CHAPTER TWO

THE GEOGRAPHY AND SETTLEMENT HISTORY OF
EAST MANASSEH

A. History of Research

East Manasseh has been one of the lesser-known and lesser-researched areas of the central hill country in particular and of the Holy Land in general. The area lies outside of the usual realms of interest of explorers; it contains almost no famous historical sites; although it is frequently mentioned in the Bible, its conditions for exploration are difficult (oppressive heat in summer, few water sources, etc.).

Most of the explorers who visited the Holy Land in the 19th and 20th centuries CE conducted journeys along set routes (Ben-Arieh 1970). Travelers tended to cross the Manasseh Hill Country along the line that led from Nablus-Shechem to Samaria-Sebasteh, Dothan, the Jezreel Valley, Nazareth and Haifa. This route brought the traveler to the few holy places in the Samaria region connected to the Old and New Testament traditions (Joseph’s tomb and Jacob’s well in Shechem; Mount Garizim of the Samaritan tradition; Samaria-Sebasteh; Dothan, etc.). The eastern section of the area did not offer additions to this set model.

Explorations and surveys:

Some of the Medieval explorers (Burchard of Mount Zion [1971] and Marino Sanuto [1971]) mentioned a few sites in the area. The Crusader sources also make note of several places, especially those near Nablus-Shechem. Moslem geographers passed by on the road from Shechem to Beth Shean, as did the Jewish traveler Ashory Haparhi, who visited there at the beginning of the 14th century and described several sites.

In the second half of the 19th century, the “Golden Age” of explorers in the Holy Land, three travelers visited this territory. The first was Edward Robinson, who conducted sporadic journeys in 1838 and 1853 and published his book detailing the finds (original publication of Robinson - 1857; reprint 1970). He descended from Shechem through Wadi Malih, visited Burj el-Malih and esh-Shaqq Valley, and then crossed over into Transjordan. Victor Guérin, the noted French explorer, was the first to conduct a 19th century survey in the area. Guérin’s research method (original publication - Guérin 1875; reprint 1969) was based on his visit to most of the sites and
places along which his route passed, and his reports comprise valuable material. Guérin visited the area a short time after the beginning of the British Survey (Survey of Western Palestine, henceforth SWP), but apparently without any connection with it. His first visit to our region lasted five days, taking place April 23-27, 1870. He visited the following places: April 23 – Wadi Far‘ah and its delta, Kh. Makhruq and additional sites in the area; April 24 – Qurn Sartabeh; April 25 – ascended Wadi Far‘ah and departed from there to el-Buqei‘ah, the village of Tammun, Tel el-Far‘ah and back through Wadi Far‘ah; April 26 – through the Jordan Valley to Kh. es-Sakkut; April 27 – Wadi Malih until Burj el-Malih and back to Kh. es-Sakkut.

Guérin returned to the area on 3-4 May, 1870. This time he approached the region from the north and visited Zebabdeh and Tubas Valleys (the villages of Kfer, ‘Aqabeh, Kh. Salhab, Taiyasir and Tubas). On May 4 he visited Kh. Yarzah, Kh. ‘Eynun and Burj el-Far‘ah, and camped at ‘Ain Beidan.

Guérin did not conduct a modern survey, but rather a journey through several sites. The importance of his work was in his short, verbal descriptions of the places and the several traditions he mentioned. In some cases, there is value in his place names and in his geographical historical discussions.

The members of the SWP, C.R. Conder and H.H. Kitchener (1879; 1882; Conder 1876a; 1876b; 1881), visited the area in 1874. As in other districts in the Holy Land, their survey was comprehensive regarding the number of sites they discovered, but their laconic descriptions and lack of dating affected the value of their work. Most of their descriptions consist of terms like “pile of stones”, “walls”, etc. Their illustrative material (photos and plans) is sparse. For example, they note that the elaborate Roman tomb in Taiyasir had already been photographed in 1866, but the photo was not published. Of the entire territory covered in their volume, they published only one very small plan, that of Burj el-Malih.

After Guérin and the SWP, few researchers returned to the area until the Emergency Israeli survey of 1967-1968, conducted after the Six-Day War. In 1940 Glueck (1951, 409-420) visited several sites at the delta of Wadi Far‘ah and in the wadi itself, but that visit was intended merely to complete his work in Transjordan. In the 1960’s the Germans Kappus (1966) and Knierim (1969) conducted brief, selective surveys of the valley of Wadi Far‘ah. In their two published reports 11 sites appear, comprising about one fifth of the sites discovered in the Manasseh Hill Country Survey.

The 1967 Emergency Survey