Edom is known as a southern neighbor of Judah during the first millennium BCE. However, many points of its geography and history are still debated\(^1\) since its study encounters many difficulties:

1. No original historiographic Edomite tradition is known so far.
2. Edomite epigraphy is still very limited.\(^2\)
3. The few archaeological excavations and surveys of Edom present numerous problems of interpretation, especially in dating.
4. The Biblical traditions about Edom are very difficult to interpret because there is very often confusion between “Edom” and “Aram” in the textual tradition: the first and third letters of these two country names are the same and the middle letters, \(\text{dalet}\) and \(\text{resh}\), are very easily confused in Palaeo-Hebrew and square Hebrew scripts. Actually \(\text{dalet}\) and \(\text{resh}\) were identical in the Aramaic writing of the 5th–3rd c. BCE. Because of this textual confusion,\(^3\) the distinction between Edom and Aram is often only possible from the context.

Another difficulty in studying the Edomites arises from the fact that the Edomite people seem to have moved or extended westwards during the first millennium BCE: from the mountains east of the Arabah to southern Palestine around Lachish and Hebron. Although there was apparently a continuity in the culture of the Edomites, especially in their religion centered on their national God, Qôs, it is necessary to distinguish different phases in their history.5

1. Edom appears for the first time in papyrus Anastasi VI, 54–56, a model letter dated in the 8th year of pharaoh Merneptah (ca. 1205): “(We) have finished letting the Bedouin (Shasu) tribes of Edom pass the Fortress (of) Merneptah-Hotep-hir-Maat – life, prosperity, health! – which is (in) Tjeku,6 to the pools of Per-Atum (of) Mer(ne) Ptah-Hotep-hir-Maat, which are (in) Tjeku, to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive…”7

This mention of the “tribes of the Shasu of Edom” seems to imply that Edom is situated east of the Egyptian delta. Actually, the mention of Edom is in some way parallel to the mention of Seir in other Egyptian texts. With J. R. Bartlett,8 it is apparently closer to Egypt and probably located in the mountains of the Negev while Edom would be in the mountains east of the ‘Arabah. People living there were apparently mainly shepherds organized in tribes and able to move a long way to find pasture for their sheep.

2. Biblical traditions concerning the exodus mention Edom and a king of Edom in Num 20:14–20 (cf. Judg 11:16–17) but the tradition of Deut 2:4–8, which seems more primitive,9 does not mention any Edom

6 Perhaps to be identified with Tell el-Maskhuta, at the eastern end of Wadi Tumilat, cf. R. Giveon, Les bédouins Shosou des documents égyptiens (DMOA, 22; Leiden: Brill, 1971) 133.
7 ANET, 259.
8 Bartlett, Edom and the Edomites, 42.
9 Cf. W. A. Sumner, “Israel’s Encounters with Edom, Moab, Ammon, Sihon and Og according to the Deuteronomist,” VT 18 (1968) 216–228, esp. 216.