79 Hula Valley

Names (also known as)

Huleh Valley, Merom, Samchuna (Egyptian), Semechonitis (Greek), Yam Sumchi (Talmud)

Etymology

Hebrew: עמק החולה, transliterated Emek HaHula; also transliterated as Huleh Valley.

Lake Hula was historically referred to by different names. The 14th century BC Egyptians called the lake Samchuna, while the Hebrew Bible records it as Merom. In the 1st century AD, the Jewish-Roman historian Flavius Josephus termed it Semechonitis (in ancient greek Σημεχωνίτις), while in the Talmud it is called Yam Sumchi – i.e. Sea of Sumchi. Currently the lake is called Buheirat el Huleh in Arabic and Agam ha-Hula in Hebrew, stemming from the Aramaic Hulata or Ulata. The "Waters of Merom" has sometimes been used in scientific literature, although that term refers specifically to springs on the western side of the valley.

Location/Description
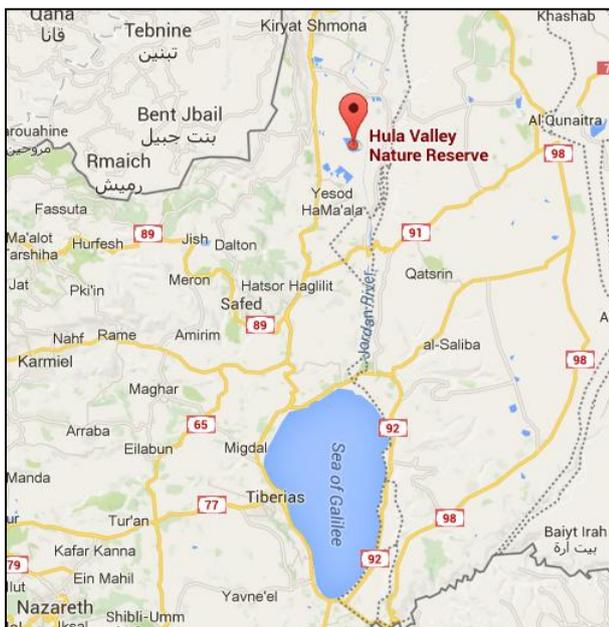
The Hula Valley is an agricultural region in northern Israel with abundant fresh water. It is a major stopover for birds migrating along the Syrian-African Rift Valley between Africa, Europe, and Asia. The marshland around Lake Hula, a breeding ground for mosquitoes carrying malaria, was drained in the 1950s. A small section of the valley was later re-flooded in an attempt to revive a nearly extinct ecosystem. An estimated 500 million migrating birds now pass through the Hula Lake Park every year.

Scriptural references

Old Testament
Joshua 11:5 – "the waters of Merom".

Famous characters

Joshua and Israel
Jabin king of Canaan

Brief history

Prior to its drainage in the early 1950s, Lake Hula was 5.3 kilometers long and 4.4 kilometers wide, extending over 12-14 square kilometers. It was about one and a half meters deep in summer and three meters deep in winter. The lake attracted human settlement from early prehistoric times. Paleolithic archaeological remains were found near the Bnot Yaakov ("Daughters of Jacob") bridge at the southern end of the valley. The first permanent settlement was Enan (Mallaha).

The Hula Valley was a main junction on the important trade route connecting the large commercial centre of Damascus with the eastern Mediterranean coast and Egypt. The cities of Hazor and Laish were built at key locations on this route approximately 4,000 years ago. The area came under Israelite control until it was captured by the Assyrian armies of Tiglath-Pileser III and its inhabitants were driven away. Joshua 11 records lake "Merom" as the site of a victory of Joshua over the Canaanites.

Throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and early Arab periods (fourth century BC to eighth centuries AD) rural settlement in the Hula Valley was uninterrupted. During the

Seleucid Empire, the town Seleucia Samulias was founded on the lake shore.

Traditional crops were rice (as early as the Hellenistic period), cotton and sugar cane (brought by the Arabs following their conquest in 636), sorghum and maize (brought after the discovery of the Americas). Water buffalo were introduced in the eighth century supplying milk and serving as beasts of burden.

In the Battle of Lake Huleh in June 1157, a Crusader army led by King Baldwin III of Jerusalem was ambushed and badly defeated by Nur ad-Din Zangi, the emir of Aleppo and Damascus. While the king and some fighting men escaped to a nearby castle, a large number were killed or made prisoner. The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem escaped worse damage when their adversary became ill and was unable to follow up his victory.

In the 19th century, the valley, mainly marshy ground and a shallow lake, was inhabited by Ghawaraneh Bedouin who wove matting from the papyrus with which they built their homes. John MacGregor, a Victorian adventurer, was captured with his boat, the "Rob Roy", by dark-skinned Bedouin living in the Hula marshes. He was responsible for the first modern maps of the area. Mortality rates were very high due to the spread of malaria. In 1882, a traveler wrote that the region was "among the finest hunting grounds in Syria," home to "panthers, leopards, bears, wild boars, wolves, foxes, jackals, hyenas, gazelles and otters." During World War II, officers of the British Army wrote about hunting birds there.

In 1908, the Ottoman government granted a concession to drain the marsh to a French firm, which sold it to Lebanese businessmen. In 1933, during the British Mandate, the Palestine Land Development Company took over this concession and drew up plans to drain and irrigate the valley which brought scientific expeditions to the area.

The draining operations, carried out by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), began in 1951 and were completed by 1958.

Draining the Hula turned out to be a mixed blessing. Water polluted with chemical fertilizers began flowing into Lake Kinneret (Galilee), lowering the quality of its water. The soil, stripped of natural foliage, was blown away by strong winds in the valley, and the peat of the drained swamp ignited spontaneously, causing underground fires that were difficult to extinguish.

Hula Lake Park, known in Hebrew as Agamon HaHula, is located in the southern part of the Hula Valley, north of the nature reserve. It was established as part of a JNF rehabilitation project. In the early 1990's part of the valley was flooded again in the wake of heavy rains. It was decided to develop the surrounding area and leave the flooded area intact. The new site has become the second home for thousands of migrating birds in the autumn and spring. The lake covers an area of one square kilometre, interspersed with islands that serve as protected bird nesting sites. It has become a major stopover for migrating birds flying from Europe to Africa and back, and also a major bird-watching site. In 2011, Israeli ornithologists confirmed that Lake Hula is the stopover point for tens of thousands of cranes migrating from Finland to Ethiopia every winter. In Israel, farmers set out food for them to keep them from damaging crops near the lake.

Sources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hula_Valley

(Compiler – Jim Cowie)