The Region of Montfort and Land Ownership in the Frankish Period

Rabei G. Khamisy

The construction of Montfort Castle began in 1226/27, a century and a quarter after the western Upper Galilee fell to the Franks following the occupation of Acre. It functioned only for about 45 years and was occupied and destroyed by the Mamluks in 1271. On the other hand, the region in which Montfort was built was ruled by the Franks for 167 years with a short break from 1187–1192 when it was under the Ayyūbid control. Thus, the castle played a role for only around a quarter of the period of Frankish rule in the region.

Many landowners, including the king, the military orders, noble families, ecclesiastical bodies and private persons were active in the western Galilee during the period, and land ownership changed for different reasons such as political and economic factors. We will not deal here with all of the changes in ownership through the period. Rather, we will examine the near vicinity of Montfort Castle and will focus on the period between the 1220s and 1271.

Topography of the Vicinity of Montfort

Montfort Castle is located almost 22 km northeast of Acre. It is 250–305 m above sea level, and 12 km east of the Mediterranean coast (Plate 2.1). Although the mountain ranges in this region are comparatively low, it contains one of the principal and deepest valleys in the western Galilee. Nahal Kziv, the Arabic name of which—Wādī al-Qarn—comes from the Arabic name of Montfort (al- Qurayn/al-Qarn), begins at the highest mountains of the Galilee—the Mount Meron range. There are no strong springs along the valley above the main spring which is located 4.5 km east of Montfort. Consequently, in its eastern part the stream flows only in short sections and is very weak. However, the section from the main spring, Raʾs al-Nabiʿ (Ain Ziv, map ref. 1759/2714) to the sea 16 km to its west, was perennial until 1952, when its water was diverted for use in the nearby settlements. This section contains another major spring, Nabiʿ al-Hardawīl (Ain Hardalit, map ref. 1674/2719) and several small springs which...
The name Nabiʿ al-Hardawīl may be derived from the Frankish name, Baldwin, as it appears elsewhere (for example Burj Bardawīl, north of Rāmalla). If so, this name might suggest that a certain Baldwin (perhaps one of the kings with this name) owned this spring and possibly its surroundings.

The two abovementioned springs are among the most powerful in the entire region of the Galilee. This perhaps explain why the Venetian, Marino Sanudo the Elder, in his description of the region, only mentions this valley and the Nahal Naʿaman (River Bellus), although there were at least two other valleys; Wādī Jaʿthin which powered several mills and sugar refineries, and Nahal Bezet (Wādī Karkara). The western Upper Galilee consists by and large of extended mountain spurs separated by deep valleys, with almost no extensive plains between the mountains, the only flat areas being along the coast. The spurs as well as the valleys are aligned east-west and are usually flat at their summits. This is the case in the vicinity of Montfort. Nahal Kziv separates two main spur. On the southern one is Mīʿilīā-Castellum Regis, the Frankish village of Tarphele (Khirbat al-Manḥata) and a number of other Frankish sites. The spur is bordered on its southern side by another deep valley which has various names in its several sections: Shulūl al-Wuḥūsh in the east, Wādī ‘Ayn al-Damm at the middle section and Wādī al-SA‘ālik in the west (all together called Nahal Sha’āl in Hebrew). The northern spur mainly contains small sites and is bordered on its northern side by one of the courses of Wādī Karkara. The section of Nahal Kziv between Raʾs al-Nabiʿ and Montfort is the deepest and most perpendicular in the entire western Galilee. Its sides are very close to each other and contain high cliffs reaching 100 m. The slopes are steep and the stream is 180–270 m below the summits (Plate 2.2).

In addition to its perennial streams, the annual rainfall in the region is 750–900 mm. As a consequence of its location at the centre of the western Galilee this region has a moderate climate and contains many varieties of native plants and animals. These include species typical to the mountains and others typical of the littoral. The location, fertility and topography of the region were the main reasons for making it the most important in the western Galilee. This is why it served as an administrative centre throughout the Frankish period and perhaps in earlier periods. Indeed, this specific area was described by thirteenth and fourteenth century Mamluk and European historians as one of the most fertile in the Holy Land and this is repeated in several nineteenth century descriptions.

In general, the region contains three main types of farmland; the majority is open land located mainly along the top of the spurs; the second type is the land on the mountain slopes which is usually heavily wooded; the third is the land along the stream in the valley (Nahal Kziv). The open lands as well as the slopes contain several types of soil such as the terra rosa, rendzina, limestone soil and so on, which extend the list of agricultural plants that could be grown in the region, different kinds of plants preferring different types of soil in order to grow and give the best product.