The Arunah Pass

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Abstract

This paper deals with the geographical pass of Arunah, for a long time considered the most significant among the three roads described in Thutmose III’s Annals of his first campaign. These three are classically discussed as a part of the “way of the sea,” and the paper suggests a new pass of the latter, together with new understandings of the Egyptian geographical descriptions.

Introduction

The Roman “Via Maris” (“way of the sea”), the ancient road connecting Egypt and Mesopotamia, crossed Sinai and then went northwards along the hills of Samaria. After passing through a hilly obstacle discussed below, it entered the Valley of Jezreel and from there, through different roads, to Damascus and the Euphrates.

1 This paper is a revised edition of my Hebrew article about the Arunah Pass (“The ‘Iron Pass’”), written following the publication of the 3rd volume of the Manasseh Survey.

2 ANET, 235-38; Urk. IV, 650.8-12; Mizrachy, Egyptian Foreign Policy in the Levant, 424-25.


The term “way of the sea” is mentioned just once in the Hebrew Bible, in an extremely difficult text (Isaiah 8:23). The combination there “the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations (“goiim”)” has no parallels, nor has its meaning ever been agreed upon. Moreover, the connection of Isaiah’s “way of the sea” to the Roman “Via Maris” is not at all automatic. Another “way of the sea” is mentioned in I Kings 18:43, in the story of Elijah. This “way of the sea” can possibly be the road which crosses the southern Carmel to the east, having again no connection to our issue.

In general, a “road” in the biblical narratives and/or the Egyptian texts is rarely built or paved. Before the road-making in the


5 Cf. also Artzy, “Routes, Trade and ‘Nomads of the Sea’.”
Roman Period no well-established and maintained roads existed, and “ways” or “roads” were no more than dirt paths, similar to those in use to this very day in the hill country or the Negev desert.

To identify an ancient “road” therefore, we should use the historical documents, together with a thorough knowledge of the topography, water sources and the original vegetation of the area.

The Three Passes

The topography of ancient Canaan is not extreme by elevation, cliffs, etc. The obstacles for movement in the Mediterranean regions were rivers, marshes and swamps in the plains, and thick vegetation in the hill country. In our case, the Sharon Plain is separated from the Jezreel Valley by the hills stretching between the Carmel and Samaria.

The first and foremost relevant narratives concerned are those of Thutmose III’s first campaign, the “Satirical letter” of Hori from the days of Ramesses II⁶ and the campaign of Shishak of the 22nd Dynas-

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⁶ Papyrus Anastasi I = ANET, 475-480.