KUNTILLET 'AJRUD
An Israeliel Religious Center in Northern Sinai

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By which route did the kings of Judah travel to Edom and Moab? And where was the westernmost border of the Judean kingdom in the Negev? Ruins of numerous Israelite forts have been discovered in the Negev, dating to the very beginning of the Judean Monarchy, but these are confined mainly to the Highlands in the region between Dimona and Qusaima, none farther south than the Ramon Crater and Nahal Lotz. These forts were doubtless erected to guard the ancient routes of the Negev, thus pointing towards a route running from Beer-sheba to Kadesh-barnea. However, from the geographical point of view, this is not the shortest way by which to reach Edom, where the ancient road to Edom passed.

Our quest for answers to these questions brought us to a site known as Kuntillet 'Ajrud, which sits atop an isolated hill jutting out of the desert on the border of northern Sinai, about 30 km. south of Kadesh-barnea. The road known today as Darb el Gender, leading from Gaza and Raphia on the Mediterranean coast to Edom, passes some 13 km. to the west, but it may be presumed that in ancient times its course ran near the foot of the hill, since one of the few water sources to be found in this arid region is located there. And, indeed, the Arabic name Kuntillet 'Ajrud, meaning "the Solitary Hill of the Wells," reflects the raison d'etre of the site—although today the clusters of wells at the foot of the hill are rather shallow and their waters are not particularly suitable. In ancient times, however, this must have been a much easier. Upon examining ancient maps it may be noted that 'Ajrud dominates not only a major north-south artery to Edom from the coast but also straddled the crossroads of an important trail traversing Sinai through Wadi Quraia and branching off towards the southern Sinai.

Explorers were already attracted to Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the last century, Edward Palmer, famous for his survey of Mount Sinai, visited there in 1869 on his return from southern Sinai and even conducted a small-scale excavation. He suggested identifying it with the Roman Gypsaria appearing on the Peutinger map between Halutza and Edom. This identification was accepted—and even adopted by some contemporary maps—until 1967 when the site was visited by Beno Rothenberg, who established from the pottery collected on the surface that it dates not to the Roman period but to the Judean Monarchy.

When we first visited Kuntillet 'Ajrud in 1970 we found a rectangular pile of debris, conveys toward the center, occupying most of the platform at the north of the hill. Its outlines resembling a typical fort of the Negev Highlands with its central courtyard surrounded by casemate walls. After three seasons of excavation, however, we discovered that this building is unique among the Israelite fortress-like sites found so far in the Negev, not only in their plan—which is lacking the casemates common to these forts—but also in the richness of its finds and the function it seems to have fulfilled.

The excavations were conducted in 1975-1978 by the author, assisted by the archaeological staff of the Israel Defense Forces (Sinai), A. Goren and B. Bass, and numerous volunteers. They managed to withstand the extremes of the desert climate and the atmosphere of utter isolation that were doubtless also the lot of the ancient inhabitants of this windswept hilltop.

We discovered that the site consists of two buildings, the main one, measuring about 15 x 25 meters, beautifully preserved, while the smaller building to its east was so badly eroded that little of its plan could be discerned; similar elements of decoration indicate, however, that both belong to the same period. Tentatively, we would date them both somewhere between the middle of the 9th and the middle of the 8th century B.C. The walls of the main building, preserved in some places to a height of about 1 meter, were built of the local chalk stone, reinforced with smaller bricks—which grow even today in Wadi Quraia—at the foot of the hill—at a height of about 1.30 meter, and then plastered over with mud mixed with straw. This building technique recalls the description of the temple courtyard in Jerusalem in 1 Kings 7:12: "The great House has three courses of hewn stone round about and a course of cedar beams." Of course, at Kuntillet 'Ajrud the stones are not hewn and the beams are not cedar, but it is nevertheless remarkable that this wood has been preserved at all from such an early age.

The entrance was through an open courtyard at the east leading into a gate room, which in turn led into a long narrow room flanked by two quasi-towers at the corners. Stone benches were built along all the walls of this entrance complex, but in the long narrow room they took up so much of the space, leaving barely room to move between them, that we dubbed it the "Bench Room." These benches were even built against what one would normally have expected to be the entrances to the corner towers, forming, as it were, the "window sills" of their openings. Floors, walls and benches were all covered with shiny white plaster. A veritable treasure of inscribed material came from this room: two fragments of plaster which had fallen from the walls inscribed in Phoenician script, a third inscription still in situ on the door jamb and various other fragments of ink-inscribed plaster in the debris. It was in this Bench Room and its two corner rooms that most of the unique artifacts were found: two large pithos bearing colored inscriptions and drawings, stone bowls with their donors' names engraved on the rims, fine pottery vessels such as jugs, lamps, flasks and bowls.

From this room one entered the large rectangular courtyard, found essentially empty except for the staircases leading to the
perhaps indicating that the goods within were consigned to the chief functionary (ao) of the city—the governor, commander or the like.

3) Inscriptions in Ancient Hebrew on the rims of stone bowls: The most complete inscription of this type reads: ‘Yehoy 6n 'dnhr brh 'ylysh (Belonging to 'Ophadi, son of 'Admah, may he be blessed by the Lord); on the others only the name was preserved, e.g. 6my 6n 'ar (She'mya, son of 'Ezer). Since one of these stone bowls weighed at least 200 kg, the donor—not to mention whoever had the task of hauling it to the site—must have had a sincere belief that the divine blessing requested would be bestowed upon him.

4) Inscriptions written in red or black ink on the plastered walls: Written in the Phoenician script, five such fragments were found; the only one in situ was so faded as to be practically illegible, while those found in the debris were too fragmentary to be decipherable. Nevertheless, on one such fragment the name 'ehovah appeared at least twice, and from such phrases as "may you be blessed" or "the blessings of," it is obvious that these inscriptions were of a dedicatory, bestowal or benedictory nature.

5) Inscriptions on pottery vessels accompanied by drawings: Written in red ink, these inscriptions also seem to be prayers, requests or blessings. They are so faded, however, that only sophisticated photographic techniques render them legible, and then only partially.

The same vessels are also densely covered with drawings. One scene shows the god Bes (Egyptian in origin) in typical stance and wearing a feathered head-dress, standing in the center, another unidentified god at his right and a seated woman playing the lyre at the right. Elsewhere on the same pithos a lion and other beasts, a tree of life on which two lions are leaping, and a cow licking the tail of her suckling calf. This last scene is very similar to one depicted on the Nimrud ivories from the palace of Shalmaneser, while other details resemble those on the Samarian ivories. Indeed, all these motifs are part of the artistic repertoire of the Syrian-Phoenician world, and although crudely executed by local artists, testify to the contact between this isolated desert spot at 'Ajlun and the cosmopolitan world far to its north.
It is not only the location of the site, straddling an important crossroads to Eilat and southern Sinai, but finds such as seashells from the coast of both the Mediterranean and Red Seas that indicate the origin or destination of the traffic that passed through it; numerous objects of cedar and sycamore wood from the north, and Hinnuk Pistacia, the latter growing only in the mountains of southern Sinai, were also found in the excavations. Nevertheless, Kuntilel ‘Ajrud cannot be considered a usual wayside fortress like those in the Negev Highlands, nor even an ordinary caravanserai, although undoubtedly it furnished some amenities to the weary travellers who rested at the foot of the hill. But above and beyond any secular purpose, it undoubtedly had a religious function. The references to the Almighty in the wall inscriptions, the various deities depicted on the jars and the stone vessels brought to the site as offerings are all evidence of this role. However, neither can it be considered a temple, since it has none of the typical cult vessels (and no metal finds whatsoever) or the architectural style associated with such a building. In our opinion, it was a wayside shrine where the traveller sojourned, to rest both his body and his soul, to commune with the divine spirit and to pray to his own particular deity to bless his journey. The wolf (an ancient Sheikh’s tomb) fulfills a similar function today. The focus of this shrine was the Bench Room where the offerings were presumably laid, the small rooms in the corners serving as a sofa at the benches were cleared away. The location of this shrine reflects an ancient Sinaiic tradition—perhaps connected with the sanctity of Mt. Hor, where the death of the priest Aaron occurred.

The existence of such a religious center south of Kadesh-barnea may have been connected with the travels of the Judean kings to Eilat and Ezion-Geber. The Phoenician inscriptions, the decorative style of the drawings, some of the pottery vessels and perhaps the references to gods other than Jehovah point unequivocally towards northern influence; this may have come via the Kingdom of Israel or even directly from Phoenicia by way of the southern Mediterranean coast. From the Biblical sources we know of three Judean monarchs who had interests in Eilat and Ezion-Geber during their short periods of southward expansion—and at the same time connections with the Kingdom of Israel and the Phoenicians. Although we did not find any clear-cut evidence that the site belongs to any one of these periods, both the ceramic and the epigraphic evidence point towards a short period from the mid-9th to mid-8th centuries B.C. Perhaps it is not only coincidence that the name ‘Adnah (exceedingly rare in the Bible), the father of the donor of one of the inscribed stone bowls, is mentioned as a commander of “three hundred thousand mighty men of valor” under Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 17:14). If there is any connection between the two, we are one generation after Jehoshaphat. And while we are speculating on matters which in any case are not subject to substantiation, let us not forget that this is the time of the Prophet Elijah, who spent forty days and forty nights on Mt. Horeb—the only Old Testament personage since the Exodus and Wanderings who is mentioned as having visited any specific place in Sinai.

The Phoenician cultural influence so evident at ‘Ajrud also points towards the period shortly after the death of Jehoshaphat. Of his son Jehoram it is written (2 Kings 8:18) that “he walked in the way of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for the daughter of Ahab was his wife.” And of Ahaziah, his son, who ruled only one year, it is said (2 Kings 22-27) that “his mother’s name was Athaliah, she was the granddaughter of Omri, king of Israel.” At the same time that Jehu killed all the house of Ahab and annihilated the priests of Baal, Queen Athaliah was ruling over Judah and building a temple to Baal in Jerusalem. It is therefore tempting to point to her reign, a time when there were direct relations between the kingdom of Judah and the Phoenicians, perhaps even to the extent of granting them direct access to Eilat and the Red Sea, as the period during which our religious center at ‘Ajrud flourished.

Be that as it may, the importance of ‘Ajrud lies not only in its archaeological remains but in its contribution to the historical-geographical research of the Negev of Israel. The road to Eilat—at least in some stage around the end of the 9th century B.C.—followed approximately the line of the Darb el-Ghazza of today. The border of the Judean kingdom was also most likely demarcated by this line, since it was the westernmost road over which the state seems to have exercised its authority at that time.

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