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 Aroer, 3 km southeast of Dhiban and 4 km east of the Madaba-Kerak highway,¹ 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.² Several sites in the vicinity of Wadi al-Mujib have been suggested. Martin Noth proposed Khirbet al-Chuscha, west of Aroer, 2 km east of the mouth of the Arnon.³ East of Aroer, at the juncture of Wadi es-Saliyeh and Wadi es-Sa’idah, lies Khirbet al-Medeineh, one of five Medeinehs in the wider vicinity of Wadi al-Mujib.⁴ Already A. Musil, followed by F.-M. Abel, suggested that this site should be identified with the anonymous city.⁵ Another Khirbet al-Medeineh, the

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. K. A. Kitchen and R. S. Hess, for instance, considered yet another Medeineh on Wadi en-Nukbeila/Wadi el-Lejun. 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.” 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-Nukbeila) to the Wadiesh-Shkefeyat junction, and then following this wadi upward to Wadi al-Balu‘ and Khirbet al-Balu‘. 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-Lejun.” 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


5This site is also called Khirbet al-Medeineh (north) to distinguish it from Khirbet al-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 el-Mu‘arradjeh pres de Smakieh (Kerak),” ADAJ 27: 165-178.


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.
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-Manariyeh*, 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).