

The Mists of Ramthalon, or;  
 // How Ramoth-Gilead Disappeared from the Archaeological Record

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This is to report the disappearance of a major LB and Iron Age site from the scholarly record, from public knowledge and, most probably by now, from the physical world as well. I am talking about the tell of er-Ramṭā, once comprising all that remained of Ramoth-Gilead.

The history of research on the localization of Ramoth-Gilead reads like a comedy of errors (the finale not yet in sight). From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, T.K. Cheyne (1903) lists the following suggestions: es-Salt, Rēmūn, Ġaraš, Irbid, Ramṭā, Ġal'ūd, and opts for Šalḥad himself<sup>1</sup>. By 1915, the identification of Ramoth-Gilead with er-Ramṭā was common knowledge<sup>2</sup>. Of all suggestions, previous and following alike, this is the only one which finds linguistic support: Canaanite (*hā-*)*rāmōt* → Aramaic *rāmāṭā* → [*rāmaṭā*] → *ramṭā*, and cf. Josephus' form of the Name: *Αραμαθά*, or even more simply *hā-rāmā* (2 Kings 8.29) → Aramaic *rāmṭā* → *ramṭā*. In the vulgar transcription *remṭa*, *e* represents [æ] as allophone of [a], or [ə] as representative of /u/ in the local dialect (in 1979, I heard the pseudo-correction Rumṭā [according to the *fu'lā*-pattern] pronounced on the spot). With the ability to read surface pottery, the infernal mists which were to devour Ramṭā/Ramoth-Gilead began to rise. Ramṭā does not have LB or Iron Age surface pottery (because it is covered by the debris of, at least, the past 500 years), nor does everybody see, or want to see, that the town is situated on top of a magnificent tell. Albright (1929) found the required pottery at el-Ḥuṣn<sup>3</sup> and thus substantiated Dalman's (1913) proposal<sup>4</sup>. The argument that Ḥuṣn cuddles up to the edge of the mountains whereas Ramṭā lies out there in the plain, is specious, for «Gilead» in Ramoth-Gilead might refer to political geography (the Ramoth of the Omride province of Gilead) rather than to physical geography.

Albright's proposal found general acceptance until N. Glueck discovered Tell er-Ramīṭ<sup>5</sup>. Now the ancient name seemed to be preserved at a place which also furnishes Iron Age pottery. I will turn to the archaeology in a minute, but first deal with the name. Glueck recorded it as er-Rāmīṭ, but Glueck was not a trained linguist (his transcriptions of Arabic place-names usually only make sense if he copied them from 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors, which was impossible in this case, because Glueck discovered this tell, and was rather proud of it). A *fā'il*-formation would indicate the toponym's Canaanite-Aramaic background indeed. Unfortunately, the form Ramīṭ is much better attested; it is also preferable on the basis of the recent Jordanian standard form, Rumēt/Rumaiṭ. Ramīṭ could easily have originated as a Euro-American misrepresentation of local \*Rəməṭ, [ə] after /t/ shifting to [ʌ], and [ē] very closed

<sup>1</sup> T.K. Cheyne, Ramoth-Gilead: *Encyclopædia Biblica* IV (1903) 4014-16.

<sup>2</sup> F. Buhl, Wilhelm Gesenius' Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament (1719) 737, with no reference to Dalman's dissent, *PJB* 9 (1913) 63f.

<sup>3</sup> Ḥṣn, to be precise; hence the transcriptional variants Ḥiṣn, Ḥoṣn, Ḥöṣn.

<sup>4</sup> W.F. Albright, New Israelite and Pre-Israelite Sites: The Spring Trip of 1929: *BASOR* 35 (1929) 1-13, 11.

<sup>5</sup> N. Glueck, Ramoth-Gilead: *BASOR* 92 (1943) 10-16.

(similar to Turkish [1]). Rumaît, however, is nothing but a masculine diminutive, the female being represented by – Rumtā. It stands to reason, therefore, that Tell er-Ramîṭ/Rumēt was named after its larger counterpart to the north, and does not bear a name preserved from antiquity. Glueck was not able to estimate the size of his discovery<sup>6</sup>. After the excavations conducted by P.W. Lapp in 1962 and 1967, at least that much is clear: Tell er-Rumēt was a miserable little outpost of less than 50x50 m of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>7</sup>, in the system of Iron Age defenses representing the lowest level, the *burgus*-type<sup>8</sup>. It never was a town, a city, the seat of a provincial government, or a prize desired and contested by whole Israelite and Aramaean armies under the supreme command of their kings. Its identification with Ramoth Gilead has to be abandoned for good<sup>9</sup>.

So it is time to turn our attention back to Ramtā. Nearly all the basic data are provided by Glueck<sup>10</sup>:

A careful examination of er-Remthā, a very large village situated in the center of the plain marking the transition from North Gilead to the stretches of Haurān, resulted in the discovery there for the first time of considerable numbers of Iron Age I-II sherds. This lends new attractiveness to the old equation of er-Remthā with Rāmōth-gilead ... They were discovered as a result of some excavations on the e. side of the low rise on which the modern town sprawls ... None had previously been found on the surface, primarily, one assumes, because of the great quantities of comparatively modern debris which covered them ... Er-Remthā is situated on a low, extensive rise, all of which is covered today by houses and dumps of the modern town ... on the e.-w. road which leads through the plain stretching between Der‘ā and Irbid. At both of the latter places, considerable numbers of Bronze and Iron Age sherds have been found ... While no BA sherds have thus far been found at er-Remthā, it would seem likely that excavations might reveal their presence, in the same way that chance excavations unearth Iron Age sherds.

A careful reading of Glueck reveals that modern Ramtā is situated on an extensive tell<sup>11</sup>, or what would you call «a low rise» consisting of modern and Iron Age settlement debris? Seen from a distance, Ramtā gives the impression of a town sitting on its own tell, very much like the view of Madeba, or er-Rabba, from some kilometers away. The extension of the tell, not indicated by Glueck, can be calculated from the map Jordan 1:100'000, sheet 1: al-Mafrāq (1959), which allows us to distinguish the old town from the more recent suburbs: 650 x 250 m, or ca. 12 ha<sup>12</sup>. Glueck leaves little doubt that he would have shifted Ramoth-Gilead back to Ramtā had he not discovered Tell er-Ramîṭ. So the fog of an explorer's pride in his discovery of a virgin site way out in the middle of nowhere and well off the path which had been trodden (at least in the armchair-archaeologists' imagination) by so many before,

<sup>6</sup> N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine IV* (AASOR 25-28; 1951) I [henceforward: EEP IV], 98: «The entire hill at the time of our visit [May 6, 1943], was completely ploughed over and planted to wheat».

<sup>7</sup> N.L. Lapp, *Rumeith, Tell el- D. Homès-Fredericq & J.B. Hennessy ed., Archaeology of Jordan II Field Reports* (Leuven 1989) 494-497.

<sup>8</sup> E.A. Knauf, *Festungen: RGG<sup>4</sup> III* (2000) 100.

<sup>9</sup> V. Fritz, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT I/7; 1994) 205. Fritz proposes to return to Huṣn; J. Svensson, *Towns and Toponyms in the Old Testament with Special Emphasis on Joshua 14-21* (CB.OT 38; 1994) 87 n. 9, offers Ramîṭ or Ramtā – so we are back to Square One.

<sup>10</sup> EEP IV, 97.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, correctly, W. Zwickel, *Eisenzeitliche Ortslagen im Ostjordanland* (BTAVO.B 81; 1990) 315, even if he attributes a dense Iron Age sherd scatter to the surface where there is none. The tell probably sits on a limestone core, still outcropping when U.J. Seetzen passed by on February 17, 1806: F. Kruse, *Ulrich Jasper Seetzen's Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan-Länder, Arabia Petraea und Unter-Aegypten*, I (Berlin 1854) 363.

<sup>12</sup> Calculated as 3/4 of the square formed by the maximal length and width.

blended into the mists of abusing surface pottery for site identification, and Ramtā/Ramoth-Gilead remained as invisible as it had been since the 1930s.

Additional support for the assumption that Ramtā was also a major town in the LB period can be mustered from settlement patterns. The major LB towns in the area between Irbid and Der<sup>ʿā</sup> are known by now<sup>13</sup>. A nearest-neighbor-analysis without Ramtā reveals the following structure:

Site (size in ha)	1 <sup>st</sup> Neighbor / distance in km	2 <sup>nd</sup> Neighbor	3 <sup>rd</sup> Neighbor
Irbid (12-16)	Ḥuṣn / 8.5	Fuḥḥār / 9.7	Der <sup>ʿā</sup> / 24.8
Ḥuṣn (> 5 ha)	Irbid / 8.5	Fuḥḥār / 13.3	Der <sup>ʿā</sup> / 25.2
Fuḥḥār (4 ha)	Irbid / 9.7	Ḥuṣn / 13.3	Der <sup>ʿā</sup> / 15.2
Der <sup>ʿā</sup> (> 5 ha)	Fuḥḥār / 15.2	Irbid / 24.8	Ḥuṣn / 25.2

In this system, Irbid has two neighbors at < 10 km distance and Der<sup>ʿā</sup> none. There should be a clear border between the Irbid and the Der<sup>ʿā</sup> sociopolitical systems which can be expected to show up in some kind of material culture remains. So even if there is no archaeology left at Ramtā at all, the question of whether this town was part of the LB urban landscape or not could be tested on circumstantial evidence, provided Syria would some day be liberated from its present régime and archaeological research in the Bronze and Iron Ages of Southern Syria would become possible again. For with Ramtā, the system looks much more integrated:

Site (size in ha)	1 <sup>st</sup> Neighbor / distance in km	2 <sup>nd</sup> Neighbor	3 <sup>rd</sup> Neighbor
Irbid (12-16)	Ḥuṣn / 8.5	Fuḥḥār / 9.7	Ramtā / 15.2
Ḥuṣn (> 5 ha)	Irbid / 8.5	Fuḥḥār / 13.3	Ramtā / 14.8
Fuḥḥār (4 ha)	Ramtā / 7.3	Irbid / 9.7	Ḥuṣn / 13.3;
Ramtā ( 12 ha)	Fuḥḥār / 7.3	Der <sup>ʿā</sup> / 10.6	Ḥuṣn / 14.8
Der <sup>ʿā</sup> (> 5 ha)	Ramtā / 10.6	Fuḥḥār / 15.1	Irbid 24.8

Der<sup>ʿā</sup> is still the odd man out of the Irbid-Ramtā-System, but distances between first and second neighbors are generally down to feasible dimensions – and within the system, Ramtā is more central than Irbid.

If, what has been said, should convince one or the other that Ramtā deserves more attention by students of history and archaeology than it has received in the past, this insight might well come too late. With the establishment of the Hashemite Kingdom, the site disappeared from the archaeological record completely. It is not listed as a site in the «Archaeological Heritage of Jordan» (Amman 1973) nor on the «Archaeological Map of Jordan 1:250'000», nor can it be traced in any archaeological database accessible through the internet. For the origin of the mists that now shroud it completely from all view, a number of reasons can be imagined:

1. Mere inattention and/or neglect on the part of the local Department of Antiquities office.
2. Inattention and/or neglect on the part of the local Department of Antiquities office enhanced by threats and/or bribes by local landowners and entrepreneurs who want to develop and destroy without

<sup>13</sup> Cf. for Irbid, Zwicker: BTAVO.B 81, 311; Ḥuṣn, *ibid.* 313; Tell el-Fuḥḥār (EA Zarqu). J. Kamlah, Tell el-Fuḥḥār (Zarqu?) und die pflanzenhaltende Göttin in Palästina. Ergebnisse des Zeraqōn-Surveys 1989: ZDPV 109 (1993) 101-127; for Der<sup>ʿā</sup>, Zwicker: BTAVO.B 81, 327. Sites < 3 ha are disregarded. Differences in site size between this list and Glueck's in EEP IV are due to Glueck usually giving the measurement for the top of the tell, which would usually apply to the Iron Age instead of the MB/LB periods.

archaeological interference (the region is Bani Saḥr territory, a tribe known from of old for its malicious character and tendency towards violent behaviour).

3. Security restrictions: the town is Jordan's border post to Syria, and Syrian-Jordanian relations fluctuate between bad and worse.

4. Abhorrence of even the thought that Ramṭā might have been a major Iron Age site because no native speaker of a Semitic language would then doubt the identity of the place with Ramoth-Gilead. The local fear of hordes of land-hungry Zionists willing to descend on any Trans-Jordanian place could its biblical identity be established is, though groundless, still strong.<sup>14</sup>

5. Mere disdain for all history and archaeology as long as it is pre-Islamic (the Muslim Brotherhood is very strong in Northern Jordan).

6. My hunch: all of the above.

According to a recent internet search<sup>15</sup>, Ramṭā has a soccer team playing in Jordan's national league, an industrial area, and several hospitals. It does not have a history.

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<sup>14</sup> For those who find this far-fetched: I remember a high-ranking and well-educated official of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities talking about «the Iron Age kingdoms of the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and Gileadites» in front of a scholarly audience.

<sup>15</sup> If you want to try yourself, make sure you enter «Ramtha Jordan» in the search window, otherwise you might end up befuddled by quite another kind of Avalonian mist.