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CHAPTER 1
THE SITE AND ITS HISTORY
Denys Pringle

The remains of the Crusading castle of Belmont lie today beneath those of the Arab village of Suba (Palestine Grid ref. 1620.1324), abandoned by its inhabitants since 1948. The site occupies the summit of a conical hill, rising 750m above sea level and commanding views in all directions (Fig. 1.1; Pls. 1.1–1.3). To the north-west it overlooks the Jaffa to Jerusalem road, where it winds up through the village of Abu Ghosh (Qaryat al-'Inab) and its fertile valley. To the south-east is the deep valley in which lie 'Ain Karim and the route to Bethlehem. To the north-east, the hills of Qastal and Nabi Samwil stand out on the skyline, in the twelfth century being occupied respectively by the Hospitaller castle of *Belveer* (Pringle 1997: 118, no. R15) and the Premonstratensian abbey of St Samuel, founded by King Baldwin II sometime before 1131 (Pringle 1993: II, 85–94, no. 159). To the south the landscape falls away in a series of massive undulations towards the ravine of the Wadi as-Sarar (Nahal Soreq), which represents, as the nineteenth-century builders of the Jaffa to Jerusalem railway realized, the easiest natural route of penetration from the coastal plain to Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The strategic significance of Jabal Suba, clear enough to anyone willing to climb its summit, would have made it from early times a prime position for settlement. The place may perhaps be identified with Σωρης or Ἐωβης (*Σωβης), which is mentioned in the Greek version of the Book of Joshua (15.59a) in the town list for Judah, under the district of Bethlehem; but attempts to equate it with Zobah (1 Samuel 14.47; 2 Samuel 23.36) appear to be unfounded (Aharoni 1979: 287, 355, 443; Haldar 1962; Kallai 1986: 392–5; Abel 1967: II, 423–4). At a later date, it may be possible to identify the site with *Sebô'im*, a village mentioned in rabbinical sources of the later Roman period (Avi-Yonah 1940: 11;

1976: 94; *contra* Abel 1967: II, 424, 452). The survival of rock-cut tombs and remains of a mosaic pavement also indicate occupation of some kind in the Iron Age and Byzantine period (Conder and Kitchener 1881: III, 18, 158; Guérin 1868: I, 265–6; Saller 1946: 82 n.2, 87 n.1; Kloner 1982).

Their ignorance of any certain antique or Biblical identification for Suba, however, did not deter the Westerners who settled in Palestine in the twelfth century from finding one for themselves. At the time when the pilgrims of the First Crusade began the final stage of their journey from Lydda to Jerusalem in June 1099, the burial place of the Maccabees at Modein (today al-Midiya) was pointed out to them in the vicinity of *Emmaus-Nicopolis* ('Amwas), the ruined Byzantine city lying at the foot of the hills of Judaea where they meet the Shephelah (William of Tyre, VIII, 1 (*CCCM*, LXIII, 381; trans. Babcock and Krey, I, 339); Fulcher of Chartres, I, 25 (*RHC Occ*, III, 354; trans. Ryan, 115); cf. Abel 1967: II, 391; Pringle 1993: II, 6). Sometime during the first four decades of the twelfth century, however, an alternative location for Biblical Emmaus was established at Abu Ghosh (Qaryat al-'Inab), a former Roman and Abbasid road-station closer to Jerusalem, where around 1140 the Order of St John constructed a new church of the Resurrection (cf. Abel 1967: II, 420; de Vaux and Steve 1950; Weyl-Carr 1982; Pringle 1993: I, 7–17, no. 1). As a result of the topographical shift of Emmaus from 'Amwas to Abu Ghosh, the hills of Modein (*mons/montes Modin*) were also now 'relocated' to that general area (cf. *Descriptio locorum* (*c*.1131–43), XLIII (*IHC*, II, 106); Fretellus (1137), LXIX (ed. Boeren, 39); Eugesippus (*c*.1148) (*PG*, CXXXIII, 1002–3); John of Würzburg (*c*.1160–65), XXIII (*CCCM*, CXXXIX, 108); Burchard of Mount Sion (1283), X (*IHC*, IV, 202)).

Plate 1.1. Belmont (Suba): the village viewed from the E in the early 20th century.

Plate 1.2. Belmont (Suba): the village seen from the NE in the 1930s.

Plate 1.3. Belmont (Suba): aerial view of the village, taken in the 1930s.

The pilgrim Theoderic, writing in 1169 or 1172, identifes the hills of Modein as lying between 'Ain Karim and the valley in which Abu Ghosh lay. Having described the holy places in and around 'Ain Karim, he continues:

> Near this place are the hills of Modein (*montes Modin*), in which Mattathias stayed with his sons when Antiochus was conquering the city and the children of Israel. Those mountainous regions are called *Belmont* by people today.

> Near these hills lies the village of Emmaus (*castellum Emaus*), which people now call *Fontenoid*, where the Lord appeared to two disciples on the same day as His Resurrection. (ch. XXXVIII (*CCCM*, CXXXIX, 184))

Although Theoderic does not mention the castle of Belmont, it is evident that it existed by 1171/2 (and perhaps by 1169/70), when its Hospitaller castellan is mentioned in a letter, addressed by the convent of the Hospital to Pope
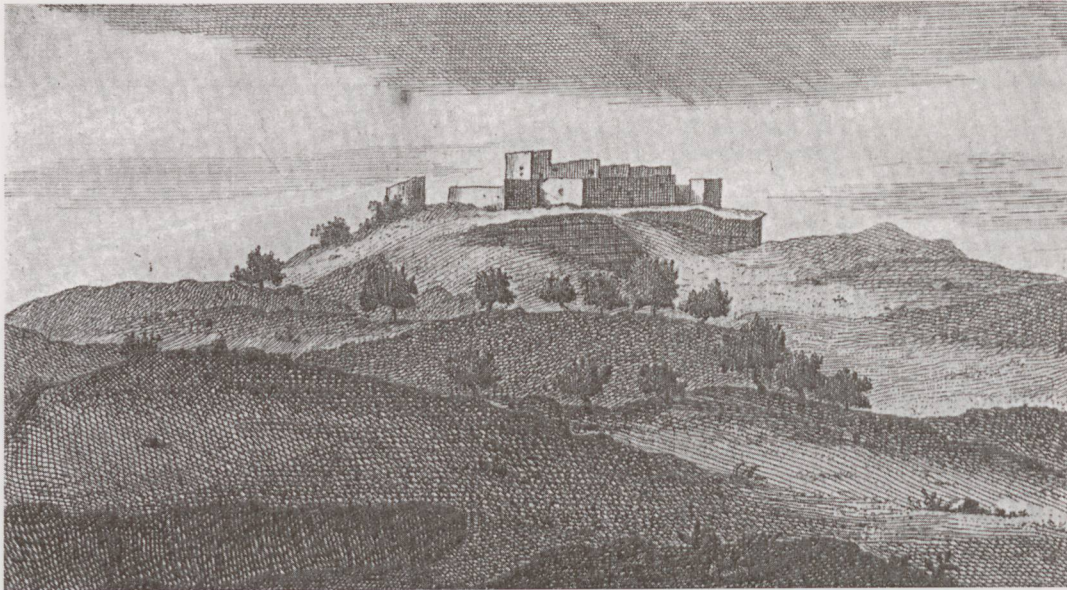
Figure 1.1. Location map.

Alexander III, as having played a part in attempting to resolve the crisis brought about by the resignation of the master, Gilbert of Assailly, two years before (Hiestand, *Vorarbeiten*, II, 222–7, no. 19; cf. *CGOH*, I, 276–7, no. 403; Paoli, I, 229, no. 186; *RRH*, 126, no. 480; cf. Riley-Smith 1967: 61–3). An earlier castellan may also plausibly be identified in William of Belmont (Willelmus de Bellomonte/de Belmont), another Hospitaller brother. In 1157, he is found assisting the order's treasurer and preceptor in a property transaction in Jerusalem (*CGOH*, I, 188–9, no. 249; *RRH*, 85, no. 329); and, on 16 August 1162, he appears as witness to a charter which Baldwin of Mirabel issued with the consent of his brother, Hugh of Ibelin, lord of Ramla, concerning the grant of a house in Jaffa (Kohler, *Chartes*, 35, no. 32; *RRH Ad*, 22, no. 370b). In April 1186, the castellan of Belmont was Brother Bernard (de Asinaria), who from 1163 had been master of the *Asnerie*, the Hospital's large extramural hospice located near St Stephen's church just outside the north gate of the city (*CGOH*, I, 503, no. 803; *RRH*, 173, no. 651; cf. *CGOH*, I, 226, no. 312 (1163); 255, no. 372 (1167); 311, no. 450 (1173); 319, no. 464 (1174); 322, no. 469 (1175); 349, no. 508 (1177); IV, 248–9, no. 372 (1167); *RRH*, 103–4, no. 391 (1163); *RRH Ad*, 27, no. 434a (1167)).

In the 1160s, the Hospitallers seem to have possessed a number of properties in the area around Belmont (cf. Beyer 1942: 180–81). Sometime between 1163 and 1169, their master, Gilbert of Assailly, offered the income from four neighbouring villages, *castellum Emaus* (Abu Ghosh, Qaryat al-'Inab), *Aqua Bella* (Kh. 'Iqbala, Dair al-Banat), *Belveer* (Qastal) and *Saltus Muratus* (probably Qaluniya), to Bela, duke of Hungary, in return for a gift of 10,000 bezants, so that the duke and his wife could maintain themselves while they were on pilgrimage in the Holy Land (*CGOH*, I, 222–3, no. 309; *RRH*, 120–21, no. 458). As it turned out, the duke never set foot in Palestine and the properties remained in the hands of the Hospital. The date at which the Hospitallers first acquired these and perhaps other nearby properties, however, is more difficult to assess, though the dating of the church at *castellum Emaus* suggests that this site at least was in their possession by *c*.1140 (Pringle 1993: I, 15–17). The same may have been true of Belmont, to whose

castellan and garrison would have fallen the responsibility for administering and protecting the estates in the region, besides assuring the security of travellers on the road from Ramla to Jerusalem that passed through Latrun and Abu Ghosh (cf. Riley-Smith 1967: 320, 429; Benvenisti 1970: 229; Fischer, Isaac and Roll 1996: 335–6, fig. 42; Pringle 1998: 108–9).

In late July 1187, following the destruction of the Frankish army at the Horns of Hattin on 4 July, it was evidently down that same route (*per descensum montis Modin*) that a party of Turks, escorting Christian refugees from Mirabel (Majdal Yaba) to Jerusalem, were driven after being attacked and routed by Templars and men from Jerusalem at Nabi Samwil (*Mons Gaudii*) (*Libellus de expugnatione Terrae Sanctae* (*RS*, LXVI, 230)). Belmont (*Ṣūbā*) itself, perhaps already abandoned by its Hospitaller garrison, fell to Saladin in August 1187 (Abū Shāmā (*RHC Or*, IV, 303); 'Imād al-Dīn (trans. Massé, 99)), though it is falsely claimed by one source that it was only surrendered at the time of the fall of Jerusalem itself, early in October, when Balian of Ibelin supposedly added it and four other castles to the ransom of 30,000 gold dinars that he paid for the release of 7,000 Christian prisoners (Röhricht 1874: I, 189; 1898: 459 n.2; Rey 1883: 383; cf. Runciman 1951: II, 465–6).

In September 1191, *Bellum Montem* was included in a list of fortresses which Saladin was supposed by Western writers to have commanded his brother, al-'Ādil, to destroy on the approach of the army of the Third Crusade (*Itin. Ric.*, IV, 23 (*RS*, XXXVIII.i, 280); Ambroise, line 6857; cf. Conder 1897: 279). Whether the Crusaders ever reached it is uncertain, though in June 1192 King Richard himself is reported to have been at Abu Ghosh (*la fontaine d'Esmals*), where he surprised a group of Muslims, pursuing them to within sight of Jerusalem (Ambroise, line 9846; *Itin. Ric.*, 49 (RS, XXXVIII.1, 369)). A certain Hospitaller knight, Geoffrey of Belmont (Gaufridus de Bellomonte), who witnessed a charter in Antioch in 1203, may perhaps have been a surviving member of its garrison (*RRH Ad*, 51–2, no. 792a). Thereafter Belmont disappears from the records.

The village of Suba, however, continued to exist and is mentioned around 1225 by the Arab geographer Yāqūt (Le Strange 1890: 538; Marmardji 1951: 119). Its precise location at this time is unknown, though it would be logical to expect the villagers to have made use of the security of the dismantled hilltop castle from an early date. It is uncertain whether or not the village was reoccupied by the Franks during the period between 1229 and 1244 when Jerusalem was again in their hands. It cannot be readily identified with any of the villages around Jerusalem and Bethlehem that are listed in Richard of Cornwall's letter recording his treaty of 1241 (Matthew Paris, *Chron. maj.* (*RS*, LVII.iv, 142–3)).

Nothing is known of Suba during the Mamluk period (1250–1516), but in Ottoman times the sources become more informative. In 1557, for example, the tax burden falling on the village was temporarily lightened, following an attack made on two of its leaders by the *sipahi* Sinan, who was farming part of its revenues (Singer 1994: 107–8). Another *sipahi* of Suba, Yusuf Ibn 'Abdallah, is also mentioned in the sixteenth century bringing a case before the *qadi* in Jerusalem against two peasants of Maliha, who had allegedly planted grape vines without his consent (Singer 1994: 93). The Ottoman taxation survey of 1596/7 records *Ṣūbā* as having a population of 60 Muslim and 7 Christian families, amounting probably to around 335 souls. The taxes on agricultural products also suggest an evenly balanced agrarian economy, divided almost equally (in terms of the value of the products) between arable cultivation in the valley bottoms, and orchards, vineyards and rough pasture (supporting goats and bees) on the terraced hill-slopes and wastes above. The most valuable commodity of Suba was grape syrup, to which, it may be suspected, the Christian inhabitants would have applied their own particular processing methods. The relative values of the different products suggested by the taxation returns are indicated in the following table (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 115, no. Z170):

Products	% value
Wheat	27.27
Barley	22.91
Grape syrup	28.36
Olives and olive oil	3.27
Goats and bees	18.18

The hill on which the village stood was still being identified as Modein of the Maccabees as late as the eighteenth century, though Richard Pococke, who was also aware of this supposed association, correctly judged it to be mistaken (1743: II, 46–7; cf. Maundrell 1697: 460–1; Mariti 1769: IV, 324–5). An engraving, made in 1698 by Cornelius van Bruyn (Pl. 1.4), shows the village to have been strongly built with a rectangular inner core and a number of tower-like stone houses (1698; 1725; cf. Schiller 1981: 148). In 1691, the inhabitants of Suba (*Modin*) are recorded conspiring with those of neighbouring villages to mount an attack on the people of 'Ain Karim, whom they accused of having accepted bribes from the Franciscans in return for allowing the latter to re-establish a monastic house at

the church of St John's birthplace (Saller 1946: 59 n.1; cf. Pringle 1993: I, 32).

In the nineteenth century, Suba and the area around it was visited by an increasing number of European travellers. One such was the Revd. J.D. Paxton, who was resident in Palestine between 1836 and 1838. He describes Suba as

> a cluster of buildings on the top of a hill, called the tomb of the Maccabees. It looked like a fort, or place of defence, and was, so I am told, not long since, the residence of Aboo Goosh, who used to make free with the property of other people; in other words, was a notorious robber. But Ibrahim Pasha has taught such gentry a good lesson. (1839: 111; cf. Thomson 1878: 665–6)

James Finn, the British consul, also visited Suba in 1858, ascending the steep hill to a small lookout tower on the summit.

> In the village we found remains of old masonry, most likely the basement of a fortification of early Saracenic or the Crusaders' era; besides which there was a piece of wall in excellent condition of the best character of Jewish rabbeted stones. One man invited us to see some old stones inside of his house; but they formed a portion of the basement above-mentioned, against which the rest of the house was built. The people were unanimous in declaring that there was nothing else of such a nature in the village. (1868: 426)

In the 1860s, Victor Guérin estimated the size of Suba as scarcely more than 800 inhabitants:

> This mountain, isolated and of conical shape, was crowned on its summit by a small town, now reduced to the status of a simple village, which is also called Sûbâ. Before the invasion of Ibrahim Pasha [1832], is was a strong point, surrounded by former ramparts perfectly constructed in magnificent and well-dressed blocks; but, in 1834, after a lively resistance, it was stormed by Ibrahim and almost completely dismantled. None the less, there exist still in certain points complete stretches of wall almost intact, attesting by the regularity and large dimensions of their courses the beauty of the *enceinte* which used to surround the town and which at that time, even though it would already have suffered greatly from the passage of time and more so of men, was still well enough preserved to offer, despite its numerous breaches, a sufficient shelter to the inhabitants of Sûbâ. On top of the hill stands a small modern tower, of which only the foundations are in part antique; it was rebuilt some twenty years ago. In a number of houses where I penetrated, I observed a certain number of fine well-squared blocks used in the construction, which came either from the ramparts or from former ruined buildings. In a house which is used today for the reception of strangers, the inhabitants assured me that they had seen in former times some ancient tombs, now fallen in. If one can believe them, there was a fairly vast funerary crypt, of which they speak with nothing but admiration. (1868: I, 265–6)

The remains of the fortification seen by Guérin were identified as Crusader work by the officers of the Survey of Western Palestine, who visited Suba in May 1875:

Plate 1.5. Belmont (Suba): site of the castle gate, as seen by a party of visiting Dominicans in the early years of the 20th century. Note the village women carrying jars of water from 'Ain Suba on their heads.

Plate 1.6. Belmont (Suba): site of the castle gate, as it appeared in the 1930s.

There are remains of a Crusading fortress at this place. Nearly at the top of the hill to the east is a rocky scarp, 20 feet [6.1m] high, sloping, and fitted with a sloping masonry revetment of good-sized drafted masonry. The draft has a diagonal dressing like that on twelfth century masonry. This fortress was destroyed by Muhammed Aly, and rebuilt by Abu Ghosh. It was again destroyed at a later period. There are remains of Crusading buildings in all parts of the village, and a stone altar, with steps, marks the probable position of the church. The central tower, which is very conspicuous, seems also Crusading work, and one of the streets has a wall of roughly-dressed large stones, with joints packed (as at Kuryet el 'Enab [Abu Ghosh]) with small chips. A little to the west of the village is a large vaulted building, with drafted stones in the walls. (Conder and Kitchener 1881: III, 157–8, cf. 18)

Conder and Kitchener also identify Suba as the village or district known as Belmont in the twelfth century (1881: III; 18–19; cf. Rey 1883: 383–4).

A romantic view of the site appears in Sir Charles Wilson's *Picturesque Palestine* (see Pl. 2.2). The remains of the castle gateway were also illustrated by Ch. Clermont-Ganneau (compare Pls. 1.5–1.6), who provides some notes on the

Plate 1.7. Belmont (Suba): the NE corner of the outer *enceinte*, as seen in the first decades of the 20th century.
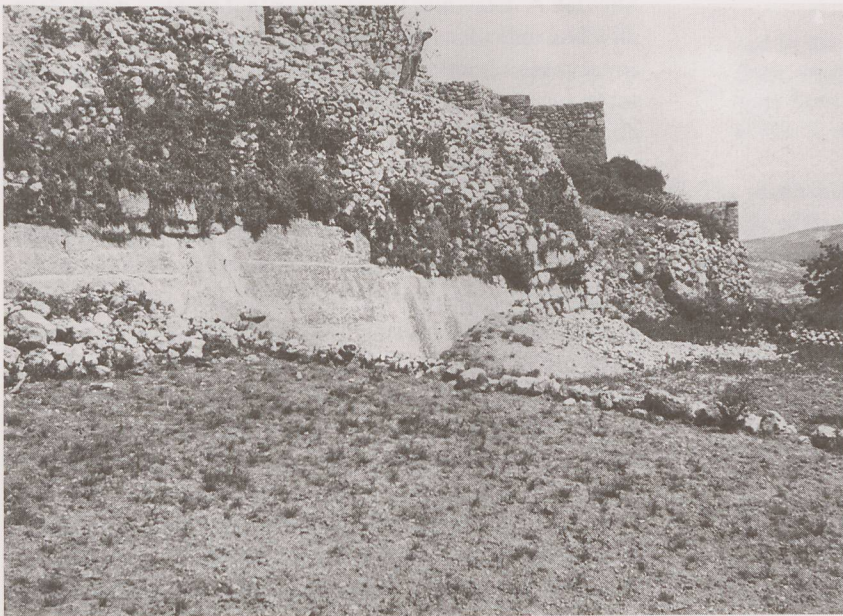

Plate 1.8. Belmont (Suba): rock-cut *talus* of the W side of the outer *enceinte*, looking S.

medieval masonry and masons' marks from the Crusader castle (1896: I, 23, 480–81; cf. de Sandoli 1974: 240; Pringle 1981: 183). It may or may not be significant that the closest correlation of these, as a group, is with those recorded on the tower of the church of the Holy Sepulchre, a building securely dated to the second half of the twelfth century (Pringle 1981: 196–7, fig. 7).

The Muslim shrines of Suba are described by Chester C. McCown, an American scholar who visited the site in November 1920. Two lay outside the village itself (see Ch. 2 below), and another two, besides the mosque, inside:

> The *weli* of the 'Forty Martyrs' (*el arba'in sahid*) is a small, half-underground room on the hillside, among the hovels of the village. On one side the hill makes a wall, on the other is the dooryard of a house. The roof is level with the floor of the house above. What remained of the entrance, abutting on one of the village alleyways, had been walled up to keep the chickens out, so we were told. They said there was nothing inside. The fourth *weli* was called the 'reformers (or 'pious ones') of the gate' (*sullah el-bab*). It was merely an angle where a short piece of ruined wall joined another. The lowest course of masonry was probably the remains of one of the Crusaders' buildings; above, other courses had been piled by later hands using some of the stones from Crusading times. At this corner there was a considerable whitewashed spot where it was customary to offer sacrifice to the *weli*… The village mosque, which stands on the highest part of the hill where the Crusaders' church once stood, looked almost deserted. It was not named with the other [Muslim] shrines'. (1921–22: 56, pl. 13 [showing the fourth *weli*])

The Palestinian ethnographer Tewfik Canaan also describes the *weli* which McCown had called *sullah el-bab*:

> In Soba the Arb'in Mghazi are represented by a small shallow hole in the old masonry. This was also called *mgharah*. Here lights and incense burnt. (1927: 59)

The remains of the castle have also been noted by various other writers from the time of the British Mandate onwards (e.g. Johns 1937: 24 (J5); Deschamps 1939: 15, 20-21;

Palestine 1948: 155; Langé 1965: 94, 179, fig. 43; Benvenisti 1970: 229; Hoade 1978: 601; Pringle 1997: 96 (no. 207), fig. 53) (see Pls. 1.7–1.8).

The census carried out in 1931 records the population of Suba as 434, all of them Muslim (Mills 1932: 43); the number had risen to 620 by 1944/5 (Khalidi 1992: 317). Already before the period of intercommunal strife towards the end of the Mandate, however, a disagreement within the Arab comminity in Suba had resulted in a part of the population leaving the village to settle at 'Ain Rafa, 1.5km away downhill to the north-west. During the war of 1947–8, these fugitives were joined by the remainder. After failing to take the village in April 1948, Israeli forces finally captured it during the night of 12–13 July (Khalidi 1992: 318). They later proceeded to destroy part of the outer ring ring of village houses and to install among the ruins a system of defensive trenches and command posts, turning Suba once again into a strategic military position defending Jerusalem's lifeline to the sea. Kibbutz Zova (originally Ameilim), founded in 1948 on the lower promontory just west of Suba, represented the civilian counterpart to this military outpost.

Today Jabal Suba is state land, enclosed by the lands of the kibbutz. The military have departed, and the site lies abandoned.