

Unlike the mountain settlements which changed very little before the nineteenth century, the coastal plain had always been characterised by considerable fluctuation in the size of its settled area, and its population, as well as in the role, number, and importance of its settlements.

Amiran made a comparison between major ancient towns in both areas. He demonstrated that in the plains out of a total of eight towns, two had ceased to exist and two had shrunk to villages, while only four maintained their status. In contrast "mountain towns have existed without interruption, though fluctuating in importance and number of population" (Amiran, 1953: 192).

## II. Uneven Distribution Versus Even Distribution: A Product of Rural Dependency on Urban Centres

While villages in the highlands were scattered and covered almost the entire area (Fig. 1.11), villages in the lowlands were concentrated mainly in the southern parts of the coastal plain (the Jerusalem-Jaffa-Gaza triangle), along major roads and around major towns. The concentration in the Jerusalem-Jaffa-Gaza triangle could perhaps be explained by the fact that this area had always been an important trade centre and hence easily accessible. In addition, the presence of government authorities limited Bedouin attacks and hence encouraged peasant settlements in this triangle. This concentration could also be attributed to climatic factors. If villages in this area were to be deserted for reasons of security or as a result of floods, it was always easier to resettle and recultivate southern areas which dried up faster and tended to deteriorate less than those settlements which were located in the central or northern parts of the coastal plain.

The concentration of coastal villages around the Jerusalem-Jaffa-Gaza triangle, as well as around other urban centres such as Acre, can also be attributed to a number of other factors; chief among them are the early existence of lowland landlords, the formation of large landed estates, the use of extensive farming and the development of