

coastal plains, historically contained the majority of Palestine's rural population and produced its main staple crops. For in those mountains, up to the middle of the 19th Century, Palestinian peasants sought refuge from foreign invaders and continuous bedouin encroachments and established a relatively autonomous existence from the heavy exactions of regional governors and local potentates.

But the historical dominance of the highlands should not be construed to mean a topographical or social homogeneity of these regions. One of the striking features of Palestinian topography, and one that was clearly visible to its many visitors in the 19th and early 20th Centuries, was the radical variation in its physical landscape not only between highlands and plains, but also within the highlands. This heterogeneous topography, combined with the extensive introduction of cash crops in the latter half of the 19th Century, had a marked impact on the organization of agricultural production.

The impact of topography, however, has given rise to monistic interpretations of the forms of organization of Palestinian peasants, and especially as they relate to the first modern transition in the mode of surplus appropriation. That is, the transition from a mode grounded in village communal lands (musha' organization) through the medium of the multazim (tax farmer), to one based on landlordship proper, operating through the mechanism of land rent and credit arrangements. Y. Firestone, in a recent study (1982), rejects the primacy of the 'security hypothesis' in explaining the prevalence of the musha' system in Palestine (i.e. the equal division of village plots in order to decrease the possibility of loss due to external threats), in favour of an explanation based on a collective village response to the heavy imposition of overlord and state taxes (1981:9-10). Firestone convincingly argues that topography explains the prevalence of the musha' system in the lowlands only, where the peasants