples, the earliest dating from the Middle Bronze Age I, ca. 1900 BCE. The uppermost temple, built ca. 950 BC, was 12 × 8 m in size and consisted of a central room with benches around its north and west sides and what appears to be a stepped podium for the display of votive objects. North of it was a smaller room filled with baskets of lentils and bags of grain burnt in the final destruction that took place around 800 BCE. In the open courtyard east of the building several pits were excavated as well as stone-built altar. Many objects were recovered from these ‘votive offering pits’ and from the destruction debris besides the altar, including fragments from several square stands, a model shrine decorated with bull heads, an incense cups and a fragment of an Ashdoda figurine. Burnt offering seems to have taken place in the courtyard, as many pits contained animal bones, mostly of young sheep and goat.
**Khirbet Ataruz**

At Khirbet Ataruz in ancient Moab a large temple complex has been excavated from 2000 onwards. The complex consisted of a multi-chambered building with at least three parallel long rooms fronting a courtyard. The main room (8.5 × 11 m) had a large unhewn stone slab standing upon a pedestal built in the niche and contained a variety of objects, among which were a large pottery bull, jars decorated with bulls heads and a fenestrated altar with two male figures. The other rooms featured a square stone-built hearth of 2 × 2 m in one room and two stone-built platforms in the other. All in all, hundreds of cultic objects have been retrieved from the temple complex. According to the excavator, the principal deity is symbolized by the standing stone in the main sanctuary room and by the bull figurine; which deity this is, Moabite Kemos or Israelite Yahweh, remains a question. The excavator dates the large temple to the beginning of Iron Age II, the 9th to early 8th centuries BCE.

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**Khirbet al-Mudayna**

A smaller cultic building was unearthed at Khirbet al-Mudayna in the Wadi ath-Thamad, located in the norther part of Moab; it dated to the 7th century BCE. The structure was 5.5 × 5.5 m with plastered benches on three sides. Two pillars connected by a bench divided the room into the main area and a small annex.
One libation altar and two shaft altars, all three made of stone, were found inside the building, one bearing an inscription reading ‘the incense altar that Elishama made for YSP, the daughter of WT’. The courtyard west of the building was an open plaza behind the gate through which one entered the town. Embedded in the floor of the plaza thousands of animal bones were excavated, mostly of sheep and goat. These remains have been tentatively interpreted as butchering waste for rituals involving the offering of meat in the shrine. However, the connection with the cult building is not clear. To which deity the shrine was dedicated is also unknown.
Outside the gate of Khirbet Mudayna a possible cultic installation was excavated, with two standing stones, 0.60 and 1.05 m high, the largest of which had fallen over. These two stones were held in place by a number of smaller chink stones carefully placed around them to act as supports. The two standing stones abutted a large 1.30 m long stone, placed on its side into the ground directly to the east. The excavators interpreted the upright stones as masseboth and the construction as a gate shrine, even though no cultic material was found nearby. Small shrines outside gates are not uncommon in the Levant.

Some 3 km west of Mudayna Thamad an open-air site has been excavated (site WT-13 of the Wadi ath-Thamad survey). On a hilltop, a perimeter wall enclosed an area of c. 7 × 14 m. Large stones inside the wall may have served as benches. Inside the enclosure wall, a large collection of ceramic statuettes and figurines was found, many with a disc in their hands. Other finds include architectural models and attached figures, miniature furniture, amulets and scarabs, miniature ceramic vessels, jewellery, marine shells, fossils and exotic geological samples. All in all, more than 500 objects were retrieved from this site, along with more than 25,000 pottery sherds. The pottery dates this complex firmly in the later Iron II period, 8th and 7th centuries BCE.
An earlier occupation phase consisted of five cooking installations with ashes and a large number of animal bones, dating to the Iron I/IIA period (11th–10th centuries BCE). It is unclear whether these finds constitute an earlier phase of the sanctuary or if they are the remains of household activities.

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Plan of cultic complex at WT-13. (Photo courtesy of Wadi ath-Thamad Project)

**Buseirah**

A possibly cultic building was excavated at Buseirah, which is ancient Bozrah, the main city of the Edomites in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. At the acropolis, two wings of a building were excavated, consisting of rooms around inner courtyards, a staircase flanked by two circular stone bases, plastered rooms and plastered water drains. Some of the smaller rooms contained a large number of cylindrical jars and may have served as storerooms. The excavator interpreted the complex as a temple though no objects were found in the building to corroborate this. Some elements of the Buseirah building can be compared with those in other temples in the Levant, such as the long narrow plastered room, the steps flanked by stone pedestals and the storerooms with storage jars, presumably with oil for use in temple ceremonies. However, none of the parallels fits neatly and the lack of cultic objects indicates that another interpretation is possible.

**Conclusions**

Several cult places have been excavated in the area east of the River Jordan, from large temples to smaller shrines and open-air complexes. The architectures and inventories of these sites show a wide variety, with stone-built altars, standing stones possibly representing deities, and the deposition of votive objects in pits and on benches. Meat offerings were possibly presented next to libations and the burning of aromatics. The shrines may have been locally used or may have served a wider region. Some temples were undoubtedly dedicated to the main state deities Milkom, Kemosh, and Qos, or to the god of Israel Yahweh, while smaller shrines seem to be related to other gods, such as the cult room at Deir Alla where Shagar is mentioned.

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Further reading:

More info on the cult places:
*Deir Alla*

*Damiyah*

*Pella*

*Khirbet Ataruz*

*Khirbet al-Mudayna*

*Buseirah*