THE IRON AGE OF NORTHERN JORDAN

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When Professor Eduard Nielsen, Doctor honoris causa at the University of Uppsala in 1987, together with Joshua, Moses' assistant, assembled the tribes of Israel to Shechem, it was at dawn of the Iron Age in Palestine. Although most of the people mentioned in the Book of Joshua belonged to the Cisjordanian area, there were some tribes which represented Transjordan. It must be regarded as an impossible task to reconstruct the historical reality behind the Day of the Covenant in Shechem, but the archaeological activity has been so intense in Palestine in recent years that we have got a rather clear picture of the history of settlement in the period in question. We do not know whether the Cisjordanian settlements could be called "Israelite" or not. But as the Old Testament historiographers mostly had a good knowledge of tribal borders and areas, there is a good chance that the 218 villages or small towns in the region of Ephraim and Manasse may have belonged to people who could have taken part in covenantal ceremonies in Shechem. Scholars are nowadays in any event very much aware of the difficulty of combining the archaeological results from the transition period between

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1 E. Nielsen, Shechem. A Traditio-Historical Investigation (Copenhagen, 1955). Although the space here does not allow more than a general note, I should like to emphasize how much Eduard's dissertation on Shechem methodologically meant for us in Uppsala during the fifties and sixties. Eduard has lectured here several times and his scholarly work was always discussed in Ivan Engnell's Higher Seminar. We regard Eduard as "one of us".


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the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age with the "history" told in the Book of Joshua and in the Book of Judges. Whatever we should choose to call the settlers of this period, what we find is a new and concrete pattern of settlements, a pattern of villages which shows a way of life different in relation to that in the so-called "Canaanite" centres on the plains and further to the west. During this period there was an enormous change in the economy of Palestine which resulted in a stationary way of life concentrated in new settlements. Although they are small and not directly equipped with strong fortifications, they do not seem to have been either "poor" or wealthy; rather, they seem to have been founded by prosperous and—especially—numerous groups of people. The Iron Age could not have been introduced into this area in a more spectacular way.

The idea behind this short paper is not to enter into the historio-philosophical discussions on the transitional period which is now such a popular topic among scholars. I just want to describe how a small Scandinavian expedition in northern Jordan was lucky enough to find some remains of the period mentioned above, and, further, how they were able stratigraphically to investigate how the Transjordanian people of this time managed to start a settlement upon the Late Bronze Age ruins. They not only used the fortifications of this past period, but also, in the following Iron I A-period, were able to enlarge their settlement by building new walls combined with an elaborate gate system and citadel.

The site is Tell el-Fukhar, on the eastern side of the meandering Wadi esh-Shellale, situated around three kilometres west of Ramtha, the town on the border between Jordan and Syria. We were advised to dig here by Professors Siegfried Mittmann, Tübingen and Moawiyah Ibrahim, Irbid, if we sought to get a picture of the evolution of northern Jordan during the Iron Age. Together with Professor Svend Holm-Nielsen, the writer contacted the Secretary General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, Dr. Bisheh and his successor Professor, Dr. Safwan Tell, Amman. They gave us a permit for two seasons in 1990-91. Pro-

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