One of the most ancient towns in the Holy Land. The Biblical statement: “Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt” (Numbers 13:22) more than stating the fact that Zoan-Tanis, once the capital of Lower Egypt on the Tanitic branch of the Nile (today the village Ṣān al-Ḥajar), was built after Hebron, wishes to emphasize the antiquity of Hebron. Its name appears about a thousand years later on a signet found in the excavations of Lachish, (with an inscription written in old Hebrew letters: למלך חברן “to the king of Hebron”) (insert below left), which means that the city was part of the political system in the Holy Land, well-known from the Biblical records, where even small towns were ruled by “kings.”

The ancient city of Hebron (also: Qiryat Arbaʿ and Mamre, Gen. 23:19) on Jabal ar-Rumaydah (pl.2 and see map) was partly uncovered in a series of archaeological excavations carried out in the south-west of the hill as well as in a few places on the eastern slope near the summit. Various stages of settlement were found from the early Bronze and Middle Bronze ages, including the strong walls of a fortified city. Among the finds were a cuneiform clay tablet written in Akkādian, and a jar handle with yet another inscription reading: “to the king of Hebron”; both finds attesting to its status as a city-state. In a recent excavation that was conducted near the summit on the northern part of the tell, during the 1990s, a section of a main street and a flight of stairs were uncovered as well as two stages of the city wall. The flight of stairs led to the city gate. A residential area was also uncovered to the south of the street and the city wall, representing another stage of the settlement, all belonging to the early and middle Bronze age. Hebron-Qiryat Arbaʿ reached the pinnacle of its prosperity in the 11th-10th century BCE, but towards the end of the 10th
The city deteriorated. The new settlement, from the Persian period (middle of the 6th century BCE) onwards, was built in the valley, and was never protected by a proper wall. (NEAEHL, 2:475-478)

After the Islamic conquest the city changed its Byzantine-Christian character and slowly developed around the Sanctuary which was transformed from a Byzantine Basilica to a mosque and a Muslim shrine. Until the Crusader period, a sparse settlement had developed to the north of the Sanctuary, but in the post-Crusader period, particularly under the Mamluks, it grew in other directions mainly in the north, around the mosque of ʿAlī al-Bakkā, in the north-west and the south. However, until modern times, the old city of Hebron with all its markets was concentrated in very crowded, built-up area in the valley of al-Khalil, as we can see in the aerial photograph from 1918. (Pl. 2)

Hebron—City and Its Surroundings

Hebron is situated some 32km. to the south of Jerusalem and has been the major and only urban and commercial centre in the southern Judean hills. Prior to the Islamic conquest, in the Roman, and more so in the Byzantine period, the Oak of Mamre (ar-Rāmah) some 3.5km. to the north of Hebron, was identified as the