

Crossroads and Sites at the Northern Edge of the Central Moabite Plateau

The central Moabite plateau and the Dhibān plateau are separated by a deep gorge, the Wādī al-Mūjib, which forms an impressive canyon (referred to by some as the “Grand Canyon” of the Hashemite Kingdom). Wādī al-Mūjib cuts deep into the plateau landscape, which has an elevation of between 750 and 900m. above sea level. At various points, the slopes drop up to 700m. into the depths. Wādī al-Mūjib drains into the Dead Sea at an elevation of ca. 400m below sea level. During the time of the Moabite King Mesha, this wadi was known as “Arnon”. It appears that the name “Arnon” remained in use until early Byzantine times. It was only in the early Islamic period that the wadi became known as “al-Mūjib” (see Kloner and Ben-David 2003: 66 nt. 3).

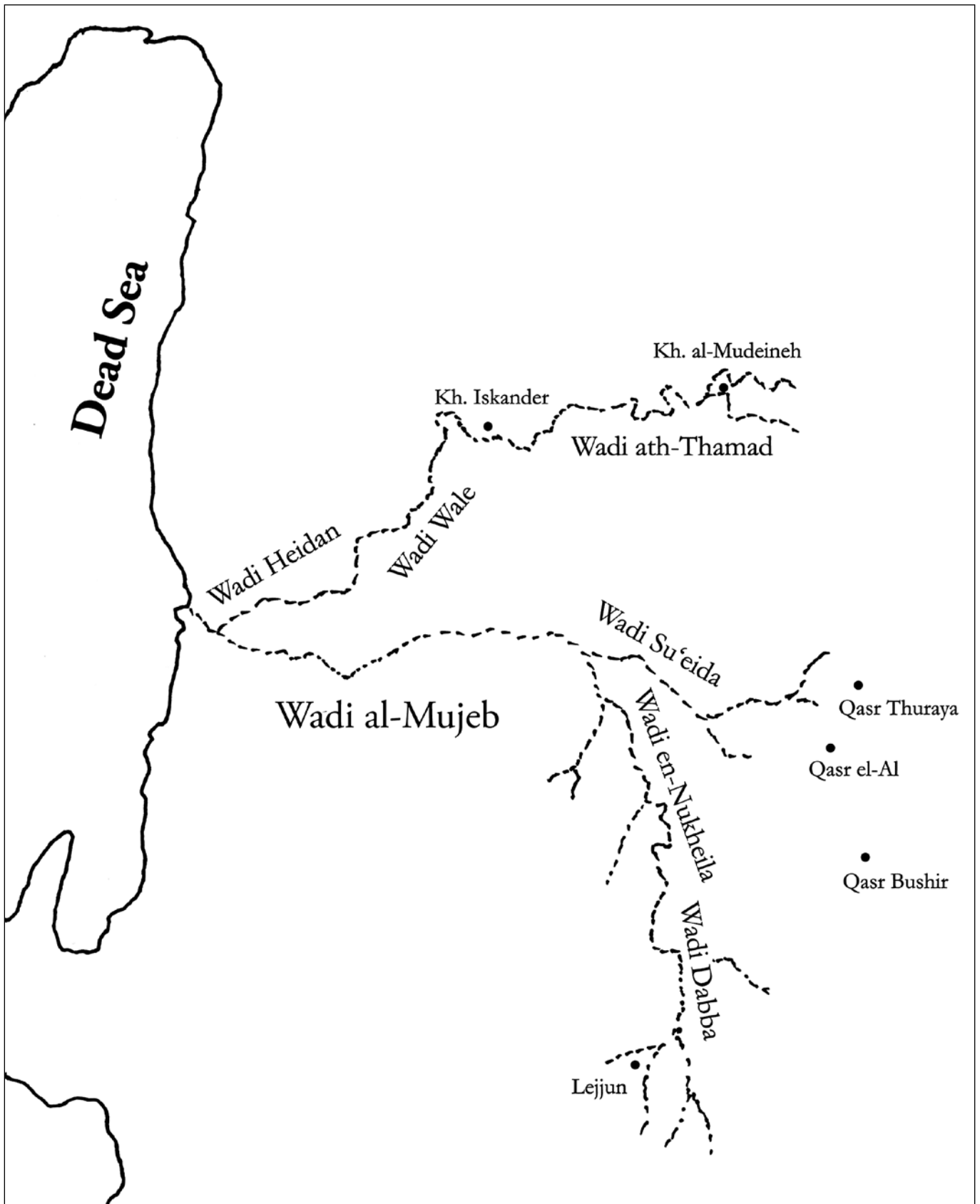
No matter what the period — Middle Bronze Age, Iron Age, Hellenistic, Roman or Islamic times — people traveled, moving from west to east, north to south and *vice versa*. They made journeys from the Dhibān plateau to the southern Moabite plateau and back again. They marched through this area on military expeditions, for trade, in search of better pastures for their flocks, for sightseeing, hunting or simply to visit the in-laws on the other side of the mighty wadi.

Wādī al-Mūjib has various tributaries. A major one comes in from the Dhibān plateau to the north; it unites with the main wadi ca. 2.5km. east of the Dead Sea. Its lower section is called Wādī Hidān; its central section — with Khirbat Iskandar as its main site — is called Wādī al-Wālā; its upper segment is Wādī ath-Thamad, with Khirbat al-Mudayna as one of the major sites in the area. Just east of the point where a modern dam holds back the winter rains, Wādī al-Mūjib bifurcates into eastern and southern tributaries. The eastern arm, Wādī as-Su‘aydah and Wādī as-Sāliyah, climbs up the east-

ern plateau, collecting various smaller tributaries in the area of Qaṣr Bashīr, Qaṣr al-‘Āl and Qaṣr ath-Thurayya. The southern arm is called Wādī an-Nukhaylah, known further to the south as Wādī ad-Dabba and Wādī al-Lajjūn (see FIG. 1).

Ancient travelers who wanted to cross Wādī al-Mūjib with its various tributaries on their way from the northern Dhibān plateau to the central Moabite plateau (or *vice versa*) had to find a way through either on narrow paths winding up and down the depths of the main wadi or follow one of the tributary wadis that led upwards until they finally reached the plateau.

During Roman times, the *Via Nova Traiana* crossed Wādī al-Mūjib by means of a bridge, the remains of which were described by various early travelers. Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, one of the first travelers through ancient Moab in the beginning of the 19th century, passed by Dhibān on 23 March 1806 and then crossed Wādī al-Mūjib. In his report he observed that the al-Mūjib was a very deep gorge in which there was water flowing westward. Down at the bottom were the remains of a bridge consisting of one arch, but it was no longer usable (Kruse 1854-1855: 1/410; see also Burckhardt 1822: 372f.). On 8 June 1818, two British officers, Irby and Mangles, traveled north from Karak and crossed Wādī al-Mūjib. They reported: “We proceeded to the northward, and in about two hours arrived upon the brink of the Wady Modjeb the ancient Arnon; on looking down, it has more the appearance of a precipice than a road, ... the Roman way coincides with the modern track very near to the brink, and again about half way down it ...; about half way the declivity is more earthy and shelving; here-about we recovered the Roman highway. It is not here as above, completely paved, but at regular intervals a line of stones is carried



1. Wādi al-Mūjib and its tributaries.

across the road in the manner of a step, to prevent the washing away of the earth from above ... We found several mile-stones; all those which were legible, were of the time of Trajan. ... In our ascent up the opposite side, we followed mostly the ancient road, and found some more Roman mile-stones; one of Marcus Aurelius” (Irby and Mangles 1823: 460f.; see also Smith 1904). During the years 1895, 1897 and 1898 Rudolf E. Brünnow and Alfred von Domaszewski, together with Julius Euting, made three research trips through the region east of the Jordan. They investigated what remained of the Roman road system and drew up various maps. Of special interest are the many photographs they took during their trips. They, too, crossed Wādī al-Mūjib and recognized the remains of the Roman bridge (see the photographs published by Brünnow and Domaszewski 1904-1909: 1/34). Towards the end of the 19th century the Turkish government built a new road through Wādī al-Mūjib.

Even before the Roman period, important routes lead through the region east of the Jordan and Dead Sea. One of the predecessors of the *Via Nova Traiana* seemed to be the so-called “Road of the Kings”, mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Num 20:17; 21:22; see also Miller 1989: 12). However, the extent to which the course of these pre-Roman roads followed the later *Via Nova Traiana* is not clear at all (*contra* Glueck 1940: 15).

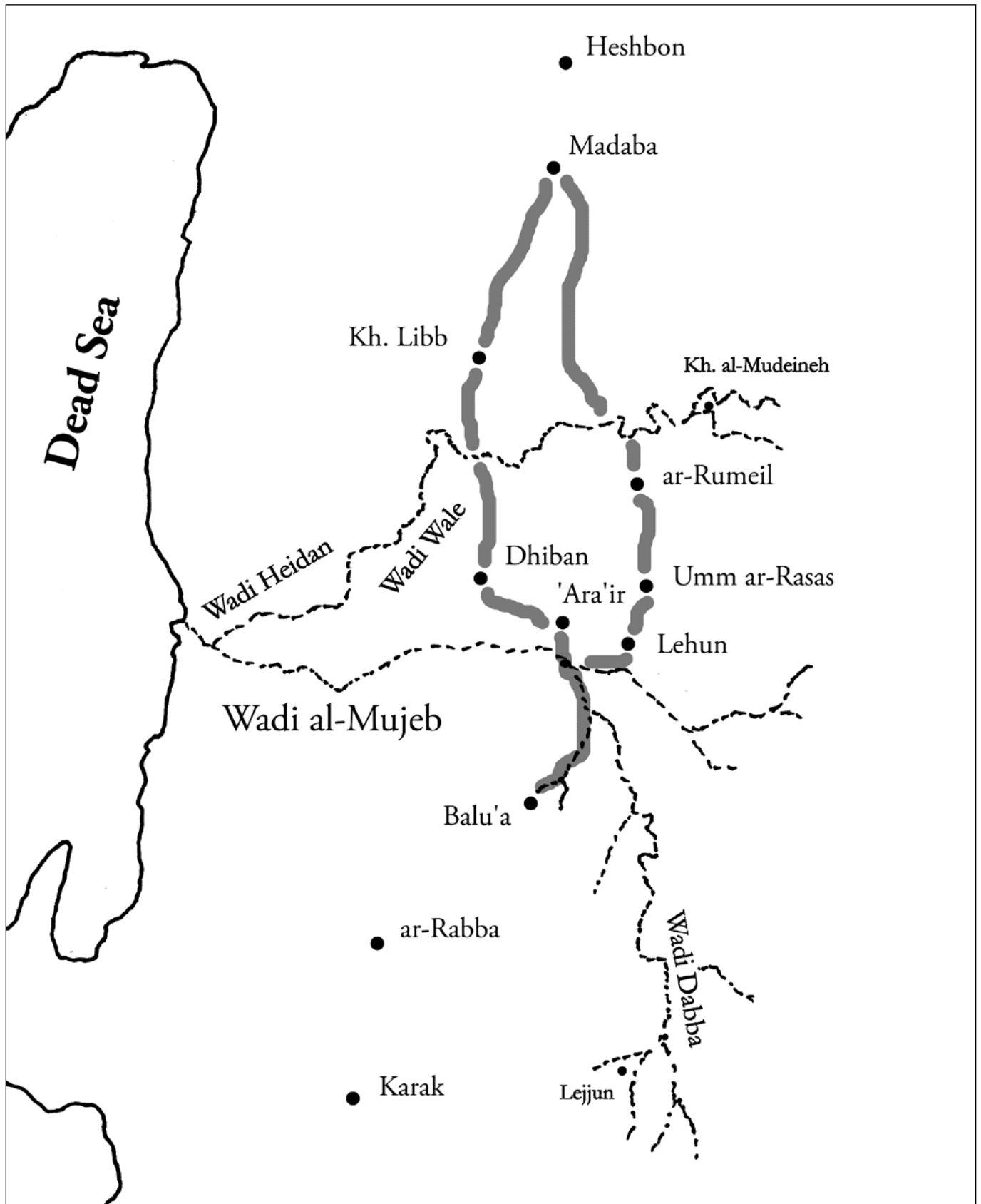
It appears that the Roman road — similar to its modern successor — descended into the Wādī al-Mūjib just south of Dhibān, winding its way down in tight bends. In so doing, the Roman builders seem to have taken a more or less direct route, the pre-Roman crossing being somewhat further to the east. During the Iron Age, two different routes led southward from Mādabā to Wādī al-Mūjib. One went south passing Khirbat Libb, crossed Wādī al-Wālā and went on to Dhibān and ‘Arā‘ir at the edge of Wādī al-Mūjib. The other route left Mādabā in south-easterly direction, crossing Wādī ath-Thamad and reached al-Lāhūn at the Wādī al-Mūjib via ar-Rumayl and Umm ar-Raṣāṣ. From both locations — ‘Arā‘ir and al-Lāhūn — tracks lead down into the wadi.

In Line 26 of his inscription, the Moabite King Mesha reports: “I built ‘Ara‘ir and made / repaired the highway at the Arnon”. J. Andrew Dearman insists that “this is a reference to a section of the main N-S roadway, the so-called King’s Highway... ‘Arā‘ir was a fortress / police station situated at the

point where the highway crossed the northern edge of the Arnon and its function must have been to oversee traffic on the highway and to collect tolls for the roadway’s use” (Dearman 1989: 191f.). Because of the direct association of King Mesha’s highway with ‘Arā‘ir, it seems reasonable to link this highway with a route descending down into the wadi in the immediate vicinity of ‘Arā‘ir. However, Denise Homès-Fredericq, excavator of al-Lāhūn, contends that the best route across Wādī al-Mūjib would have been via al-Lāhūn (see Homès-Fredericq 1992: 200). If one considers the geomorphic condition of Wādī al-Mūjib and its tributaries, it becomes clear that the most convenient crossing appears to descend from ‘Arā‘ir. Nevertheless, excavations at al-Lāhūn, which appears to have been a very prominent site during the Iron Age, and a number of recently identified Iron Age site on the Dhibān plateau (see Ji and Attiyat 1997; Ji and Lee 1998, 2000) suggest that the eastern section of the major north - south route was frequently used. Both descents, that from ‘Arā‘ir as well as that from al-Lāhūn, provided a passable way down into wadi.

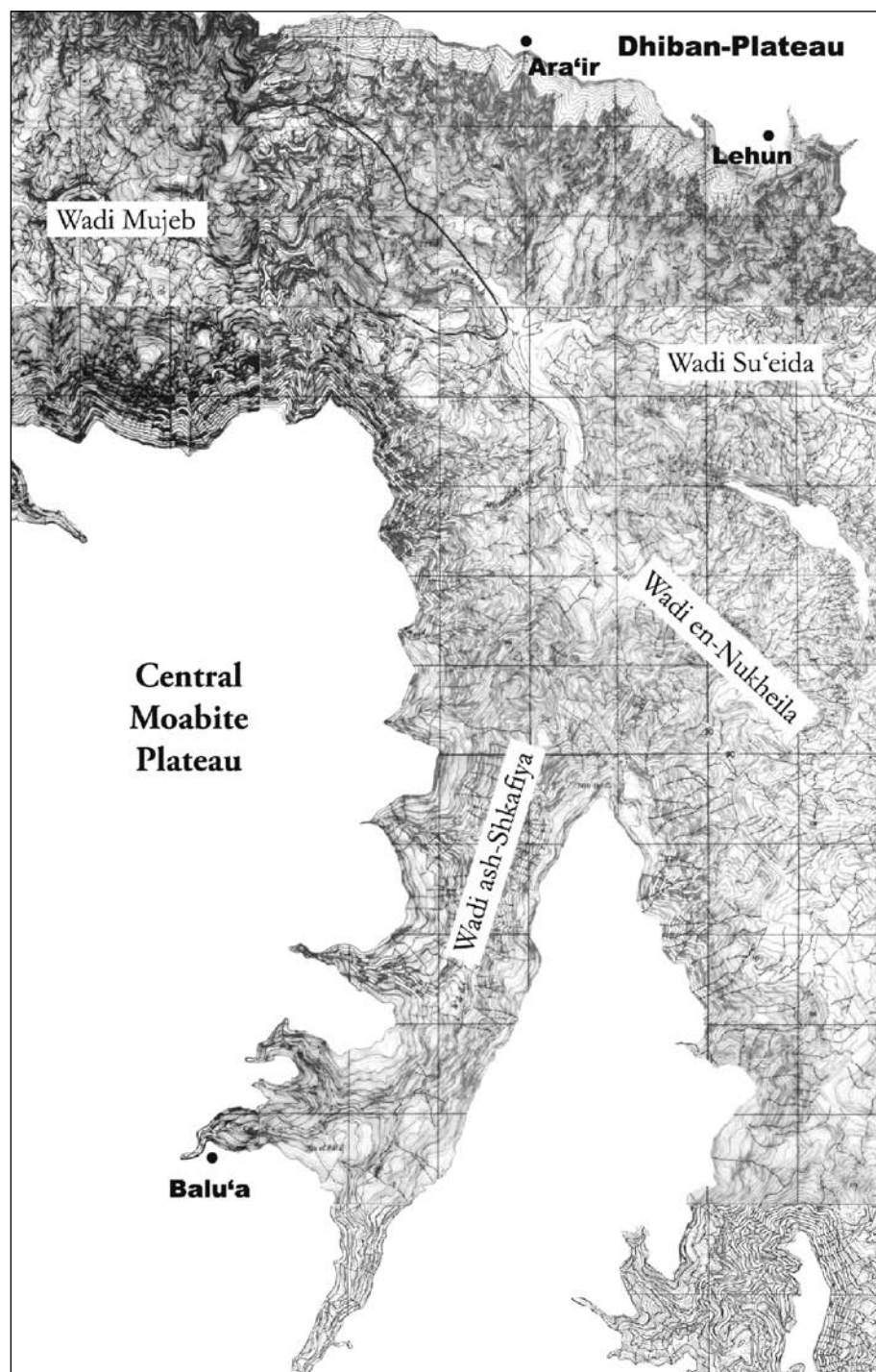
With regard to the route up on to the central Moabite plateau from the north, the most convenient ascent appears to have been through Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya. This wadi is directly in line with the possible descent at ‘Arā‘ir (see FIG. 3). Adding to the importance of this tributary wadi is the fact that this ascent is guarded by the major Iron Age site of Khirbat al-Bālū‘ at the edge of the plateau. Max Miller suggests that, for an ancient traveler approaching Wādī al-Mūjib from the north, “the easiest crossing in accordance with the natural lay of the land would have been to begin the descent into the al-Mūjib canyon at approximately Aroer (present-day ‘Arā‘ir), follow the canyon floor southeastward to the Wādī al-Bālū‘ [my Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya] junction, and then follow Wādī al-Bālū‘ [Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya] southward completing the ascent onto the southern Moabite plateau at approximately Khirbat al-Bālū‘ ” (Miller 1989a: 12, see also 1989b: 594).

The area of the central Moabite plateau (Ard al-Karak) has seen a number of archaeological reconnaissance surveys over the past few decades. Among the most comprehensive were the “Archaeological Survey of the Kerak Plateau” of 1978 to 1982, directed by J. Maxwell Miller, Jack M. Pinkerton (see Kautz 1981; Miller 1991) and, more recently, Udo Worschech (see Worschech 1984,



2. Major pre-Roman routes east of the Dead Sea.

CROSSROADS AND SITES AT THE NORTHERN EDGE OF THE CENTRAL MOABITE PLATEAU



3. Wādi ash-Shuqafiyya.

1985, 1986) and the Karak Resources Project directed by Gerald Mattingly (see Linton and Hoffman 2004; Mattingly and Pace 2007). Although these investigations have focused on the Moabite plateau or the slopes to the Dead Sea, the Wādi al-Mūjib itself has been left out.

Recently, an archaeological survey has been conducted in the area where the bridge of the mod-

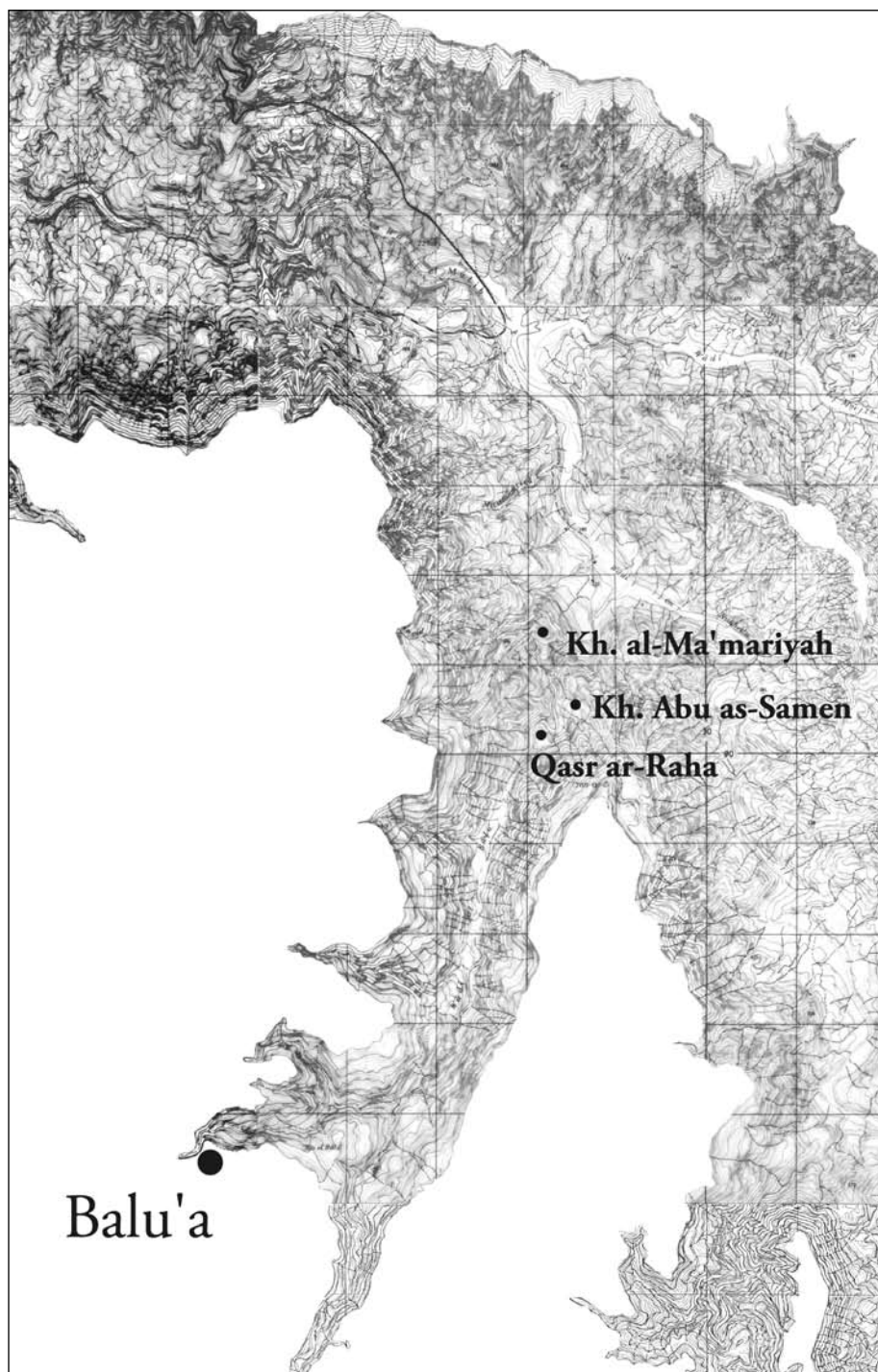
ern highway crosses Wādi al-Mūjib. The Ministry of Water and Irrigation has been constructing a new dam at this point. As this new reservoir is to cover an estimated area of six square kilometers, it was necessary to assess the archaeological data, which would be inundated (see Abu-Shmais and Waheeb 1999). Apart from this survey, no other archaeological investigation of the area has been conducted in

recent years.

In 2001, Friedensau Adventist University started a small survey project in the area of Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya. During the course of these investigations, a number of sites — forts, watch towers, and fortifications — were discovered. Among the most prominent are Khirbat al-Ma‘mmariyya, Khirbat Abū as-Samin and Qaṣr ar-Raḥa (see FIG. 4). These sites date mainly to the Iron Age and Roman

periods (see Ninow 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2006a). At Khirbat al-Ma‘mmariyya, small sondages have been excavated in the meantime (see Ninow 2002c, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006b).

The numerous sites and installations of Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya — many of them well fortified — indicate that this route through the wadi was frequently used in the past. The course of this route can be traced at various points. On the northern slope



4. Major Sites of Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya.

CROSSROADS AND SITES AT THE NORTHERN EDGE OF THE CENTRAL MOABITE PLATEAU

of Jabal al-Ma‘mmariyya, the remains of the fortified pathway leading up Khirbat al-Ma‘mmariyya and on to Khirbat Abū as-Samin is still visible (see FIG. 5). From there, the route went up to Qaṣr ar-Raḥa and then further up the wadi (see FIG. 6). The approach to the central Moabite plateau is guarded by the major site of al-Bālū‘. Since many of the sites along this route have substantial quantities of Iron Age pottery, it appears feasible to identify King Mesha’s “highway at the Arnon” with this route through Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya.

Another part of this road system has recently been identified by Amos Kloner and Chaim Ben-David in the area of Wādī an-Nukhaylah (see Kloner and Ben David 2003). This road was originally identified by Nelson Glueck, on the basis of aerial photographs, as the *Via Nova Traiana*. The question of how this part of the road linked up with the route through Wādī ash-Shuqafiyya remains to be investigated.

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5. Fortified path to Khirbat al-Ma‘mmariyya.



6. Path leading up to Qaṣr ar-Raḥa.

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