

## IN SEARCH OF THE "CITY WHICH IS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE VALLEY"

FRIEDBERT NINOW

Theologische Hochschule Friedensau  
Friedensau, Germany

In connection with the description of Transjordanian territory in the area of the Arnon river (modern *Wadi al-Mujib*), an unnamed city is mentioned several times in the Bible (Deut 2:36; Josh 13:9, 16; 2 Sam 24:5). This location is described as the "city which is in the middle of the valley." Each time, this city is associated with Aroer, which lies on the northern bank of the deep Arnon gorge. While ancient Aroer has been identified with *Arair*, 3 km southeast of Dhiban and 4 km east of the Madaba-Kerak highway,<sup>1</sup> the identification of the "city which is in the middle of the valley" remains uncertain.

The close association of the unnamed city with Aroer has led to the conclusion that it must be a "suburb" that was situated near ancient Aroer in the middle of the Arnon valley or somewhere near the river. It might have protected the water supply of Aroer.<sup>2</sup> Several sites in the vicinity of *Wadi al-Mujib* have been suggested. Martin Noth proposed *Khirbet al-Chuschra*, west of Aroer, 2 km east of the mouth of the Arnon.<sup>3</sup> East of Aroer, at the juncture of *Wadi es-Saliyeh* and *Wadi es-Sa'ideh*, lies *Khirbet al-Medeineh*, one of five *Medeinehs* in the wider vicinity of *Wadi al-Mujib*.<sup>4</sup> Already A. Musil, followed by F.-M. Abel, suggested that this site should be identified with the anonymous city.<sup>5</sup> Another *Khirbet al-Medeineh*, the

<sup>1</sup>E. Olávarri, "Sondages à 'Arô'er sur l'Arnon." *RB* 72 (1965): 77-94; idem, "Fouilles à 'Arô'er sur l'Arnon." *RB* 76 (1969): 230-259; idem, "Aroer (in Moab)," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta), 1: 92-93.

<sup>2</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 117; Zecharia Kallai, *Historical Geography of the Bible: The Tribal Territories of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 260-261, n. 338; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Commentary Series (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 418.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua*, vol. 7, Handbuch zum Alten Testament (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971), 79.

<sup>4</sup>See J. Maxwell Miller, "Six Khirbet el-Medeinehs in the Region East of the Dead Sea." *BASOR* 276 (1989): 25-28. The sixth *Medeineh* is located in the area of *Wadi al-Hesa*.

<sup>5</sup>A. Musil, *Arabia Petraea*, 1, Moab: Topographischer Reisebericht (Wien: Alfred Hölder, 1907), 329-330, 332-333, n. 1; F.-M. Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine* (Paris: Gabalda, 1967), 2:351.

one furthest to the west on the northern edge of the Kerak plateau, west of the "Kings' Highway" and overlooking a tributary of *Wadi al-Mujib*, has been investigated and proposed by U. Worschech in connection with his survey of the northwestern *Ard al-Kerak*.<sup>6</sup> K. A. Kitchen and R. S. Hess, for instance, considered yet another *Medeineh* on *Wadi en-Nukheila/Wadi el-Lejjun*.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, J. M. Miller, followed by J. A. Dearman and U. Worschech, have suggested identification of *Ar/Khirbet al-Balu'* with the "city which is in the middle of the valley."<sup>8</sup> The prominent site of *Khirbet al-Balu'*, with its extensive Iron Age ruins, is situated at the other end of the ancient *Wadi al-Mujib* crossing that began at Aroer, climbing down the northern bank of the wadi, following the canyon bed eastward into the southern arm of *Wadi al-Mujib* (*Wadi en-Nukheila*) to the *Wadi esh-Shkefeyat* junction, and then following this wadi upward to *Wadi al-Balu'* and *Khirbet al-Balu'*.<sup>9</sup> Proponents of this theory stress that difficulties in regard to a possible identification "would be lessened considerably if the river in question included not only the main branch of the *Wadi al-Mujib* but its main southern tributaries, the *Wadi al-Balu'a* and *Wadi el-Lejjun*."<sup>10</sup> Since *Khirbet al-Balu'* is situated on a plateau that is surrounded by two tributaries of the Arnon River, one could conclude that *Khirbet al-Balu'* is a city *in the middle* of the Arnon River.

In spite of the various possibilities, there has been no definitive solution to the problem of identifying the "city in the middle of the river." *Khirbet al-Chuschra* and all of the *Khirbet al-Medeinehs* are too far away from Aroer in order to be closely associated with it as the biblical text suggests. It is true that *Khirbet al-Balu'* marks the other end of the Arnon crossing between Aroer and the central Moabite plateau, and thus can be associated with Aroer. However, to define the location of *Khirbet*

<sup>6</sup>U. Worschech, U. Rosenthal, and F. Zayadine, "The Fourth Survey Season in the North-West *Ard el-Kerak*, and Soundings at Balu, 1986," *ADAJ* 30 (1986): 285-287, 290.

<sup>7</sup>This site is also called *Khirbet el-Medeineh* (north) to distinguish it from *Khirbet el-Medeineh* (south), which lies about 5 km south of it. E. Olávarri proposed the name *Khirbet Medeinet el-Mu'arradjeh* for this site. See further E. Olávarri, "Sondeo arqueológico en *Khirbet Medeineh* junto a Smakieh (Jordania)," *ADAJ* 22 (1977-78): 136-49; idem, "La campagne de fouilles 1982 à *Khirbet Medeinet al-Mu'arradjeh* pres de Smakieh (Kerak)," *ADAJ* 27: 165-178.

<sup>8</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, "The Israelite Journey Through (Around) Moab and Moabite Toponymy," *JBL* 108 (1989): 595; J. Andrew Dearman, "Levitical Cities of Reuben and Moabite Toponymy," *BASOR* 276 (1989): 58; U. Worschech, "Ar Moab," *ZAW* 109 (1997): 252.

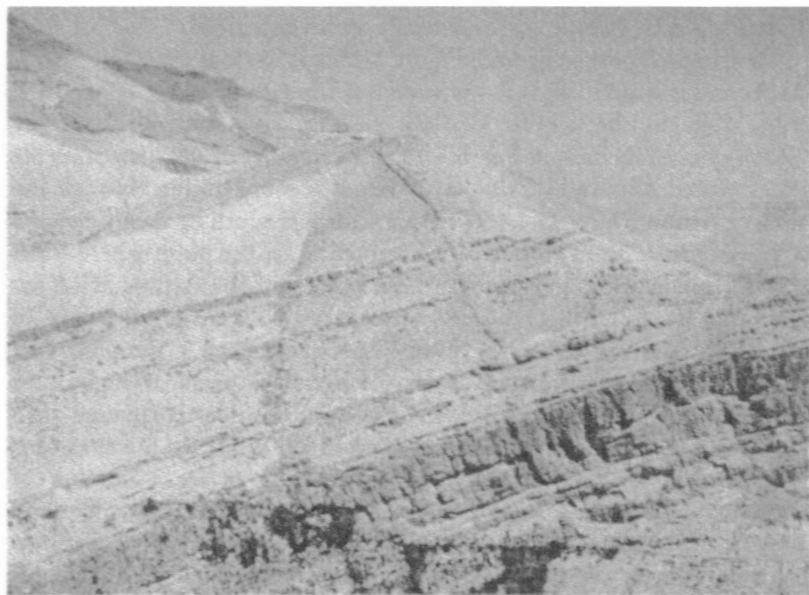
<sup>9</sup>For a discussion on this route, see U. Worschech, *Die Beziehungen Moabs zu Israel und Ägypten in der Eisenzeit*. Ägypten und Altes Testament 18 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990), 112-117.

<sup>10</sup>Dearman, 58.

*al-Balu'* as in the middle of the river seems a bit contrived.

I propose another site (see Figure 1) that is in close association with Aroer and is situated *right in the middle* of the Arnon River. While on a study tour to the central Moabite plateau with students from the Theologische Hochschule Friedensau in the summer of 2000, my students and I visited *Khirbet al-Balu'* and *Wadi al-Mujib*. Driving through the ancient Arnon River, we left the main road just south of the bridge and followed a little street eastward. We wanted to see the point where *Wadi esh-Shkefeyat* empties into the southern branch of the Arnon, *Wadi en-Nukheila*. Reaching this juncture, we climbed up a little hill to get an overview. Not far above the wadi floor we reached a shoulder that stretches from east to west and has the form of an elongated triangle, with its tip on the western upper part. The entire shoulder is covered with remains of an ancient city, *Khirbet al-Mamariyeh*. While the lower eastern part of the city has suffered from erosion, there are a number of architectural features that have remained visible on the surface. The site is protected by a large casement wall that is traceable on both sides up to the western top of the city. While the eastern end of the city has a breadth of 150 m, the city wall extends at least 300 m on each side. A number of installations and various wall lines and gates can be distinguished. The top of the shoulder is covered by a strong fortress. The pottery seems to indicate that the site may have been occupied during the end of the Late Bronze Age and during the Iron Age. Since we were not on an official archaeological expedition, we could not further investigate the site.

It appears that the site just described has not been mentioned before in the various surveys and archaeological expeditions that have studied this area in the last century. Therefore, it has not been included in the list of possible candidates for the "city in the middle of the valley." However, its location best fits the biblical description. It is situated almost opposite Aroer. Overlooking the juncture of *Wadi esh-Shkefeyat* and *Wadi en-Nukheila* (Figure 2), it guards the river crossing and commands an important strategic position. The size of the site suggests that it was a place of some importance. Whoever occupied this city controlled the crossing southward to the central Moabite plateau or northward up to the plateau around ancient Dibon. Further archaeological investigation is planned for the summer of 2002.



**Figure 1.** *Khirbet al-Mamariyeh*, proposed site for the “City Which is in the Middle of the River.”

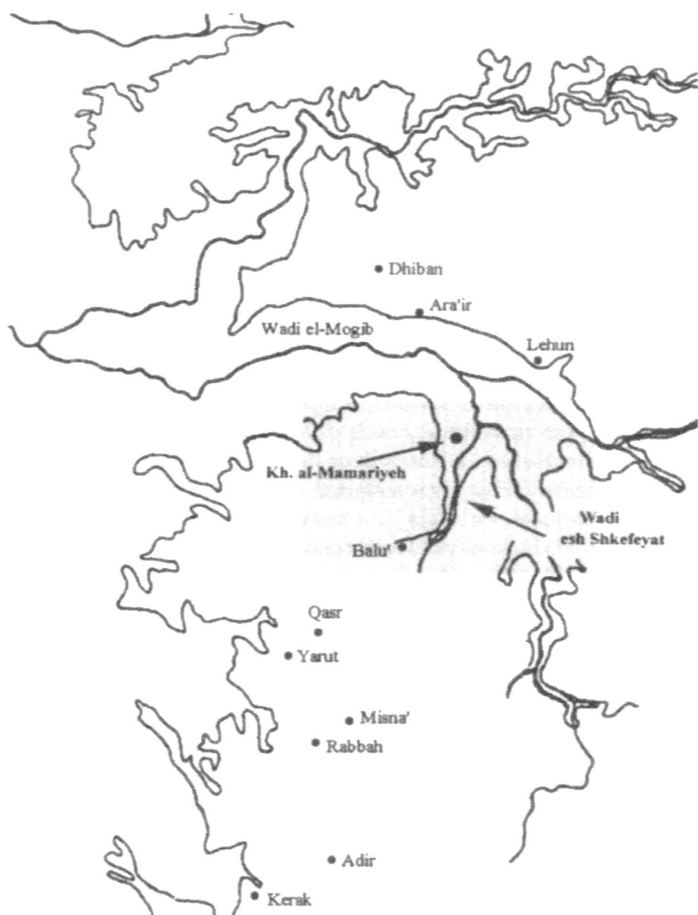


Figure 2. Location of *Khirbet al-Mamariyeh* in *Wadi al-Mujib* (or *Mogib*).