

were very different both in their character and in their patterns of distribution.

### I. Discontinuity Versus Stability

Until the beginning of this century, the general conditions in most parts of the coastal plains presented great hardships for the inhabitants of these areas. Conditions were not favourable to stable and continuous settlements. Unlike settlements in the mountainous areas, those on the coast were exposed to a number of threats which often resulted in their destruction or desertion.

The lowlands included many swampy areas in which severe epidemics often appeared and caused the deaths of many of the inhabitants (Baldensberger, 1913: 22). In addition, the presence of sand dunes south of Jaffa all the way to the southern coast borders made this area uninhabitable (Fig. 1.1). At the same time, settlements along the coastal plain were exposed and vulnerable to internal and external conflicts and wars. And with few exceptions, invading foreign armies in Palestine have passed through the coastal plain. In contrast, conquering armies rarely passed through the mountain areas and rarely occupied the highlands. These invading armies often brought about considerable destruction in lowland settlements. (In 332 B.C. Alexander the Great destroyed settlements on the coastal plain completely and ended the Phoenician Empire. The new Mameluk rulers in 1291 AD did the same, in a deliberate policy of destruction in order to end European influence).

In spite of these continuous challenges to the inhabitants of the lowlands, there were always many attractions to living in the coastal plains as opposed to the mountains. The lowlands included some of the most fertile land in all Palestine, such as the Jezreel Valley. They were not only the route of military forces, but also the major route for commercial traffic, particularly the Via Maris (the coastal highway). During more peaceful times and with improved security conditions, the lowlands enjoyed a much more flourishing economy than that of the highlands, leading to an expansion of settlements.