

Donald Whitcomb

Donald Whitcomb's summer began with a second visit to Saudi Arabia, a follow-up to the suggestion by Dr. al-Ghabban that we excavate the site of Jurash in the Asir. Normally, late July is not an optimal time to visit the kingdom, as a few days in Riyadh amply attested. But the Asir is very different; part of the Yemeni highlands, it is styled the “Alps” of Arabia and features ski lifts and wooded forests (with baboons, not observed during our trip). Whitcomb spent two temperate days visiting the site of Jurash, which proved to be the fenced remnant (about 500×300 m) of a former town. In many ways it seems a half-scale version of Najran, about 300 km to the southwest, with some pre-Islamic stone structures and ample evidence of continued occupation throughout the Islamic period.

One of the more interesting aspects of researching the archaeology of Saudi Arabia is the evidence provided by maps, especially medieval maps (fig. 1). During the autumn, the main excitement of the Oriental Institute was preparation for the exhibit *European Cartographers and the Ottoman World, 1500–1750: Maps from the Collection of O. J. Sopranos*. This was an opportunity to return to one of Whitcomb's first interests, Islamic maps, encouraged by his professor Paul Wheatley

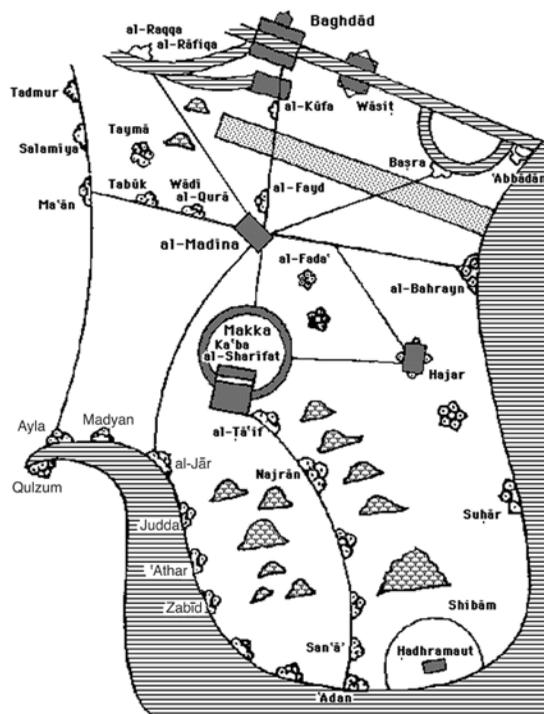


Figure 1. A tenth-century map of Arabia, showing the centrality of Mecca and Madina

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and the appearance of Harley and Woodward's magnificent *History of Cartography* (published by the University of Chicago), and the fine essays and maps testifying to Islamic cartography (vol. 2, book 1, 1992). Curiously, the exhibition moved from ancient maps to medieval European and Ottoman cartography with minimal mention of the contributions of the Arab geographers and their mapping traditions. This proved a splendid inspiration for a number of students to explore, in a seminar, a region of particular archaeological interest and examine its medieval maps and section of the al-Idrisi world map of the twelfth century. These discoveries were distilled into parts of Whitcomb's presentation on the Islamic mapping tradition at the symposium held to commemorate this exhibition on December 8.

Early November saw a pause for reflection at the Oriental Institute retreat, during which Whitcomb presented some ideas on the relationship of "ancient and Islamic" research (see *Islamic Archaeology Project Report* and below). This proved a quiet prelude to the intensity of the American Schools of Oriental Research meetings in San Diego. He gave a paper as part of a fine session on Islamic Archaeology entitled "Early Palestinian Glazed Pottery." This provided a context to review the state of this fundamental archaeological tool and the amazing progress provided by recent excavations and surveys throughout the Levant. Toward the end of the conference, Whitcomb met with Hamed Salam, of Birzeit University, and Mahmoud Hawary, presently at another Oriental Institute in Oxford; they reflected an old pipe-dream to begin new excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar, near Jericho. Later in the spring, Whitcomb responded to Hamed's invitation to visit Birzeit University and the site once again (fig. 2).

This year also has a special guest, Professor Mahmoud ElHusseiny, chairman of Islamic Archaeology at Cairo University. In devising a research project for his stay in Chicago, he suggested the tribes of Fustat. Whitcomb had written some speculations on the original structure of the earliest urban settlement in Egypt after the Muslim conquest. This would provide a special opportunity to delve further into the organization of this very early Islamic city (see Oriental Institute *Annual Report 2005–2006*, pp. 23–24). Whitcomb selected a particular tribe for this project, the Madhhij, a Yemeni tribe which migrated to Fustat after the conquest and whose principal center in Arabia was the town of Jurash. The research design hoped that excavations in Arabia, when compared with excavated remains in Fustat (the houses found by Ali Bahgat

or George Scanlon), would suggest Arabian architectural features which the Madhhij brought with them and incorporated into the new Islamic city. Unfortunately the independent research of ElHusseiny indicates no overlap of excavations with the location of the Madhhij in Fustat. At the same time, the participation of the Oriental Institute in the Jurash project came to naught, so this research design must remain a "pipe-dream" for an opportunity in the future.

Along the way, Whitcomb's students have progressed with increasingly specialized seminars on Islamic archaeology and relevant artifacts. The introductory course on Islamic archaeology had a larger-than-usual number of students, which one would like to see as an increasing interest in this relatively unknown field. Alexander Asa Eger took his doctorate



Figure 2. Floor mosaic from Mafjar, showing the tree of life with gazelles and a lion

with honors, having written his dissertation on the archaeology of the *thughur*, or Byzantine frontier, in the early Islamic period. His research into the landscape from the Syrian plains into the heights of the Anatolian plateau was based on his own surveys and excavations as well as those of many predecessors. His analytic separation of aspects of this complex problem stands as a major contribution, remarkably expressed without the usual jargon. He is now happily away continuing his excavations and then on to a post-doctoral position at Koç University in Istanbul.

The spring began with Whitcomb's participation in the Oriental Institute Seminar, organized this year by Jeffrey Szuchman. The subject of the seminar was Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East; Whitcomb hopes to have shown that expansion of "ancient" into "Islamic" is a worthwhile venture. On the one hand, an ever-increasing number of excavations are revealing the settlement of nomads through analyses of archaeological remains of villages. On the other hand, the organization of the earliest Islamic state presents a case for archaeological investigation in the dearth of textual evidence. Following the lead of Fred Donner, Whitcomb suggests the extensive settlement of Arab nomads led to a "tribal state" under Mu'awiya; this historic example may be useful to analyze these concepts in much earlier periods. Finally, this relationship of "ancient and Islamic" was revisited at the 6th International Congress for the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE), held in Rome. Whitcomb was invited to present a plenary speech on the Islamic sessions at this congress; Cristina Tonghini, Alan Walmsley, and Whitcomb had assembled some thirty-six papers and a major part of this congress. Whitcomb used this forum to advocate the inclusion of Islamic archaeology of the Middle East in this congress and he is delighted to report that the steering committee has agreed to the participation of this new field in London in 2010.
