

## Ancient Roads in the Roman District of South Peraea: Routes of communication in the Eastern area of the Dead Sea.

Josephus offers some principal statements about Peraea in Bell.Iud. III, 3,3. In length it extends from Machairous to Pella, in breadth from Philadelphia to the Jordan. In the South the so-called district of Moabitis forms the neighbouring country. The historian also writes exactly about its breadth being 120 stadia, that is about 50 to 60 km. In its total length South Peraea measured from Julias/Livias, the former administration centre, to the natural southern border of the Sayl al-Mūjib, also about 60 km.

Thus the Roman district of South Peraea had been a relatively definitive geographical area. The statements of Josephus are astonishingly exact. They reflect knowledge, not opinions. But until recent times this area had been virtually an unknown and non-accessible part of the Kingdom of Jordan. It was lacking clear historical outlines and it was uninteresting for foreign travellers and historians, with the single exceptions of U.J. Seetzen and A. Musil, two famous explorers of the 19th century.

Starting with a survey at az-Zāra and Khirbat Mukāwir in 1965 and 1973, where the German Protestant Institute with its director Martin Noth had made occasional excursions shortly before, I tried to collect more detailed information about the forgotten and burnt-out strip of land between the Dead Sea shore and fertile high country alongside the main north-south axis of the King's Highway. Already then the author was convinced that more attention should be paid, especially, to the first plateau. In the past it had been like a comfortable step leading up to the high populated tableland with its rich settlements and wide plains of agriculture. This lower area going down to the Dead Sea was still principally unknown, in any case unnoticed, and uninteresting for non-Bedouin inhabitants and visitors. At the fringe of the forgotten village of Mukāwir, the modern village succeeding the totally demolished fortress of Machairous, one could find a simple path 22 km long between Khirbit al-Libb and the next settlement nearest the erased cone. At that time the asphalt road leading down to the deserted geological fissure of the Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in with its springs and natural hot water reservoirs did not exist. The road alongside the steep declivity down to the first plateau was still unfinished. It was relatively risky or nearly impossible to drive from Mā'in to the thermal

waters and up to the early seventies only the few enthusiasts would walk there. Moreover, there was no modern highway running southward from the village of ash-Shūna alongside the Dead Sea. In 1973 the modern road finished abruptly two kilometers after crossing the lower Wādī al-'Azīmī, at this point reaching the northern plain of the Dead Sea shore. Next to the abrupt end of the new road a lonely artillery observer did his military duty. A forgotten guard at a forgotten piece of country! This means, that the whole lower plateau and cliff area down to the Dead Sea was an inaccessible part of the country. There was a conviction since generations that this area had always been a closed district without any archaeological remains, and of course without any significance for historical studies. But this general opinion is erroneous and it had to be corrected. This part of the kingdom of Jordan had never been really an unhistoric *terra deserta*.

First working at Mukāwir in 1973 I was aware of the astonishing regular agricultural connections between the village and the fertile oasis of az-Zāra. It seems obvious that this basic dependence on the agricultural 'supply base' which lay 1 km lower and about 10 km farther has existed since centuries. Maps of the early 19th century provide evidence of such traditions. We may therefore conclude that this habit of life had always had an ancient basis. Three campaigns were necessary to excavate the Herodian villa of Kallirrhoë, today az-Zāra, about 1 km south in Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in. The last season took place in 1989, together with a final geodesic survey started earlier by colleagues from the Fachhochschule Karlsruhe. This large fertile oasis, with its numerous thermal springs of 60 degrees Celsius radioactive waters, was once completely surrounded by a partially well-preserved stone fence. It had extensive harbour installations with moles and roofed corridors, and with staircases and narrow lanes leading up to the residential quarters. About 200 m inside the shoreline, on a rocky terrace, is the Herodian villa of the well-known type of Roman *villae maritimae*, consisting of a peristyle courtyard and extensive contiguous living quarters. The main installation of the courtyard was a swimming pool of about 12 m length and 5m depth, reached by an impressive staircase. Several inviting, adjacent basin-like lower pools served curative

functions. Near the villa area, among the rocks, is the quarry which provided the building blocks for the construction of the royal facilities. About fifty thermal sources with their creeks water the oasis of Kallirrhōē. The rich and singular oasis az-Zāra, northern centre of King Herod's spa, was also embedded in a network of roads, important for the whole region of South Peraea, supposedly developed since centuries and subsequently made permanent (FIG.1).

1. Primarily we must pay attention to the central north-south line, a kind of trunk road. It connected the Jordan Valley with the King's Highway. Until the last

centuries this transversal road had the rank of a so-called 'sultaniye', in certain distances protected by watch-towers and consequently renewed and improved by the responsables of the district. The order of the Turkish empire reflects ancient installations and traditions (FIG.2). After the Jordan ford, this main road to the south climbed up to the first plateau, using the convenient natural cavity of the Wādī al-'Azimi and crossing older settlements, especially near the dolmen fields of Tulaylāt al-Ghassūl. Then, up on the plateau the road joins with a branch coming directly from the north. Both lines unite in the area of Wādī al-



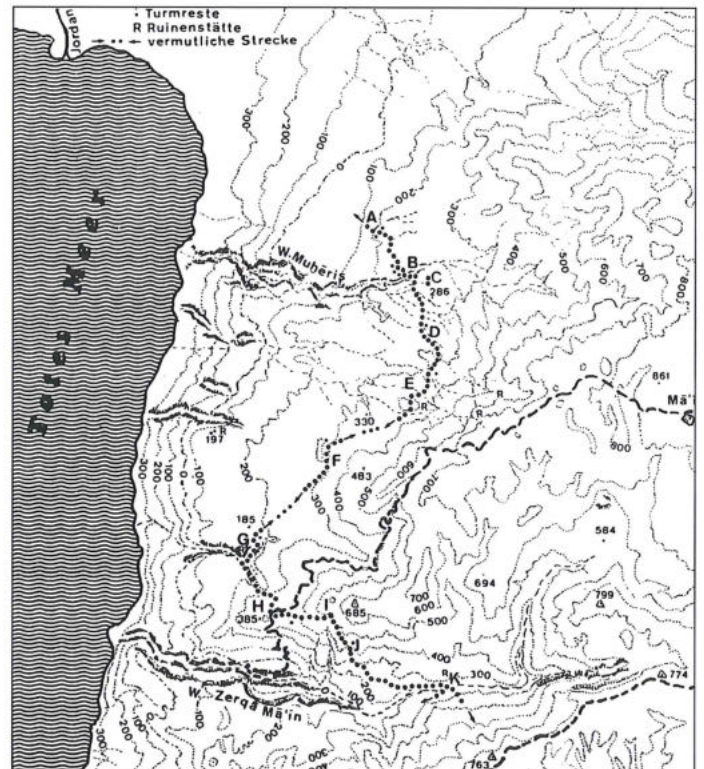
1. Schematic map of ancient roads in South Peraea.



2. Section of the map of Capt. Conder (1881).

side the tremendous geological fissure. Far in the east the valley, with its numerous thermal springs, can easily be crossed before the first cataract, which forms a huge step in the unique gorge down to the basin of the Dead Sea itself. The sultaniye on the first plateau from Wādi az-Zarqā'-Mā'in may have had a total length of about 18 km. It uses the advantages of nature and area and it was protected by a series of watch-towers alongside. The sultaniye climbs to higher elevations as straight as possible, by about two or three turns. All in all the distance between the Jordan and Wādi az-Zarqā'-Mā'in was a day's journey (FIG. 3).

2. The continuation from the crossing of the upper gorge up to the main road of the King's Highway on the plain of the Moabite plateau is a separate task and a special section of research. First the ancient road must again climb up the mountain 'threshold' of about 800 m asl. Here, the road first ascends the promontory of Boz al-Mushelle, a mighty summit at the edge of the mesa. It bears the impressive walls of a Moabite border fortress, once controlling the area of foothills and descent down to the Dead Sea. The site must be identified with the ruins of Zereth Shaḥar, the Reubenite town "on the hill of the valley" (Joshua 13:19). Based on existing knowledge and by means of survey work and some short excavations, we found definitely a border fortress of the Moabite kingdom of Mesha (FIG. 4). The large Bronze Age city itself must have covered



3. The ancient road (A to K) on the first plateau from Wādi al-Mukhayriṣ to Wādi az-Zarqā' Mā'in.

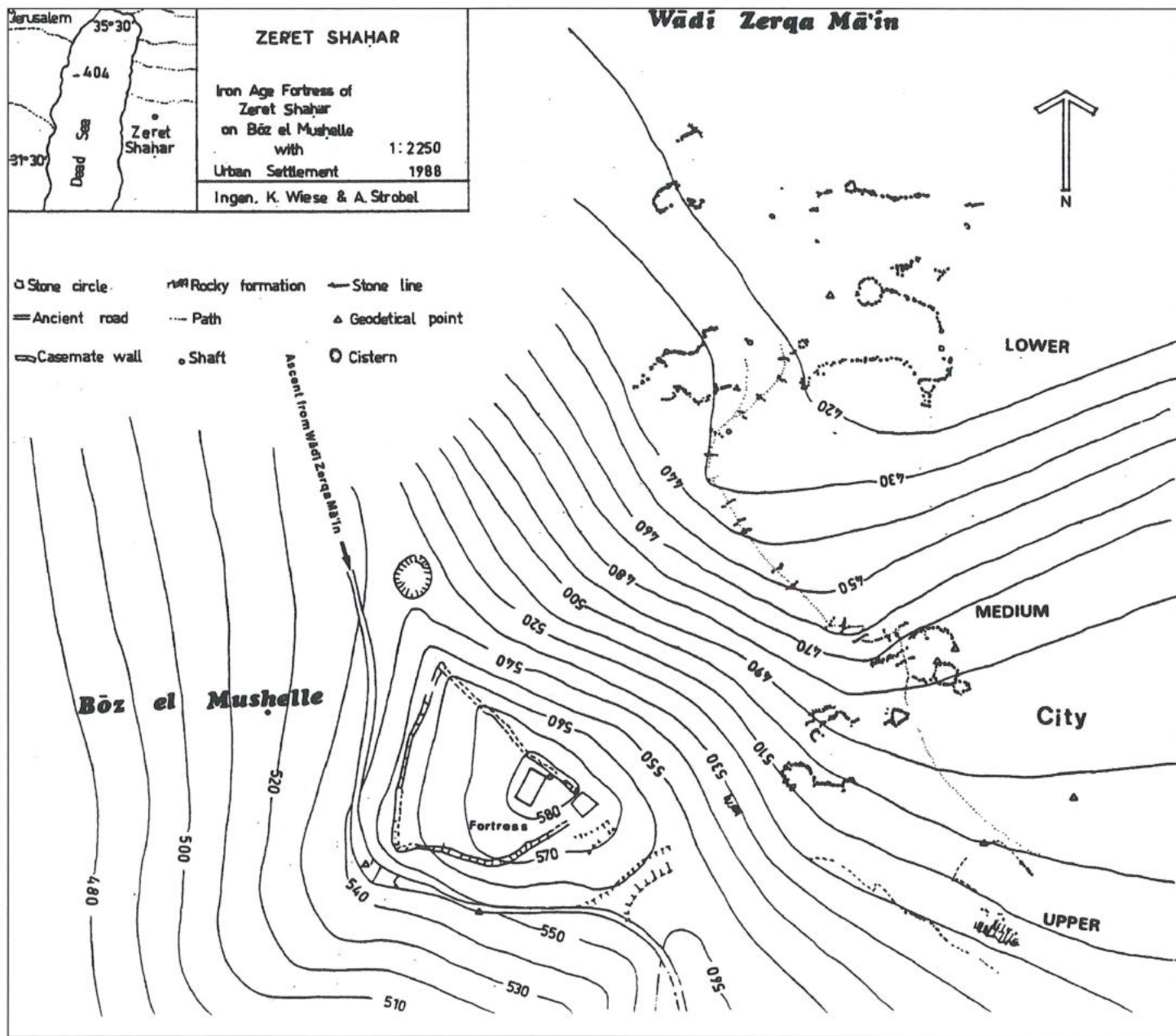
Mukhayriṣ, forming now one main line to the south on the first plateau. It hurries towards the longitudinal ridge alongside the Wādi ad-Dardūr in the west of 'Ayn al-Minye. There it is finally, climbing up a limited plateau elevation, called the "black hill", where nearby the Bedouins traditionally localize the mythical City of 'Antar. Having crossed a black basaltic stone-field the road runs 3 km straight on to the south where the deep Wādi al-Himārā incision with its springs offers a place of rest and recreation amidst a walled enclosure. From here the sultaniye climbs up to south-east, always facing the height of Rujum al-Muriqib. After crossing the modern road down to the thermal springs, it goes first up to the 'Arqūb aṣ-Ṣuwān (about 380 m). Arriving at the southern flank of the long extended chain of mountains it makes a definite turn to south-east where one overlooks the whole upper valley of the huge Wādi az-Zarqā'-Mā'in. Here the road begins to descend. In the upper course it uses a long wadi like a natural conduit. Then, further down, the road surmounts the hilly northern embankment along-

<sup>4</sup> The team on the fields, led by G. Gullini, was composed by C. A. Birocco, L. Ferraresi, M. Musso, D. Sangiorgio and the author.

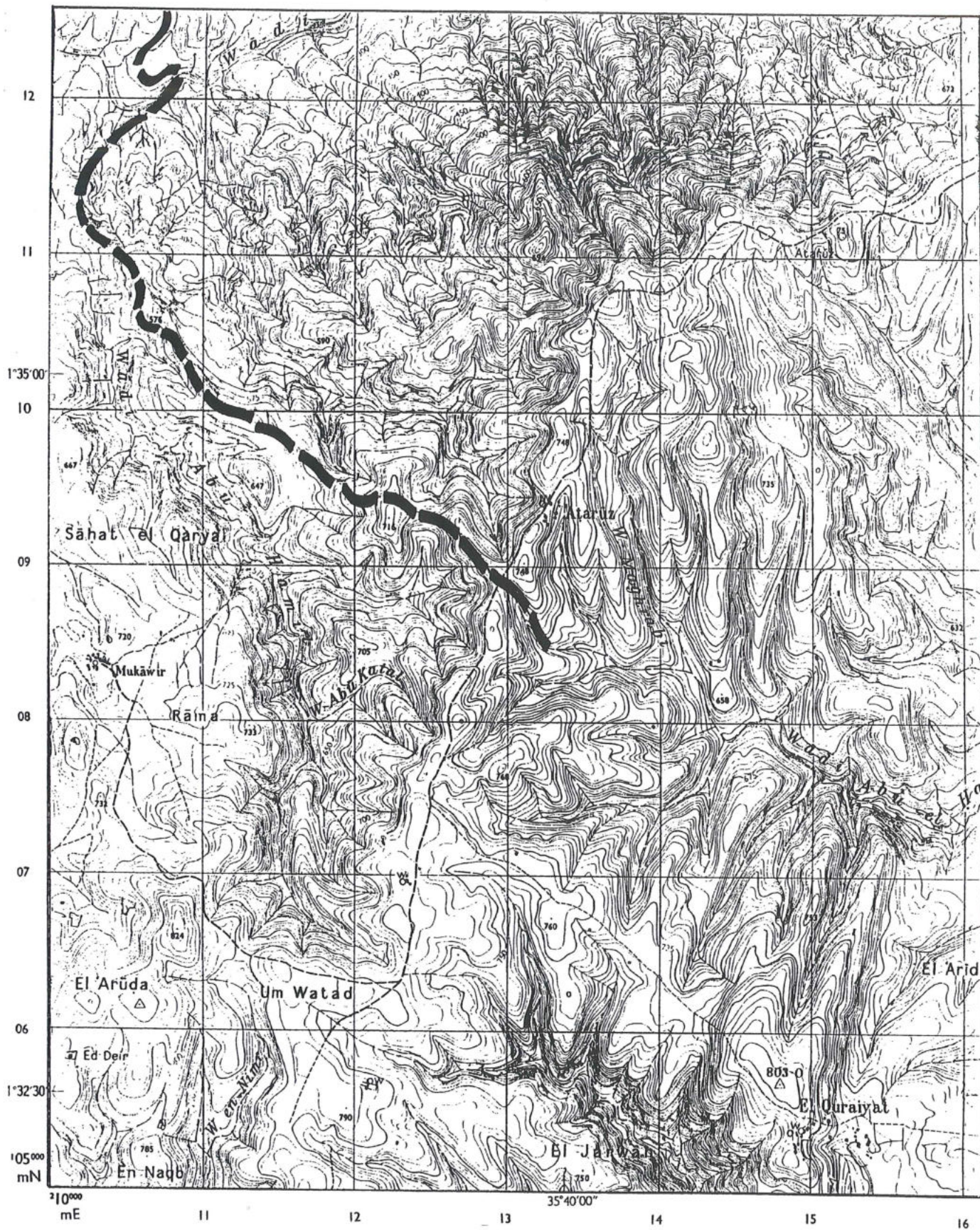
several terraces and was dominated by a three-cornered fortress wall controlling road, foothills and plain. The road hurries from here to Khirbat al-'Aṭṭarūz, about 3 km in the east. There, it takes the south-east direction past the vast ruins of al-Qrayyāt straight down to the upper course of Wādī al-Wāla, where it joins at Khirbat Iskandar (supposedly the ancient site of Jahaz) the well-known central King's Highway (FIG. 5).

3. Having incorporated the side-road coming from the Jordan Valley, this main axis runs southward to ancient Dibon and from there a little bit south-east to the upper course of the Sayl al-Mūjib (or Arnon gorge) in the region of Khirbat 'Arā'ir (i.e. Aroer) - according to our

knowledge an Iron Age fortress controlling the descent down to the confluence of the two branches Sayl as-Sufiyya and Wādī an-Nukhayla. Exactly here at the bottom of the valley one can locate an important site. The modern Arab name of it is Khirbat al-'Ajam, but the abundance and singularity of Bronze Age ceramics are a cogent reason for its identification with the "City of the valley" (Josua 13,9). It means that the fortress of Khirbat al-'Arā'ir and the "City in the valley" must be judged as an original dual settlement, consisting of upper fortress and lower domestic quarters. Importance and unity diminished when Dibon extended her supremacy on the plateau nearby. The original continuation of the highway can be found in the south-



4. The site of Zeret Shaḥar with road and fortress (on Boz al-Muṣḥelle).



5. Transversal road running to Wādī al-Wāla and Wādī al-Mūjib.

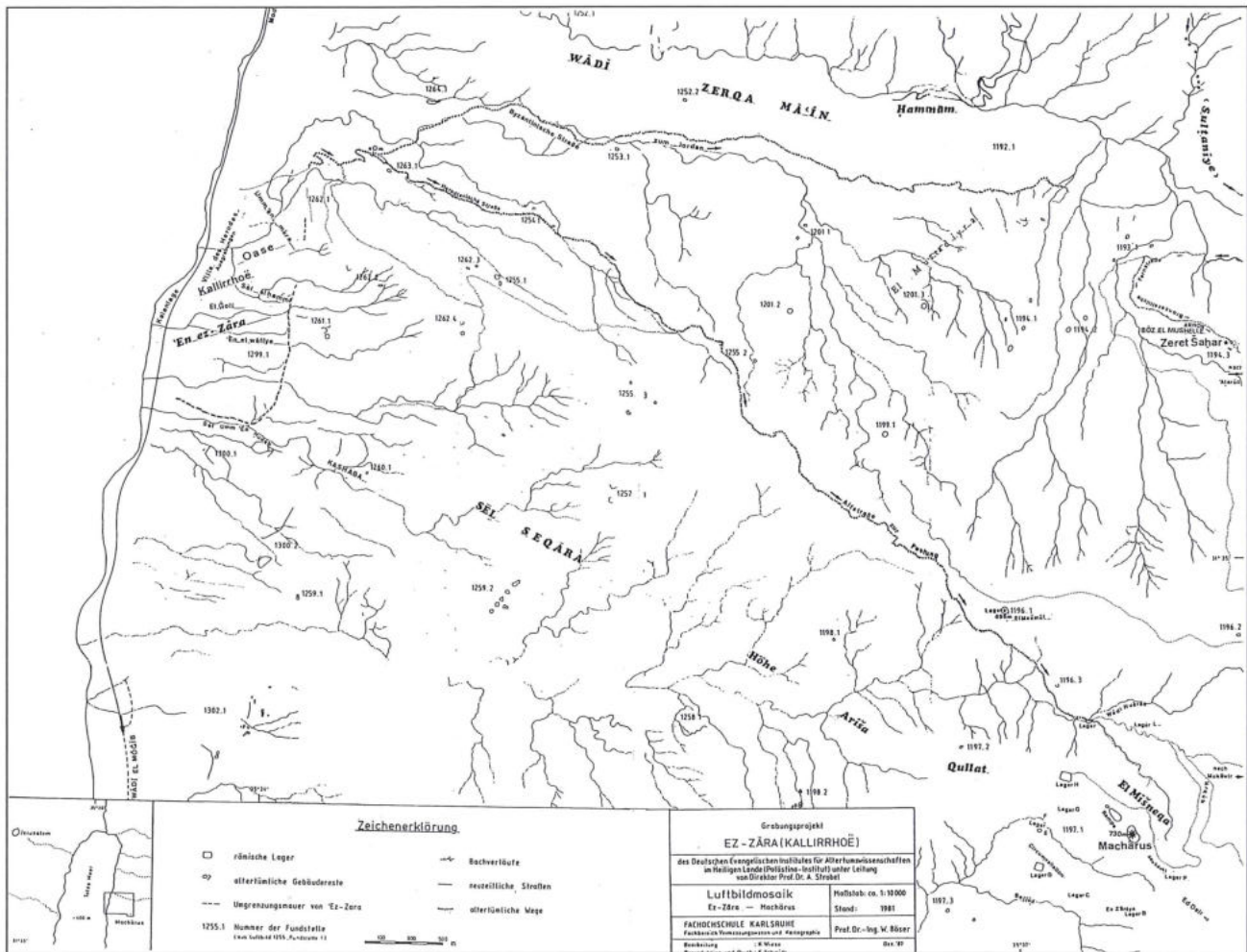
ern branch of the Wādī esh-Shuqayla up to the Bronze Age fortress al-Balu'.

4. Taking stand again at the eastern bottom of the Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in one may follow the whole net of ancient roads in South Peraea. By then, the territory in the south of the ancient transversal main road, representing a lot of fertile centres down to the invincible Arnon gorge, was made accessible for military and economical purposes.

In the southern chain of the al-Balqā' mountains Alexander Jannai had founded the mighty fortress of Machairous in the second century BC, according to Josephus by strength and importance the second one after Jerusalem itself. We must assume that between the transversal line to the King's Highway and the royal bullwork, there existed also a short feeder road. The fortress got its building plot about 3 km far away from the ancient ruins of Zeret Shaḥar.

As important as the dominating fortress had been so was the convenient and quick road connection down to the harbour Kallirrhōē at the Dead Sea with a length of

about 10 km. It had to surmount a height difference of more than 1000 m (FIG. 6). Historical documents give sufficient information about the facts, supported and illustrated by research in the three campaigns (see above). The road up to Machairous, today still recognizable by its typical stone embankments, leaves the once fenced-in spa settlement in the east to climb up the first steep slope by several serpentines. From there, at the edge of the geological precipice down to the basin of the Dead Sea, one has an overwhelming view. Then the road runs up straight to the chain of mountains in the east, principally avoiding the basaltic region at the western Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in. After gaining more and more height the road makes an abrupt turn after 4 or 5 km to the south, touching the Sekāra gorge. Here begins the final steep ascent, which brings one to the upper course of the huge geological fall. The road follows the dangerous edge and ends after 1 or 2 km at the terrain of al-Mashnaqa. The stronghold itself had its place upon a high longitudinal ridge. It could be entered at the north-western corner of the walls of the so-called Lower City, protecting the central fortress complex



6. The Herodian road from Kallirrhōē up to the fortress Machairous (al-Mashnaqa).

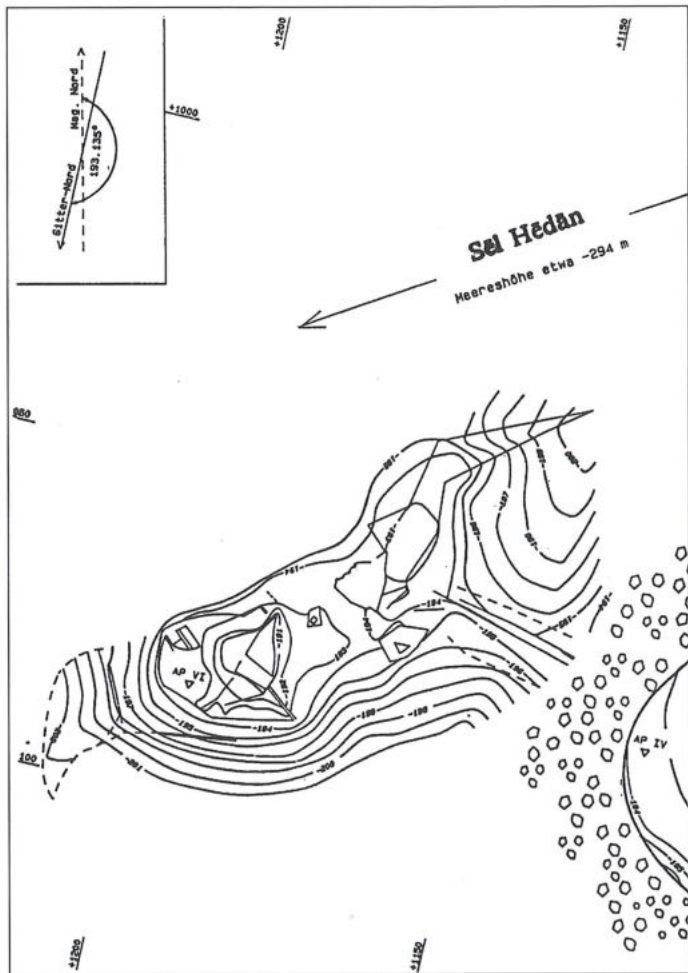
on its northern side. This road was not paved. It was the simple type of the normal rural roads of that time, bordered by kerbstones and adjusted to the natural outlines of the landscape.

In the lower section of the road, about half-way between fortress and royal oasis, a sideroad to the hinterland of the shore can be detected. It first goes down to the bottom of the lower Sekāra gorge. Yet we must assume that, once, the sideway had its extension to az-Zāra South and perhaps to the shoreline in the neighbourhood of Rās al-Ghawr. It was suitable for caravans and travellers, but not for heavy traffic. Down to the bottom of the gorge two Byzantine watch-towers are still *in situ*. Evidently there existed another road connection down to the southern coast with its original accumulation of Roman villas (FIG. 6).

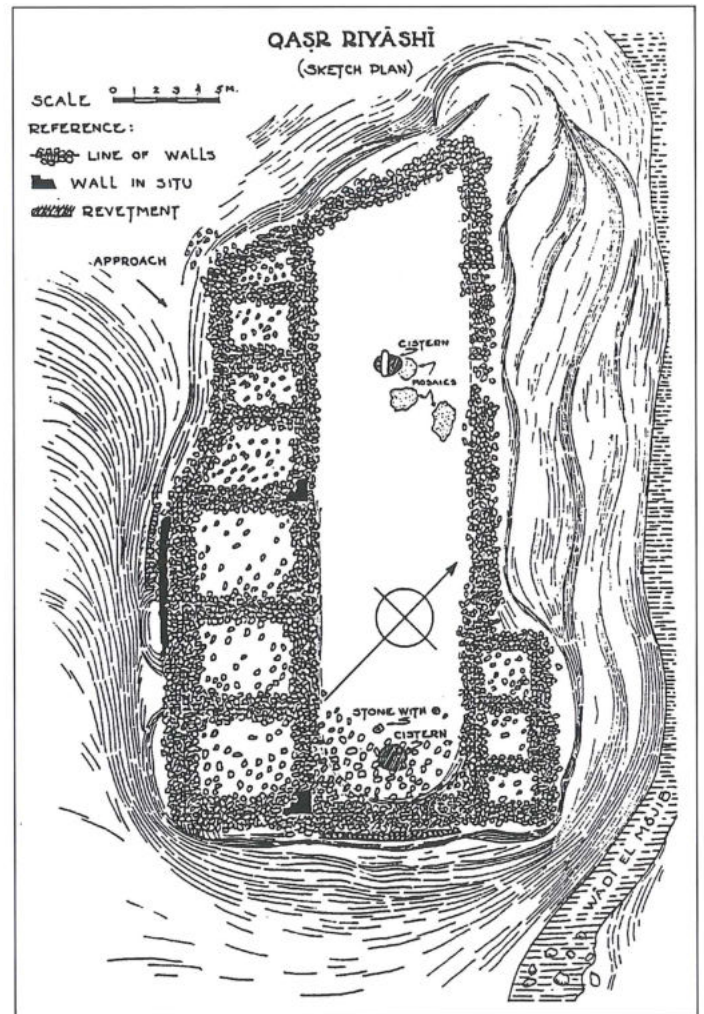
There is also no doubt about a road down to the borderline of the impressive canyon of Sayl al-Mūjib, the traditional border between south Peraea and the Edomite country in the south (FIG.1). The road started in the dominion of Machairous, supposedly in the region of ad-Dayr, still in the Byzantine period a populous settlement,

from where a descent down to the region of the confluence of Sayl al-Hidān and Sayl al-Mūjib existed. One km after the village, the present road passes three huge Roman cisterns called Umm ar-Rujum. Then the route, supposedly an original route, climbs down to Sayl an-Nimr, following the connection with the settlement complex of the Herodion border fortress, today still well-known as the ar-Riyashī sites, also surrounded by thermal springs. Altogether the large complex of the ancient royal buildings consists of three single localities, all attached to the area of the Qaṣr al-Bashīr Hill. The name reflects the strong ancient tradition which is still common among the Bedouins.

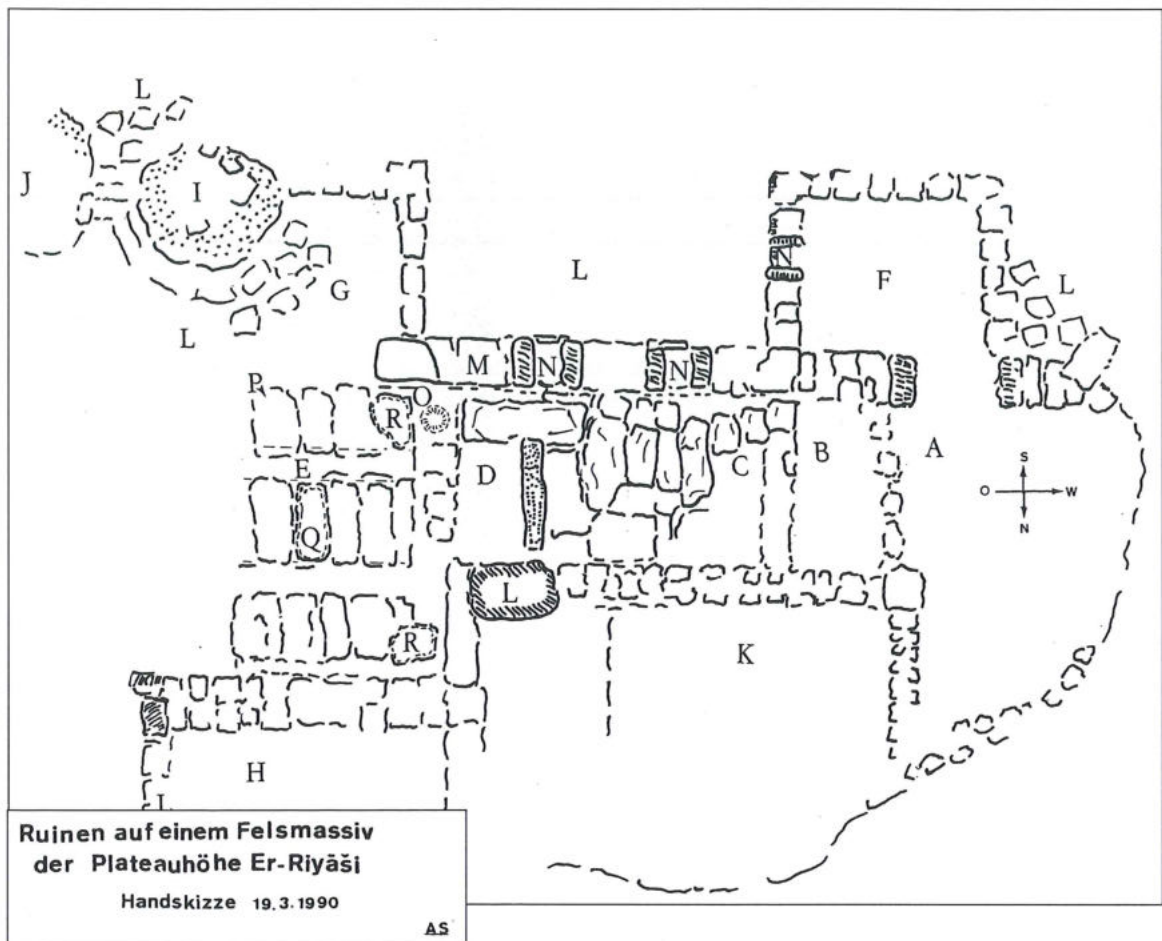
Three sites deserve special study. One is a pleasure retreat near the thermal springs in Sayl al-Hidān (FIG. 7), known as al-Ḥammām, that occupies a ridge overlooking the southern cliffs of the wadi. There are remains of many rooms, cisterns and an aqueduct, and mosaic-decorated terraces giving fine panoramic views. Second, nearby and to the south-east (FIG. 8), there is the main fortress looming over the Sayl al-Mūjib and dominating the northern borderline of Idumea. Third, in the immediate neighbour-



7. The Herodian castle (Qaṣr ar-Riyashī) near the thermal springs of Sayl al-Hidān.



8. The Herodian fortress (Qaṣr ar-Riyashī) at the Arnon gorge (Sayl al-Mūjib) according to the sketch plan of N. Glueck.



9. Sketch of the pavilion-like ruins on the plain near the fortress(J = place of the sundial in March 1990).

hood of both these royal structures there is a park-like plateau over a rocky formation with a special building and some interesting installations. The most exciting object found during the short survey and excavation work in the spring of 1990 was a conical Herodian sundial that had originally been situated on the peak of the 20 m high rocky massif which was once surrounded by walls and roofed forming a well-built pavilion-like structure. Today the Bedouins still call the large site Qaṣr ar-Riadji, "castle of Herod". They also call the pavilion-like ruins Tulūl Abū al-Filūs immediately over the confluence of the united rivers (FIG. 9).

Castle and fortress were linked by a partially stepped passage, which we still can follow. A natural rock-bridge over the huge Arnon gorge granted the passage, supervised and controlled by its military authorities. The site itself gets special meaning by the following well-documented historical affair.

Josephus delivers an impressive story (*Bell. Iud.* XVIII,5,1) about the love affair of tetrarch Herod Antipas with his cousin Herodias. The sovereign of Galilee and Peraea, already married to a Nabataean princess, had to expell his legitimate wife, - this was the condition of the new marriage contract. About this shameful agreement the princess received early information. Resolutely, the

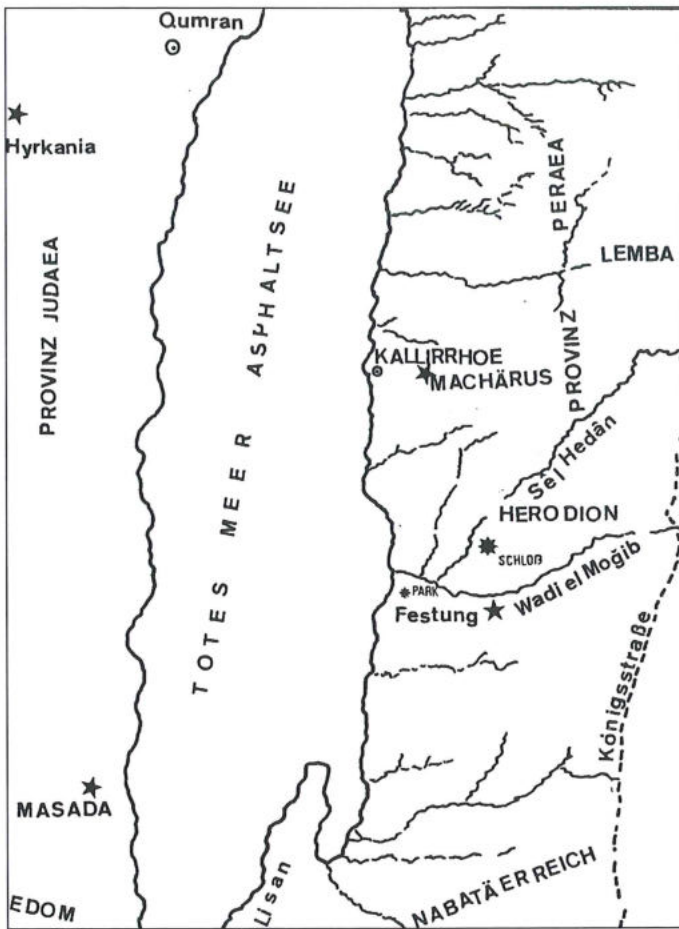
cheated woman made up her mind for separation and flight. The end of this matrimonial quarrel becomes clear in the geographic context of the frontier area of south Peraea. The Nabataean princess pretended, for reasons of health, a necessary stay in the castle of Machairous. At night, she ordered to be brought to the border nearest to her involuntary stay. There she could flee into the arms of her waiting father. The historical report is illustrated and supported by geographical and archaeological facts, the close connection between the two fortresses Machairous and Herodion (FIG. 10).

### Conclusion

The main traffic routes of south Peraea can no longer be questioned. We must stress the fact that an ancient road connecting the Jordan Valley and the King's Highway is well preserved until today. It is also possible to suggest about further enlargements of the road in later periods, primarily in the Late Hellenistic and Roman eras.

1. The most ancient, and without doubt the most important route, had always been from the lower Jordan River up to the central axis of the King's Highway - an Early Bronze Age installation with historical relevance for all ages and periods. It is accompanied by impres-





10. Sketch plan of the Herodian sites in South Peraea at the border of the Nabataeans.

sive settlements and cities like Zeret Shaḥar (Boz Mushelle) in the Upper Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in, Khirbat al-'Aṭṭarūz on the High Plain, Khirbat Iskandar in the Lower Wādī al-Wāla nd above all the "City of the valley" in the Upper Wādī al-Mūjib. There is absolutely no question about the relevance of this road since the origins of biblical settlement history, starting with the so-called conquest of the Holy Land by Israelite tribes and followed by the coming up of the Moabite Kingdom and its followers.

2. In the Hellenistic period and especially at the height of the Roman empire, the network of roads was enlarged. We must especially take notice of the road between Kallirrhoe and Machairous that is between the harbour and the central fortress of south Peraea. Another junction between Machairous and the Herodion border fortress must also be presumed (FIG. 11). They both lost their basic functions after 70 AD.
3. Of course, there may have existed some other roads, especially within the periphery of the central crossing point in the area of the Upper Wādī az-Zarqā' Mā'in, supposedly up to the city of Mā'in and a route from here also to the supply line between the fortress and harbour oasis. A strip of Roman villas in the area of



11. View down to the fortress Qaşr ar-Riyāshī (i.e. "Herodian in the Arab Mountains") at the precipice of the Arnon gorge with rocky viaduct crossing nearby.

az-Zāra South must have had connections to the interior of the country. In each case one may suggest another ancient route near the southern hill countries of the Dead Sea.

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