

Pioneer Settlements over the Jordan

The area lying to the east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea and between Ramtha in the north and Aqaba in the south is the subject of this study (FIG. 1). It has been, since time immemorial, the meeting grounds of people who crossed and recrossed it in different directions. These human waves came from near and distant lands and many from amongst them were those who settled in it. A wave that extended for nearly a thousand years can be referred to in general terms, as the Hellenistic-Roman presence in Transjordan. Historians mark it down as having started with Alexander's conquest in the fourth century B.C., but there is no doubt that the human physical presence of Hellenes in this area started some time earlier. They came as traders, men of fortune and prisoners of war. Naturally, as with all humans, some of them married women of the land and settled down.¹

The real wave, however, came in the fourth century B.C. when the Hellenistic settlements were growing in number and strength. Like all those who preceded them, they realized that they were living in the areas that divided the desert from the sown. In 1894 George Adam Smith described their situation in a rather simplistic form, by writing about their times "when the Decapolis is formed as a Greek League to keep the Arabs out."² The dislike between the settled and the nomad resulting from conflicting interests, which my generation remembers well, is old indeed. At this stage it is therefore relevant and necessary to put things in the right perspective and to mention clearly what people meant when using the word "Arabs". There is no doubt it was used for nomads, who as camel herders, could bring havoc to the settled areas through their dire need for pasture land and water resources.³ This usage was often used by Jordanians, until a few years ago, when a beduin encampment was referred to merely as "al-'Arab".

It did not have anything to do with national feelings or national interests as we understand them nowadays.⁴ The desire to keep the nomads out was again actively manifested in Roman times when the policy of the "Limes Arabicus" was firmly exercised towards the end of the third century A.D.⁵ For the three centuries that followed both Romans and Byzantines strived to maintain a military build-up in the whole region bordering the Syrian desert. The purpose was the protection of the many settlements that lay to the west of the line that marked the extent of agricultural activity. It must have been a difficult task as frequent droughts, that sometimes continued for more than one season, caused the nomadic tribes in the southern and eastern areas to migrate in large numbers, into the settled areas in the north and the west.

In the year A.D. 614, the Persian Sassanids swept over the area in a wave that brought a great deal of suffering and devastation. The Byzantines, who rallied their forces under Heraclius, succeeded in throwing them back in A.D. 628 but within a few years were overwhelmed by the Arab armies advancing from the south under the banner of Islam. For the three hundred years that followed the countryside enjoyed what can be called a demographic peace. The nomads of the south were already dispersed in Persia and Central Asia in the east and in Egypt, the Sudan, North Africa and Andalusia in the west. The settled population in Transjordan therefore had no nomads to fight back. However they probably felt the adverse effects of living, in an outlying district, when after A.D. 750 the centre of Arab power established itself with the Abbasids, in faraway Iraq.

In the tenth century, Transjordan formed part of the kingdom of the Ikhshidis which ruled both Egypt and Syria between A.D. 934 and 969.⁶ It was during this period and

¹These migrations to and from the Middle East seem to be old indeed. The Philistines settled in the coastal strip of Palestine in the 12th century B.C. while the Phoenicians migrated to Carthage on the North African coast in the ninth century B.C.

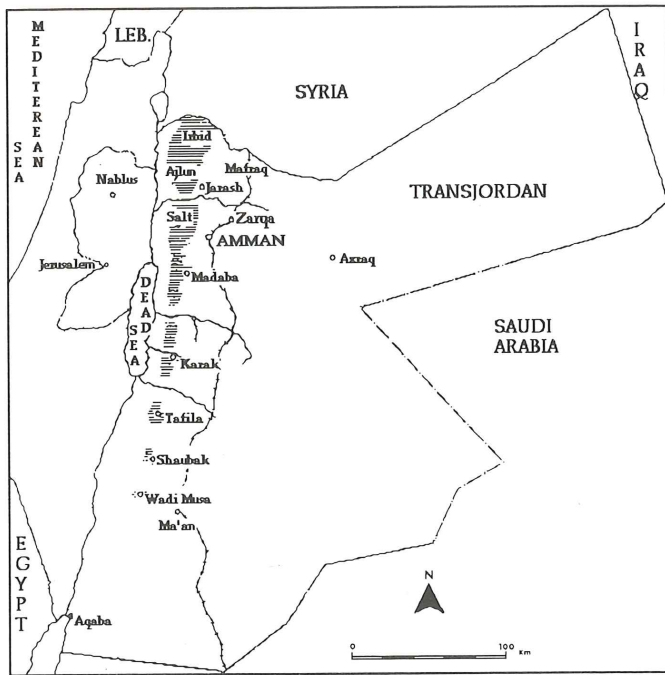
²G.A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, (London, 1894), p. 9.

³Ibn Khaldun, n.d. *Al-Muqadimah*, (Dar al-'Awdah, Beirut), p. 96.

⁴A report about the beduin migrations into Bilad ash-Sham at the beginning of the 18th century is given by Doha Chatty, 'Tawasu' al-Badu fi Bilad ash-Sham wa Inhisarahum', *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilad Ash-Sham*, pt. 1 (Damascus, 1978), pp. 403-413.

⁵S.T. Parker, *The Roman Frontier in Central Jordan*, (BAR Int. Ser. 340, Oxford, 1987).

⁶Ahmad al-Sa'id Sulciman, *Tārīkh ad-Duwal al-Islāmiyah wa Mu'jam al-'Usar al-Hakimah*, (Cairo, 1969), pp. 129-130.

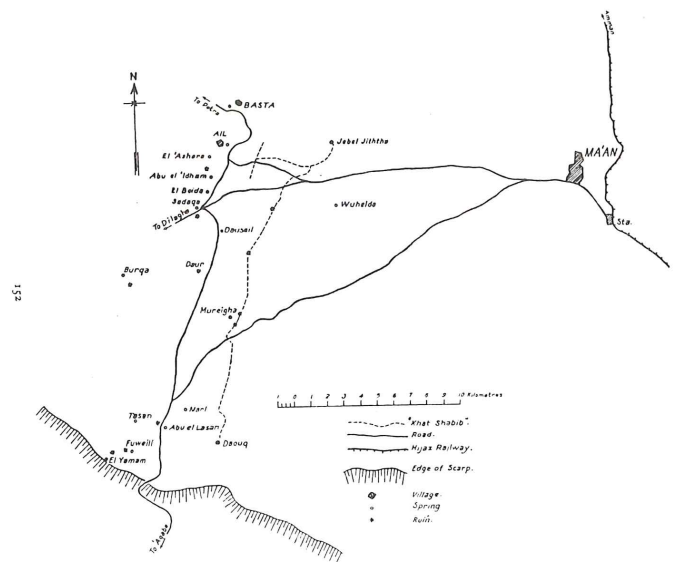


1. Map of Jordan. Shaded areas indicate roughly those under cultivation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The railway line between Mafrqa and Ma'an became operational after 1905.

probably just after A.D. 950 that their governor of Amman and al-Balqa' was Shabib ibn Jarir al-'Uqaili, who built a castle in the vicinity that is still known by his name in az-Zarqa. His name is also very well remembered by the Chronicles which associate him with two sites that are called Khatt Shabib. The first, an imaginary line in the area east of Amman, probably indicating to cultivators the boundary between the fields that receive enough rainfall to produce reasonable crop and those that do not. Generally it relates to the line that stretches parallel to the Hijaz Railway between az-Zarqa and Zizia. The second line was:

"...a stone wall running for no obvious reason, across country from a point about twelve kilometers west of the town of Ma'an and terminating near the edge of the scrap, known as Nagb Eshtar".⁷ (FIG. 2).

Sir Alec Kirkbride, the British Resident until 1946 and later Ambassador in Amman, was the first person to write about this stone wall. He described it as being "a single layer of rough blocks of stones laid upon the surface of the ground, over a width of about two metres, with larger blocks standing upright in the centre of the strip at more or less regular distances of about five metres. Circular



2. Map showing Khatt Shabib to the west of Ma'an. After Kirkbride, *Antiquity* 87 (Sept. 1948), p. 152.

arrangement of similar rough stone appear to have existed at irregular intervals and where the line crossed important tracks, there appeared to have been breaks or gates so as not to impede traffic. Although a great physical effort must have gone to build this remarkable wall, the nature of its structure indicates that it was a boundary line and not a defensive wall. All the permanent water points lie to the west of the line and so also does the cultivated land in the vicinity which is capable of raising rain irrigated crops under existing climatic conditions." Kirkbride commented that there is no evidence to confirm the date of the construction of the wall and I am not aware that studies or excavations since 1946 have given any conclusive information concerning this point. Nevertheless I am certain that whoever built it, if it was not Shabib himself,⁸ was trying to keep the countryside on the fringe of the desert under his control. He wanted to save the crops so that farmers would be able to pay their taxes to his till and at the same time keep the beduins under check so that tribute could be collected from them when making use of the western lands' pasture and water resources. As already mentioned, the conflict between cultivators and nomads came to a stand still when the Arab Peace prevailed in the middle of the seventh century. The cultivation of the fields abandoned by the population of Greek origin in Bilad ash-Sham and of Persian origin in Iraq and Faris brought favourable

⁷A. Kirkbride, 'Shabib's Wall in Transjordan', *Antiquity* 87 (1948), pp. 151-154.

⁸Shabib's name has been immortalized through his mention in a poem by the famous Arab poet al-Mutanabi. It can be referred to in my collection of his poems.

conditions for growth that continued until the establishment of the Crusader Kingdoms and principalities in Bilad ash-Sham.⁹ Then the agricultural strife between settlers and nomads became another aspect of the major military conflict. During the three hundred years that followed, both Ayyubid and Mamluk rule have had to live with agricultural strife since their regimes, whether in Cairo or Damascus, did not have real authority over the tribes of the peninsula. The Ottoman rule after 1516 tried to control the countryside and remove agricultural strife in the hope of collecting taxes in regular style. Therefore a fiscal census was initiated in the year 1525 which was followed by a more elaborate one in 1595/6.¹⁰ It is indeed striking that even after eighty years of Ottoman rule, their formidable government bureaucracy was not able to make better conditions prevail for agricultural extension in the areas bordering on Badiat ash-Sham. The line of agricultural activity, as is shown in FIG. 1, has indeed shrunk westward and all the areas east of Irbid and as-Salt have been transformed into pastureland. The activity in al-Karak and the southern area has been so un-rewarding, tax-wise, that they were not even included in the census. It is therefore safe to assume that all the areas east of the line stretching between Irbid, Jarash, as-Salt, al-Karak, at-Tafla and ash-Shawbak were no more under cultivation. This beduinization of the Transjordanian eastern districts, which lasted probably for more than four hundred years until the 1860's, was so complete that the government withdrew its forces and left the small population living in it on their own. The only time some of them came in contact with the authorities, was during the pilgrimage when the famous caravan crossed the Transjordanian countryside on its way to the holy places and two months later when it returned to Damascus.¹¹

This poor state of agricultural affairs continued until the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman Sultanate issued the Land Law of 1858 and beduin shaykhs as well as tribesmen and groups of cultivators started to acquire, by prescription or purchase, large estates of dry farming land that were known then as *khirab* or *khraḥ*. This process started first in the Balqa', the middle region when towards 1860 Shaykh Fandi ibn Fayiz and his son Shaykh Saṭṭam started their agricultural activity at Barazin. Probably at the same time their cousin Shaykh Rumayḥ Abu Junaib took over al-Yaduda, at-Tunaib and Lubban and

started his partnership with Ṣaliḥ Abujaber at al-Yaduda.¹² Few years afterwards, Shaykh Saṭṭam took over ten villages including Umm al-'Amad, Zizia and al-Qaṣṭal and distributed them to shaykhs and clans of the Bani Ṣakhr¹³ when he became Shaykh al-Mashayekh of the whole tribe in 1881. Madaba was acquired in 1880 by three Christian tribes who moved out of al-Karak a year earlier and the Saṭṭiyih clans acquired land in the Amman area. The fields around Amman were allotted to Circassian refugees some time after their arrival in 1878. In 1884 Ibrahim Abujaber left al-Yaduda and struck a partnership with al-Ḥadid shaykhs of the Balqawiyyi tribes at aj-Juwaidah and Qurayit Nafi'.¹⁴ Afterwards the Bisharats, of Nabulsi origin, followed their uncle Ṣaliḥ Abujaber, already established at al-Yaduda and became his neighbours at Umm al-Kundum. In 1894 three clans of farmers, originally from Egypt, pooled resources and acquired from the governor of Damascus the title deed to Saḥab.¹⁵ Towards the end of the century other families followed suit when the Nabulsis, originally from Nablus but already in as-Salt for some twenty years, acquired an estate in Ḥisban, and the Tuqans also originally from Nablus acquired land in Nau'r. At the same time or a little afterwards Khairo Agha Abu Qura, of Damascene origin living in as-Salt, acquired an estate in ar-Rajib still owned by his descendants, now known as Khair family. In al-Baniyat, a Nabulsi residing in as-Salt, al-Sharabi bought lands which his descendants are still farming. The Qa'wars acquired Qurayit Salim and a clan of Dababnih of as-Salt bought lands in Nau'r from al-'Ajarmih tribesmen.

In the north, acquiring of land was greatly encouraged by the Ottomans who by 1851 had already instated a Kaim Makam in Irbid. Probably immediately after that date, ar-Ramtha was settled by cultivators who came from the west and the Ḥauran. At the same time al-Gharaybiḥ, whose name means those from the west, moved and settled in al-Mughayar. Years later in 1869 ar-Ramtha was sacked by nomads¹⁶ and few families of al-Ḥuṣn headed by al-Hindawi, and his companions Halush, al-Khalil and al-Nasser, were not allowed by the authorities to stay at al-Ḥuṣn where they resided until then.¹⁷ They moved to an-Nu'ayma and joined hands with the clans already residing in it, al-Khaṣawnih, al-Murayyan, Hamasha and al-Maumani to cultivate the fields of an-Nu'ayma and to settle the two *khirab* to the east, Kabar and Tumaira. The

⁹This period of instability extended for nearly two hundred years until the Crusaders were finally defeated at the Horns of Hittin on 4 July 1187.

¹⁰W.D. Hütteroth and K. Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 19th Century*, (Erlangen, 1977), pp. 3, 4.

¹¹Three travellers who visited Transjordan at the start of the 19th century were Seetzen, Burckhardt and Buckingham. They all confirmed that there were no agricultural settlements east of as-Salt.

¹²The partnership involved division of the crop and the land after cultivation at Ṣaliḥ's expense. A document found in the Abujaber collection, 4 Jumada al-Aula 1317 A.H./A.D. 1899 stipulated that Rumayḥ's holdings in al-Yaduda be exchanged for Ṣaliḥ's holdings lying to the east in at-Tunaib. This transaction was concluded between Rumayḥ and Ṣaliḥ's sons (he died in 1897) and

probably some 35 years after the original partnership was started.

¹³Y.S. al-Shuwaihat al-Uzaizat, *Al-Uzaizat in Madaba*, (Amman, 1964), p. 76.

¹⁴This was possible by the sale of a house that the family owned in Jerusalem for the large sum of 650 gold French Pounds. The transaction is recorded in the Registers of as-Salt's Islamic court on the 1 Rabi' al-Akhir 1305 A.H. which coincides with the year A.D. 1885.

¹⁵F.G. Peake, *Tārīkh Sharq al-Urdunn wa Qabā'iluha*, (Jerusalem, 1934), p. 352.

¹⁶A report about this incident was sent by Consul-General Wood from Damascus to Britain's Ambassador in Constantinople. It was dated 27 September 1869 and is in the archives of the Public Records Office in London No. FO 95/927 Syria and Palestine.

¹⁷The document of this act was dated 29 Rabi' al-Akhir 1286 A.H./A.D. 1869. It is now published in my book *Pioneers over the Jordan* (London, 1989).

beduin tribes acquired also a taste for land. Probably in the 1880's the Khurshan of Bani Şakhr acquired the villages, Buraiqa, Fa'a, and Khanaşri all to the east of Tumaira. The Bani Khalid acquired Hausa and the Bani Hasan spread out and acquired all the villages between Jarash and al-Mafraq. New groups of Circassians and Chechen arrived as refugees and started cultivating the land in az-Zarqa, ar-Ruşaifa and as-Sukhna towards 1900.¹⁸

The southern districts south of al-Wala required, on account of instability, a longer period before they were agriculturally settled. The Ottomans only managed in 1894 to send an expedition to subdue al-Karak. With a governor and a strong garrison in the town the district became better prepared for agricultural activity. It was only after 1900 therefore that al-Majali started cultivation, at some scale in villages like al-Qaşr, al-Yaruţ, and ar-Rabba. Al-Halasah acquired Hmoud at the same time while al-Zuraiqat acquired fields in ar-Rabba with al-Majali and the Madanat in Ader. The most recent village as far as settlement date is concerned is as-Smakiiyh, the village of the clan of our good and learned friend Dr. Fawzi Zayadine,¹⁹ and their kin al-'Akashah.

A study of the different patterns of settlement during the 19th and early 20th centuries revealed that these could be divided into three broad groups. The first and most common was that resulting from a khirba being taken over by a beduin shaykh or a beduin clan and fields in it allowed to be cultivated by farmers in some form of partnership. The latter became known as *fallahin*. Examples of this pattern were common in the middle part of the country, especially in the khirab of the Bani Şakhr. The land owners normally did not render any service other than playing their role as land lords and protectors and collected between 30 and 40 percent of the crop, while the *fallahin*, who provided the seeds, equipment, animals and labour, were content to receive the balance after payment of all expenses. Generally the 'ushr or one tenth of crop, which was 12.5%²⁰ agricultural tax, was rendered to the land lord who in most cases never paid it to the government. This is because the Ottomans were not militarily able to collect taxes in the frontier of settlement areas except after 1851 in the north, 1867 in the middle and 1894 in the south.

The second group in these settlement patterns were those entrepreneurs who moved eastward and managed to acquire land either by partnership with beduin clans or

through outright purchase. They then developed their estates by providing the necessary capital to buy animals, equipment and seeds, and by hiring labourers who were called *harathin* or ploughmen. In most cases, the ploughmen were hired for a season's duration, starting work at the start of ploughing in mid-October, and becoming free from this year's bondage in August the next year after the crop has been collected. Their share as a group was one quarter of the crop after deduction of the 'ushr and farming expenses. This share, however, changed with time and became only one fifth of the crop in 1911, probably as a result of a bigger supply in the labour force, but the ploughmen, nevertheless, continued to be called *mura-b'iyih* meaningly those who receive a quarter of the crop as a group.²¹

The third group were clans or groups of farmers who joined hands to cultivate a certain khirba and as such became its collective owners. Probably it was groups like this one which developed, in earlier times, the Musha'a system, when fields were rotated amongst the different members of the group to insure equal opportunity and fairness. Examples of this pattern are Dayr as-S'inih,²² west of Irbid, and an-Nu'ayma²³ east of Irbid, in the north; Şahab²⁴ and Umm Quşair in the middle; and as-Smakiiyh²⁵ and Hmoud²⁶ in the south. Most peculiar, however, amongst these settlement operations was that carried out at Umm Quşair, few kilometres south of Amman where a heterogeneous group of people managed to join hands and establish themselves amongst the different clans of the Da'ja tribe with equal rights and duties. The following detailed story of this operation will give the reader an interesting example of resourcefulness and originality which was every now and then resorted to by people who had everything to gain from stability and a higher grade of security through larger numbers in their clans.²⁷

Around a hundred years ago a beduin by the name of Salamah al-Ghrai was living as a member of the Da'ja tribe in az-Zarqa, 22 kilometres north of Amman. His people were originally of the Rabi'a tribe of Najd. When the tribe was attacked some 150 years earlier, an ancestor by the name of Qasim immigrated and joined the Da'ja, one of the oldest Jordanian tribes.²⁸ In 1891 Salamah, who must have been unhappy about the possibilities of agriculture in az-Zarqa, moved and settled at Umm Quşair, an old site five kilometres to the south of Amman. In accordance

¹⁸Land was allotted to 162 families as per an Ottoman document dated 3 Şafar 1323 A.H./10 April A.D. 1905.

¹⁹Christian tribes of the southern part of Transjordan around Petra, they migrated north to al-Karak, probably in the middle of the eighteenth century after the spread of the Wahabi doctrine.

²⁰The increase in the rate of al-'ushr tax from its original 10% to 12.5% took place gradually during the 19th century. 0.25% was added in 1878 for payment of the war indemnity to Russia. 1% was added for the creation of an agricultural bank in 1885. 0.5% was added in the following year for education. The last addition of 0.5% was applied for military purposes in 1897. There is no mention of the 0.25% difference which may have been added by tax collectors to round the figure to one eighth of the crop.

²¹The documents of the Abujaber collection confirm that the *rub'i* until 1903 was one quarter of the crop. Afterwards, probably due to a larger supply of labour, it was reduced to one fifth of the crop.

²²G. Schumacher, *Northern 'Ajlun*, (London, 1890), p. 131. Total area of Dayr as-S'inih is 7451 dunums.

²³The Nu'ayma document dated 1869. Total area of Nu'ayma is 34,484 dunums.

²⁴R.S. Abujaber, *Pioneers over the Jordan*, (London, 1989). Total area of Şahab is 13,643 dunums.

²⁵Interviews with Dr. Fawzi Zayadine in the summer of 1988. Total area of Smakiiyh is 2924 dunums.

²⁶A. al-Qusus, *Mudhakkarat* (Memoirs), unpublished, p. 34. Total area of Hmoud is 25,259 dunums.

²⁷Chronicles, until fifty years ago, gave detailed reports of these alliances and affiliations. Nowadays such studies have become difficult as there are no written documents.

²⁸Peake, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

with the Index Gazetteer published by the Department of Lands and Surveys in 1958, the whole area of the village was 6794 dunums or 680 hectares. The population of the village as per the census of 10 November 1979 was 3970. The growth is not a natural one because the area has industrial activity and estimates of the numbers nowadays vary between 5000 and 6000. Thanks to its proximity to Amman, Umm Quşair has developed better than other villages during the last ten years and its original owners have done well through the sale of land at the increased prices. Probably the group was not more than three or four tents and in addition to their usual pastoral activity, they became engaged in dry farming of cereals in the plains south of Amman. The fields that this new settlement cultivated were in the domain of the Da'ja and were not until then cultivated regularly due to the shortage of manpower. Salamah, a pioneer member of the tribe was not therefore prevented from settling on the land especially that he brought with him two other clans of the Da'ja, the Millifi, who like him were originally from Najd and the al-Hamlan originally of al-'Amr of the al-Karak area. He began to welcome other settlers to join the new clan which now developed into al-Khuşailat, the word being a plural of *khuşaila*, which literally is the diminutive of *khuşla* (a lock of hair). It is significant that they were given this name as evidence of the fact that everybody already knew that they were tribesmen who belonged to different tribes but were now united in one clan which is a grouping of these different people. It is on record that the Khuşailat in 1902 were only 30 families under the leadership of Salamah al-Ghrai and all were living in and around Umm Quşair.²⁹ The numbers have grown from the original ten families because within years, the three original clans have been joined by seven new ones bringing the number to ten clans in all. The seven were:³⁰

1. Al-Dru' originally from Shammar of Najd while some say they are from Harb of the Hijaz.
2. Al-Jhaish originally from Shammar of Najd while some say they are from the Gaza district.
3. Al-Sh'arat originally from Bilad ash-Sham.
4. Al-Jurban originally from aj-Jarba of Shammar.
5. Al-Muhairat, originally from the Jordanian tribe of 'Abbad while some say they are from Shammar.
6. Al-Hanaifih, whose origin is not known, but some say they are from Iraq.
7. Al-Ramamnih, originally from the Ramamnih clan of as-Salt area who migrated from their village Umm Jauzih.

Only the last clan, al-Ramamnih, bought their share of land in the village common. They bought the land from the Shubaikat, another clan of the Da'ja, sometime during the late 1890's and although cause for their migration is not known now, it probably was like many others because of

tribal differences in their original abode. All the other nine clans acquired shares in the village common through tribal division of land amongst the different clans in a tribe. This system is still recognized even by the Land Settlement Department of the Jordan government, when many a time an announcement in the local press will refer to a certain parcel of property as "having attached to so and so through tribal division."

Although it is not always possible to reconstruct the history of agricultural activity in the countryside with certainty, it is reasonable to assume that in the nineteen hundreds Umm Quşair had thirty working faddans, or one faddan per family on the average. A faddan, an agricultural operation that involved the cultivation of an area of land by a pair of oxen during the season, generally covered two hundred dunums. Half the area was under actual cultivation in a season whilst the other half was left fallow for one whole year. The crop gathered per faddan in this part of the country varied between 1000 *sa'* of cereals (6 tons) in medium years and 2000 *sa'* (12 tons) in good years. To support their takings from crop production, the farmers resorted to raising sheep and goats and it was customary for every household to have around fifty of them to produce its requirements of milk, butter, fresh meat, yogurt (*jamid*), wool and hair. The last two items were usually mixed together and used for the weaving of the *shqaq* (heavy cloth in long pieces), that gave the beduin tents of Arabia their black look.

Fortunately it has been possible to study the history of settlement of Umm Quşair with some ease. As previously mentioned it is barely one hundred years ago that the settlement was started and this is confirmed by the fact that Major C.R. Conder, whilst carrying out his survey of Eastern Palestine in 1881 for the Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, had very little to say about Umm Quşair. All he had was one sentence: "It is a small ruin, with scattered stones and foundation of houses."³¹

When mentioning the tribes or the clans of the area, he mentions the Da'ja divisions in the west of Amman, Amman and at Marj al-Hamam,³² but there is no mention of the Khuşailat in any form. This is strong evidence that the clans, which after Conder's visit and survey joined hands to form the population of the new settlement of Umm Quşair, were really different branches or locks from different tribes. They came together with the sole purpose of protecting their golden opportunity, the ownership of land. After all the beduin proverb used so many times and on so many different occasions simply said "*'id rjalak wa ird al-ma'*" which freely translated means "count your men and then go to the water source in strength." Through larger numbers, therefore, they could defend their right to the land ownership in better form.

²⁹P.A. Jaussen, *Coutumes des Arabes au pays de Moab*, (Paris, 1908), p. 402.

³⁰Interviews with Mr. Muhammad Abu Rumman on 15 April, 1983 and with Haj Abd Rabbu al-Dru' on 22 September, 1988.

³¹C.R. Conder, *The Survey of Eastern Palestine*, (London, 1889), p. 250.

³²Conder, *op. cit.*, p. 294.