THE APPEARANCE OF ROCK-CUT BENCH TOMBS IN IRON AGE JUDAH AS A REFLECTION OF STATE FORMATION

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Introduction

The emergence of statehood in Judah has been the subject of numerous studies over the last few decades. Although the matter is still debated, the archaeological data collected so far supply, in my view, no clear evidence for the existence of a fully developed state in Judah before the late 9th–early 8th centuries BCE. In what follows, I will point out several factors that agree with the archaeological record and which may also be interpreted as reliable signs of statehood in Iron Age Judah. The main issue I wish to concentrate on is the appearance of burial practices connected with the use of so-called bench tombs in Iron Age Judah. The consensus among most scholars is that rock-cut bench tombs are a Judahite phenomenon, characterizing both the United Monarchy and the Kingdom of Judah. Such a reconstruction, however, fails to provide a reasonable explanation for the fact that bench tombs in the Judean core area (the Jerusalem Hills) appear only in the 8th century BCE, while in other areas such tombs arrive significantly earlier. Is there a connection between the appearance of bench tombs throughout the Kingdom of Judah during the 8th century BCE and its emergence as a fully developed state? I argue that the widespread appearance of

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1 References regarding the emergence of statehood in Judah are numerous; for collections of essays addressing the subject, see, e.g., Lipiński 1991; Finkelstein and Na’aman 1994; Levy 1995; Fritz and Davies 1996; Handy 1997; Gitin et al. 1998; Vaughn and Killebrew 2003; see, also Finkelstein and Silberman 2001; 2006; Halpern 2001; Na’aman 2002; Routledge 2004: 114–132; Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2004; Fantalkin and Finkelstein 2006.

bench tombs throughout the Kingdom of Judah during the Iron Age IIB is a reflection of state formation, accompanied by the creation of new elites, who apparently adopted this burial practice. But first a few introductory notes are necessary.

The intensive research of rock-cut bench tombs in Iron Age Judah, as well as of relevant biblical sources, has resulted in numerous summaries, which offer a wide range of chronological, architectural and sociological viewpoints (e.g., Loffreda 1968; Brichto 1973; Ribar 1973; Abercrombie 1979; Spronk 1986; Lewis 1989; Bloch-Smith 1992a; Ussishkin 1993; Barkay 1994; Burkes 1999: 9–33; Yezerski 1999; Friedman and Overton 2000; Schmidt 2000; Wenning 2005). This extensive database, developed since the undertaking of the Survey of Western Palestine in the 1870s, provides considerable information regarding burial customs of the inhabitants of Judah during the monarchical period. Recent summaries include nearly 300 rock-cut bench tombs dated to that period (Barkay 1994; Yezerski 1995), and archaeology is likely to increase this number.

From a typological perspective, bench tombs may be divided into several main groups (for the most up-to-date summary, see Yezerski 1999). The first attempt to demonstrate continuity in development between the different types of bench tombs was made by Loffreda who discerned five basic types and three sub-types, arranged typologically and chronologically from the simplest to the most complex (Loffreda 1968: 265–287). However, Loffreda’s evolutionary scheme is misleading since it has been shown that some types existed simultaneously (e.g., Borowski 1994: 46). According to Barkay (1994: 162; 1999), the typological differences between rock-cut bench tombs may reflect various dwelling types in Judah, as well as the social status of those interred. In addition, the simultaneous existence of several typological-architectural groups probably attests to regional differences as well (Yezerski 1999). But despite architectural differences, rock-cut bench tombs most probably reflect an identical conceptualization of the afterlife (cf. Osborne 2007; Suriano 2007).³

The absolute dates of the bench tombs are based on limited ceramic finds; those discovered looted are dated by stylistic comparison with

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³ For the purpose of the present article, the typological differences between bench tombs are insignificant, since all cases (including so-called arcosolium type) share a common concept of a bench on which the deceased was laid.