

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT AND ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Donald Whitcomb

In the last *Annual Report* for the Oriental Institute, I reported on publications and meetings in this field of research. This delineated the exciting new features of Islamic archaeology which came to my attention. Sadly, this year rather less news has come into my ken, perhaps because I have had my nose pressed to the ground, almost literally, with new digging.

This new archaeological research is located in the Jordan valley near Jericho. To reach Jericho one must descend east from Jerusalem, from highlands at Ramallah (2,500 ft) into the *ghor* (literally, the depths) some 850 ft below sea level. Jericho is reputed to be the lowest city in the world, a sub-tropical environment of palms, citrus fruits, bananas in lush vegetation, where there is access to water. Jericho is a virtual oasis, with the city located on the wadi al-Qilt, and springs of ʿAin Duyuk, Naʿaran, and Nuwaiyma providing copious waters. Perhaps the most important was (and remains) the ʿAin al-Sultan at the foot of the massive mounds of biblical Jericho, known as Tell al-Sultan (fig. 1).

When one mentions the archaeology of Jericho, it evokes the famous excavations of Kathleen Kenyon (1952–59) and the search for the fallen walls of Joshua. Her methodology remains the standard for modern archaeological fieldwork, but also recalls Robert Braidwood of the Oriental Institute and his debate with the formidable Dame Kathleen on the nature of urbanism and the Neolithic period in the Near East. The questions are past and the city of Jericho is celebrating 10,000 years of urbanism, making it also the oldest city in the world. Muqaddasi



Figure 1. Mounds of the site of Tell al-Sultan, biblical Jericho. Photo by Donald Whitcomb

## JERICO MAFJAR PROJECT AND ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

sang of its reputation in the tenth century, “Ariha is the city of giants and herein is the gate indicated by God to the children of Israel. This a land of indigo and palms. Its rural district is the Ghor, where the fields are watered by springs. ... one drinks there the lightest water in Islam; bananas, fresh dates, and fragrant flowers are abundant” (al-Muqaddasi 1906: 174–75).

## Ariha

This is a rendition of the name Jericho in earlier times and should be reflected in specific archaeological remains. Invariably, discussion of Hashmonean, Herodian, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic occupation has placed the main settlement under the modern town of Jericho (or occasionally at Tell al-Sultan). The only published archaeological site in the town is the church at Tell Hassan, where Baramki found remains of the Byzantine and Islamic periods. There are two important sites along the Wadi al-Qilt: to the east is Khirbat al-Nitla, and Tului Abu al-‘Alayiq is on the west (fig. 2).

The site of ‘Alayiq has been labeled New Testament Jericho and a long series of excavations, both before the 1950s and more recently, have revealed palatial complexes of Hashmonean and Herodian times. Islamic occupation is reflected on the summit of Tell 1, south of the Wadi Qilt, where ceramic diagnostics reliably place it within the Abbasid period, despite an absence of glazed wares. George Miles was entrusted the publication of 266 Islamic coins from this site (while curiously both Nitla and even Mafjar have no numismatic information).

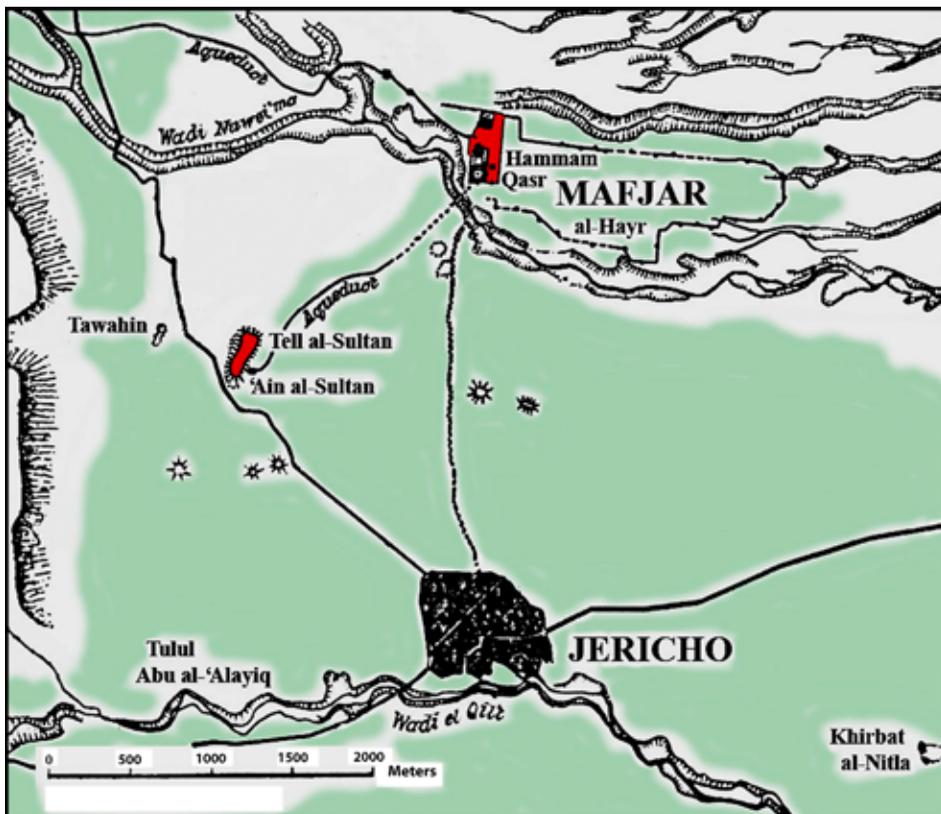


Figure 2. Map of some remains in the Jericho region (after Hamilton 1959: fig. 1)

An important corpus of Umayyad and earliest Abbasid issues gives a very clear picture of the regional economic and political context of Ariha. Coins from Damascus, capital of Bilad al-Sham (Syria), are predominant, then those of al-Ramla, the capital of Filistin, and then a large number of coins from Egypt, indicating commercial connections.

The site of Khirbet al-Nitla is 2.5 km east of Jericho and produced, in the words of its excavator, buildings that were “architecturally of no consequence.” One structure was a church with at least four architectural phases, from the late fourth through the ninth centuries. Baramki treated the ceramics from Nitla in careful detail, since he recognized in this assemblage Byzantine and early Islamic periods (eighth–ninth centuries) directly comparable in fact to the ceramics of Mafjar (fig. 3; see below). In his enthusiasm for the ceramic assemblage from Nitla and Abu al-‘Alayiq, he clearly notes that “... the two sites give a cross-section of Palestine pottery from the close of the Hellenistic period through the Roman and Byzantine and into the Early Arabic” (Kelso and Baramki 1955: 52).

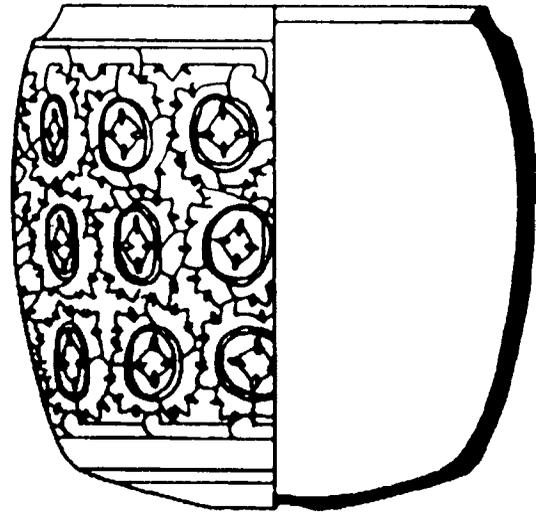


Figure 3. Painted bowl of Abbasid “palace ware” (after Kelso and Baramki 1955: pl. 30, A121)

### Khirbet al-Mafjar

During the survey of western Palestine in 1894, F. J. Bliss described a series of three large mounds north of the town of Jericho. Even at this relatively early date, these ruins were utilized as a source of building stones for the modern town, and the site was much disturbed. Dimitri Baramki was antiquities inspector for the Palestine Department of Antiquities and responsible for securing this site among so many others; he recognized its extraordinary potential and directed some twelve seasons of excavations, from 1934 until 1948. He was joined by Robert W. Hamilton, Director of Antiquities under the Mandate, during the later seasons of the 1940s when the bath hall was uncovered. Hamilton went on to publish a monograph on the site in 1959 (with the assistance of Carl Kraeling, then director of the Oriental Institute).

The identity and character of Khirbet al-Mafjar have always been problematic – there is no ancient or medieval reference in literary or historical texts. The site is anepigraphic, without inscriptions except for a number of ostraca in Arabic. Two of these scraps of marble provide a clue: the name of the caliph Hisham, who ruled from 727 to 743 (fig. 4). Thus, the site became Qasr Hisham (“Hisham’s

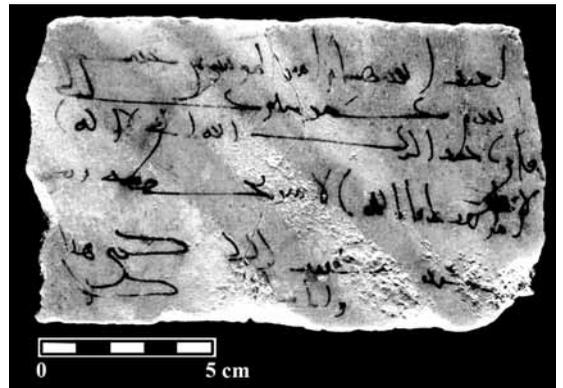


Figure 4. Ostracum with name of Hisham (after Hamilton 1959: pl. 57:1)

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT AND ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

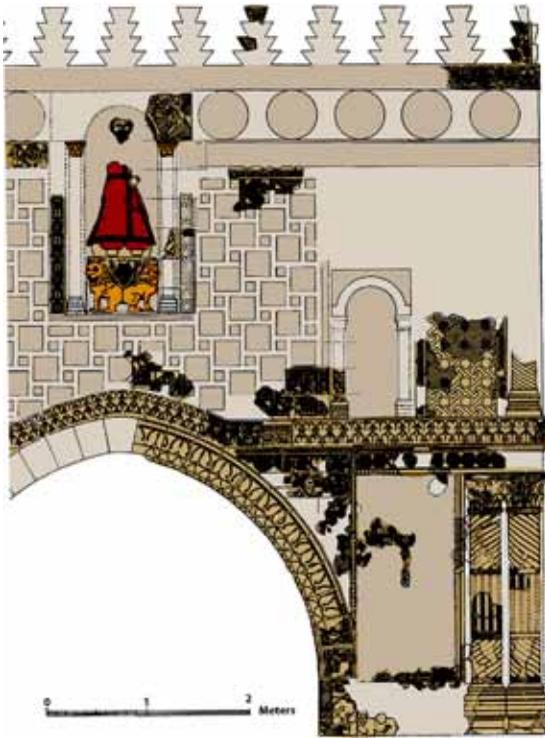


Figure 5. Palace facade with stucco work (after Hamilton 1959, fig. 52)

floors. Perhaps the most extraordinary element is the ceremonial entryway, the porch, with a high central niche carrying a figure with sword standing on two lions, very likely the caliphal patron himself, Hisham (fig. 5). The Palace is more typical of Umayyad residences but no less wonderfully decorated with stuccoes and frescoes. Together with the pavilion and mosque, this architectural complex stands analogous to Fustat (Cairo) and Samarra in Iraq as a testament to the beginning of Islamic archaeology, in this case for Palestine.

## To Return to Mafjar

This archaeological site witnessed fine excavations that produced monuments of magnificent art and archaeology. The documentation is exemplary in Baramki's preliminary reports and Hamilton's monograph, a record many excavations might emulate. Interpretation of the history and functions of the site remains debatable, and the archaeological evidence is obviously incomplete. In contemplation of a return to these remains, two aspects appear foremost as research agendas.

The original chronological assumptions on the buildings and their occupation seems erroneous. The original ceramic analysis by Baramki (1944) was admirable but never consistently utilized, as suggested in my study in 1988. A new stratification indicates four phases of occupation, which have been confirmed by sondages by Hamdan Taha in 2006. The suggested periods are proposed with the following features:

palace") for Baramki and indeed this remains the popular name in Palestine (and is reflected in the Wikipedia entry on the Internet). Hamilton went on to weave an alternative interpretation, assigning foundation stories to Walid II, before his brief caliphate in 743–47. At present, the more neutral site name of Khirbet al-Mafjar ("flowing-water ruins") seems preferable.

The Khirbet al-Mafjar excavation produced some of the most stunning art work of the early Islamic period, setting a standard for evaluating this period throughout the region. Khirbet al-Mafjar is one example of an amazing phenomenon, the settlement of marginal lands by the early Muslims employing the bounty resulting from the conquests. An aqueduct brought water from springs to irrigate about 150 acres of garden or parks enclosed in a long boundary wall. The principal building was the Great Hall and bath, a reception hall not unlike the Sasanian palace at Firuzabad in Iran. It is not difficult to imagine the mosaics as so many Persian carpets spread throughout the hall

1. Construction and destruction debris mixed with painted wares. 700–750
2. Further occupation and destruction, suggesting more extensive damage from an earthquake in the ninth century; ceramics seem transitional types, similar to the Mahesh phase at Aqaba. 750–800
3. Major reoccupation of the site in the Abbasid period; continuities and introduction of cream wares (popularly known as Mafjar ware), incised, molded and glazed ceramics. 800–950
4. Medieval reoccupation in the Ayyubid-Mamluk period; final destruction of roofed structure. 1100–1300

Creswell pointed out long ago (1932) that the palace is based on a different cubit from the bath and pavilion. His concern was to understand the sequence of these structures, pointing out the secondary history of occupation after the foundation. These aspects have been consistently ignored and the evidence presumed to have been destroyed.

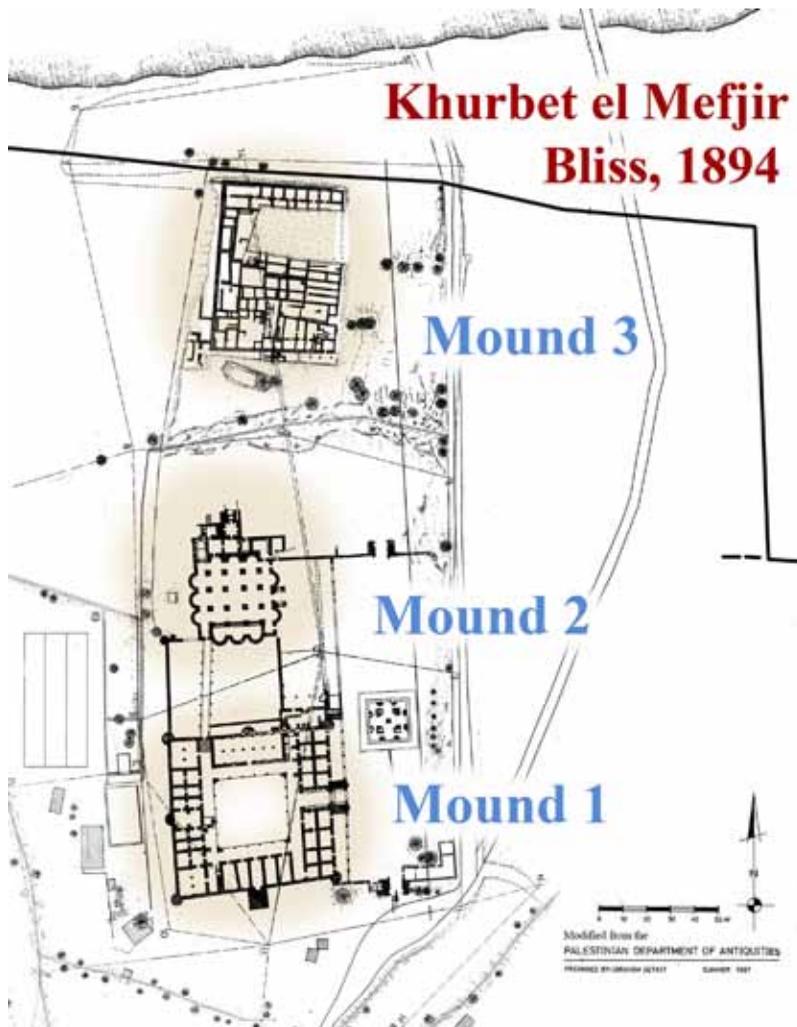


Figure 6. Plan of the mounds described by Bliss in 1894 and structures excavated

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT AND ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

There is an important lesson in archaeological research that one should return to the first excavations of a site, in this case that of Bliss and Hunter in 1894. They noted three separate mounds: one with a hollow center in the south (the palace with its large courtyard), a massive mound in the center (the bath with its massive fallen superstructure), and a badly robbed complex on the north. They planned this latter structure and suggested an identification as a khan or caravanserai (fig. 6). A visit to this area reveals extensive archaeological excavations, squares with baulks still standing. This was the work of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities between 1957 and 1967 by Awni Dajani. It is a profoundly sad instance where only a few minimal lines have been written and all records and objects apparently lost, perhaps in a flood in central Amman in 1970.

This has been characterized as a laborers' settlement or "domestic quarters for servants and slaves" by Lancaster Harding (1967: 177), but fine architectural elements suggest a more important role for this settlement. Two other hypotheses might be considered: first, that these northern structures represent the original settlement around another "palace," along the lines of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi; or alternatively, the palace and other structures represent a major Abbasid settlement. There seem to be sufficient unexcavated areas to test these and other hypotheses.

## Islamic Archaeology in Palestine

The late professor Albert Glock was a strong advocate of Palestinian archaeology and yet wondered whether such a focus, having explicit political intent, might not perpetuate the problems of Western-oriented biblical archaeology. Searching for a remedy, he noted the potential of the field of Islamic archaeology but lamented the domination by art historians and preoccupation with Jerusalem to the exclusion of the remainder of Palestine (1994). The field is not quite as bleak as he imagined and an impressive amount of high-quality fieldwork has been undertaken. That there has been no synthesis is perhaps more typical of present archaeology than the relative importance of Islamic archaeology. One may suggest that archaeological research at Jericho has a potential for defining an aspect of Palestinian archaeology and the general discipline of Islamic archaeology at the same time (fig. 7).

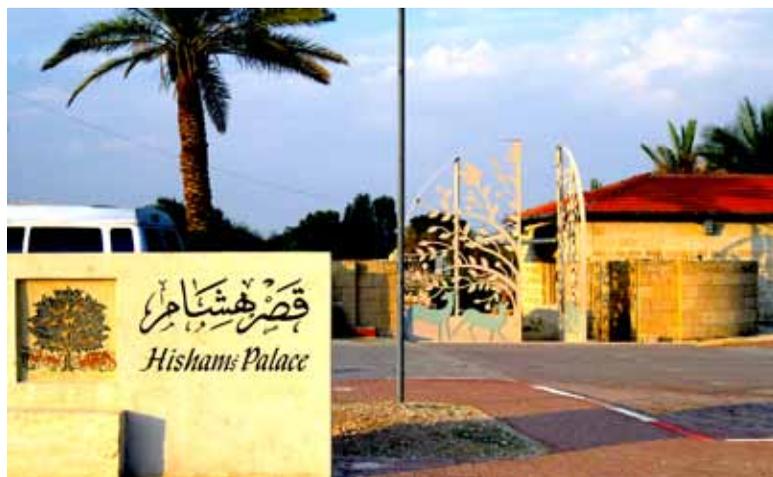


Figure 7. Recent view of entry through the south gate into Khirbet al-Mafjar.  
Photo by Donald Whitcomb

For Hamilton, who pondered the social context of Khirbet al-Mafjar for over fifty years, this was "... the mansion of a Muslim personage of princely status.... Yet here there was no capital. There was not even a centre of population. No trace of any settlement, village or town, can be seen nearer than Old Jericho, now Tell es-Sultan" (Hamilton 1959: 3). His assumption of an

absence of archaeological evidence for the city of Ariha seems mistaken, perhaps clouded by a superficial view of the role of the “desert castles.” Impressive new research, especially by Denis Genequand, has refined the understanding of these elite residences, villas, or estates of the Umayyad period. One nuance is the idea that these settlements were proto-urban, or rather intended to become urban entities in an Islamic landscape. Thus one may posit that the northern area was intended to develop into the town adjacent to the palatial complex. What is more important and interesting is the continuing existence, and even prosperity, of a Christian occupation in Ariha, now obscured by the modern city of Jericho. Clearly an eventual investigation of these dual settlements in the early Islamic period has historical importance for Palestine and the Middle East.

## References

- Al-Muqaddasī, Muhammad ibn Ahmad  
 1906 *Kitāb Ahsan al-Taqāsīm fī Maʿrifat al-āqālīm*. Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum 3. 2nd edition. Leiden: Brill.
- Baramki, Dimitri C.  
 1944 “The Pottery from Khirbat el Mefjar.” *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* 10: 65–103.
- Bliss, F. J.  
 1894 “Notes on the Plain of Jericho.” *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statement*, pp. 175–83.
- Creswell, K. A. C.  
 1932 “Khirbat al-Mafjar.” In *Early Muslim Architecture*, edited by K. A. C. Creswell, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 545–77. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glock, Albert  
 1994 “Archaeology as Cultural Survival: The Future of the Palestinian Past.” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23: 70–84.
- Hamilton, Robert W.  
 1959 *Khirbat al Mafjar: An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Harding, G. Lancaster  
 1967 *The Antiquities of Jordan*. Revised edition. London: Lutterworth.
- Kelso, James L., and Dimitri C. Baramki  
 1955 *Excavations at New Testament Jericho and Khirbet en-Nitla*. The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research 29–30. New Haven: American Schools of Oriental Research.
- Taha, Hamdan  
 2006 “New Excavations in the Bath Area at Khirbet el-Mafjar” (unpublished manuscript).
- Whitcomb, Donald  
 1988 “Khirbet al-Mafjar Reconsidered: The Ceramic Evidence.” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 271: 51–67.