PERMANENT AND TEMPORARY SETTLEMENTS IN THE SOUTH OF THE LOWER BESOR REGION: TWO CASE STUDIES

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…and what cities they be that they dwell in, whether in tents, or in strongholds…Num. 13: 19

Introduction

The south of the Lower Besor region is located in the semi-arid climatic zone of southern Israel (Shachar et al. 1995: 27). The rainfed agriculture borderline—the 250 mm annual average isohyet—cuts across its center from east to west (Gazit 1986: 39–49). The natural climatic circumstances of the region and its soils form conditions suitable for the growth of dense annual shrubbery, and set the anthropological background for the southern population of the region, characterized throughout the ages by its pastoralist lifestyle. It was in these territories of semi-nomadic populations that four fortified settlements (Tel Sera’, Tel Haror, Tell Jemme and Sharuhen) emerged in the beginning of the Middle Bronze II, near permanent water sources, followed by clusters of settlements founded along strategically located roads and trade routes (Gihon 1975; Meshel 1977; Cohen 1991). Arrays of permanent settlements were established in the heart of the Besor region plains during three distinct periods: The Iron Age IB (Gazit 1995); The Byzantine period (Gazit 1994); and the turn of the 19th century BCE (Gazit 2000).

1 The spatial approach to the phenomena presented here was formulated during a series of discussions with Ram Gophna in which an attempt was made to delineate the borderline between cultivated land and wilderness in the Besor region from the protohistoric periods to the Late Bronze Age.

2 The isohyet is a line on a map connecting points that receive equal amounts of annual rainfall.
The Map of Urim was published as part of the Archaeological Survey of Israel (Gazit 1996). The area surveyed is located in the south of the Besor region, and the aforementioned rainfed agriculture borderline (latitude coordinate 080) demarcates its northern boundary. The survey for the Map of Ze’elim area—adjacent to the Map of Urim area from the south—was completed by the end of 2001 and its results have been handed in to the Israel Antiquities Authority for processing and publication (for preliminary reports, see Gazit 1988; 1999; 2002).

Combined, the two survey maps create a 200-km² strip of land, 10 km wide, and 20 km long from north to south: The northern part of this narrow strip lies at the fringes of a climatic zone that enables subsistence on traditional rainfed agriculture during approximately 70% of the rainy seasons (Gazit 1986: 41). The center of the strip overlaps the 200 mm annual average isohyet (latitude coordinate 070), and in the southern border of the strip (latitude coordinate 060) annual average rainfall is approximately 150 mm. This data illustrates a gradual southward decline in annual precipitation of 5 mm per km within the limits of the surveyed area. According to recent data gathered during paleoclimate research carried out in the Negev, there is no substantial difference between present precipitation levels and those of the past three millennia (Goodfriend 1990: 130).

The dominant geographic element of the Map of Urim area is a loess-covered plateau: The channel of Nahal Besor cuts across the length of the western edge of the map and a strip of badlands runs along the eastern bank of the stream. Several springs, located in the channel, are active mostly during wintertime. A topographic rise above the plateau, along the eastern edges of the map, creates a 20 m high geologic terrace. The southern boundary of the map (latitude coordinate 070) is the northern geographic border of the Halutza sand dunes, which lie at the edge of the North-Sinai Massive (Rosnen 1953), and cover most of the area of the Map of Ze’elim (apart from the northeastern corner of the map). The dunes form long, parallel ridges, and valleys of up to hundreds of meters wide stretch between them. Remains from all periods provide proof to human activity that took place at the fringes of these valleys—hunting, animal husbandry, and occasional farming (Gazit 2003).

In terms of geography, climate, and settlement, this strip of land, constituting a typical transition zone between the permanent settlements