CHAPTER ONE

'SPRINGS, SWEET AND CLEAR': WADI HAMMEH 27 AND ITS ENVIRONS

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1.1 Introduction

Writing of the springs of ancient Pella (Figs 1.1-2), Glueck (1946: 75) observed that:

The steep slopes above Pella lead down, at the east end of the shelf on which it is situated, into a caldronlike hollow. Along its sides there gushes forth a whole series of springs, sweet and clear, and so strong that within a few hundred yards a rushing stream is formed, which plunges headlong down to the floor of the valley. It was inevitable that men should settle by this gathering of the waters, and build large houses and temples and strong fortifications.

His evocation aptly describes the multiple spring heads seeping from the floor of Wadi Jirm (Fig. 1.3), beside and beneath the ancient mound called Khirbet Fahl (Smith 1973).

Glueck added (1968: 143):

It seems likely that some day there will be found in the vicinity settlements contemporary with earliest Natufian or Neolithic Jericho.

These words proved to be prescient, since one of the southern Levant’s richest Early Natufian sites was found in 1980 in Wadi al-Hammeh (Macumber 1981, 2001), which lies two kilometres to the north of Pella (Fig. 1.2). The site is Wadi Hammeh 27, numbered according to the nomenclature of the Villiers-Petocz survey of Wadi al-Hammeh (Villiers and Petocz 1984) as the twenty-seventh one recorded in that valley.

This report describes the results of excavations undertaken at Wadi Hammeh 27 between 1983 and 1990. The site, dating to ca. 12,000 BP (12,000 cal BC), yielded several superimposed constructional phases featuring oval, limestone hut footings and a variety of associated features such as hearths, postholes and pavements. Material culture included a varied repertoire of rock-art, ranging from large-scale incised slabs to small plaques; many artefact types in flint, limestone, basalt and animal bone; ochre and shell fragments; and taxonomically diverse faunal and botanical remains. Several human burials were interred beneath the lowest architectural phase and isolated human skeletal elements were found throughout the occupational deposits.

Wadi al-Hammeh is a perennial stream which emerges as a hot water spring called Hammamat Abu Dhabla about two kilometres east of the Jordan Valley (Fig. 1.2). The valley lies opposite Beisan, or modern Bet Shan (Fig. 1.4), the gateway to the Jezreel Valley (Marj ibn al ‘Amr), which in turn strikes westward to the Mediterranean coast. The springhead in Wadi al-Hammeh is now enclosed in a concrete bathhouse (Fig. 1.5). The Romans, according to their invariable practice, trained this excellent hot water source through a much larger stone built complex, vestiges of which are still to be seen embedded in the wadi terrace (Watson 1996: 73). Several classical authors made note of the plentiful groundwaters of the Pella region. Pliny termed it civitas aquarum, or, ‘a city rich in water’ (Natural History V. 16. 74; Bowsher 1997: 227). But this phase represented only a comparatively recent use of the spring waters which had watered Wadi al-Hammeh since prehistoric times (Edwards and Macumber 1995). Groundwater outflows have attracted humans and their hominine ancestors to the region for at least the past 400,000 years (Macumber and Edwards 1997). Settlement in Wadi al-Hammeh owes its long and rich prehistory to the Hammamat Abu Dhabla spring and its antecedents.

1.2 Wadi Hammeh 27 in the Context of Previous Natufian Research

On a clear day, the headland of Mount Carmel can be seen from the site of Wadi Hammeh 27, protruding behind Jabal al-Fu’qa (traditionally known as Mount Gilboa). It was at Mount Carmel that the exploration of the Natufian culture began in earnest over eighty years ago (Garrod and Bate 1937), soon after Garrod’s initial discovery of
Fig. 1.1. The locations of Pella, Wadi Hammeh 27 and Natufian sites mentioned in the text.