

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT

Donald Whitcomb

In the last *Annual Report* for the Oriental Institute, I presented an outline of the background, research contexts, and project goals for new excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar, also known as Qasr Hisham. At that time this new project was only a memorandum of understanding. The Jericho Mafjar Project (JMP) has now become the first Palestinian-American archaeological research project and has two seasons of discoveries to its credit. The first season was briefly described in the *Oriental Institute News & Notes* (# 210, Summer 2011). The present report will show the cumulative results from both of these excavations.

The site of Khirbet al-Mafjar is located about 4 km north of the modern town of Jericho, a fertile oasis in the Jordan valley. Its characterization by Muqaddasi in the tenth century remains accurate; it is a “land of indigo and palms ... abundant with bananas, fresh dates, and fragrant flowers.” Tourists are drawn to Tell al-Sultan, the biblical Jericho, and to Qarantal, the Mount of Temptation; many also find their way to the remarkable monuments of Qasr Hisham (fig. 1). This is the modern name taken from an inscription found at the site, indicating the founder was Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik, an Umayyad caliph in the early eighth century (724–743 CE). Even this identification was uncertain before the excavation campaigns of Dimitri Baramki, who worked for twelve seasons of excavations, from 1934 until 1948.

The Khirbat al-Mafjar excavation produced some of the most stunning artwork of the early Islamic period, setting a standard for evaluating this period throughout the region. 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 floors. Perhaps the most extraordinary element is the ceremonial entryway, the Porch, with a high central niche carrying a standing figure with sword on two lions, very likely the caliphal patron himself, Hisham. The Palace is more typical of Umayyad residences but exceptional in its stone carving, stucco, and fresco decorations. 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.



Figure 1. The emblem of Qasr Hisham, the mosaic called the Tree of Life. Photo by Enrico Cirelli

## 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. Yet, interpretation of the history and functions of the site remains highly debated, 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 about the buildings and their occupation seem erroneous. The original ceramic analysis by Baramki in 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 recent sondages by Hamdan Taha, Director of Antiquities for Palestine in 2006. New suggested periods are proposed with the following features:

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1. Construction and destruction debris mixed with painted wares.                                                                                                                    | 700–750   |
| 2. Further occupation, suggesting less extensive destruction from the earthquake of the mid-eighth 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, moulded and glazed ceramics.       | 800–950   |
| 4. Medieval reoccupation in the Ayyubid-Mamluk period; ending with the final destruction of the roofed structure of the palace.                                                     | 1100–1300 |

Occupation of the site is far more complex than that advocated by Hamilton in 1959 (and earlier), which suggests a foundation in the 720s and destruction in 748. Creswell has carefully pointed out that the palace is based on a different cubit from the bath and pavilion. An archaeology of the site must move beyond the initial, art historically brilliant phase (as presumed) to encompass broader aspects; there remains evidence that has been consistently ignored and was presumed to have been destroyed.

## A New Gate and Monumental Stairway

A second misperception of the palace complex at Khirbet al-Mafjar is that the ensemble of buildings was accidental or at least not planned. The new excavations in 2011 addressed this issue with a new trench laid out on open, flat ground aligned with the south gate and a wall extending from the bath (fig. 2). Within a few days we had cleared broken pots in the guard room of one bastion; the second bastion appeared soon after this with fine carved stones of the fallen arch. Among these stones were iron nails and plating which once clad the wooden gate. The massive threshold was gone and the fine paving stones removed, except for a few. When we examined Baramki's dissertation much later, we saw that this new gate was precisely the same design as the south (Jericho) gate, though slightly better preserved. One of the stone benches even had a game scratched on its surface.

Hamdan Taha and I had noticed the long portico in front of the palace, mosque, and bath; and we commented on how nice this scene would have been in the shade of a portico, with a garden and pavilion in front of us, and stretching to the east were green fields, the Jordan River in the distance, and the Jordanian highlands as the background. This was a belvedere, a *manzara* in Arabic, which was open to the east and enclosed by a gate to the south, leading toward the town of Jericho, and now a northern gate. We discovered Baramki makes exactly the same observation in his dissertation (1953, pp. 8–10). There should be a north gate, a transition from the palace complex to the residential area, perhaps the town, to the north.

Our second trench in 2011 was situated near Hamdan Taha's sondages of 2006. He had found massive walls north of the bath which suggested a new, major building. Our trench repeated his observation of a secondary occupation of walls and floors, here clearly dated to the Abbasid of the late ninth and tenth centuries (fig. 3). Below this were well-laid lines of stones with plaster coating, which became a broad stairway proceeding downward. This Area 2 was expanded to the south in 2012; after seven stairs

there was a large platform opening through a doorway to a room toward the west. Ignacio Arce, our archaeological architect, saved the fallen stones of this doorway for reconstruction and speculated on a large store for wood for the bath furnaces. A matching stairway leads upward to the south and confirms three unexplained lines on Baramki's plan. The area has become a puzzle and may have been more than a simple service area for the baths.



Figure 2. Plan of the North Gate, excavated in 2011

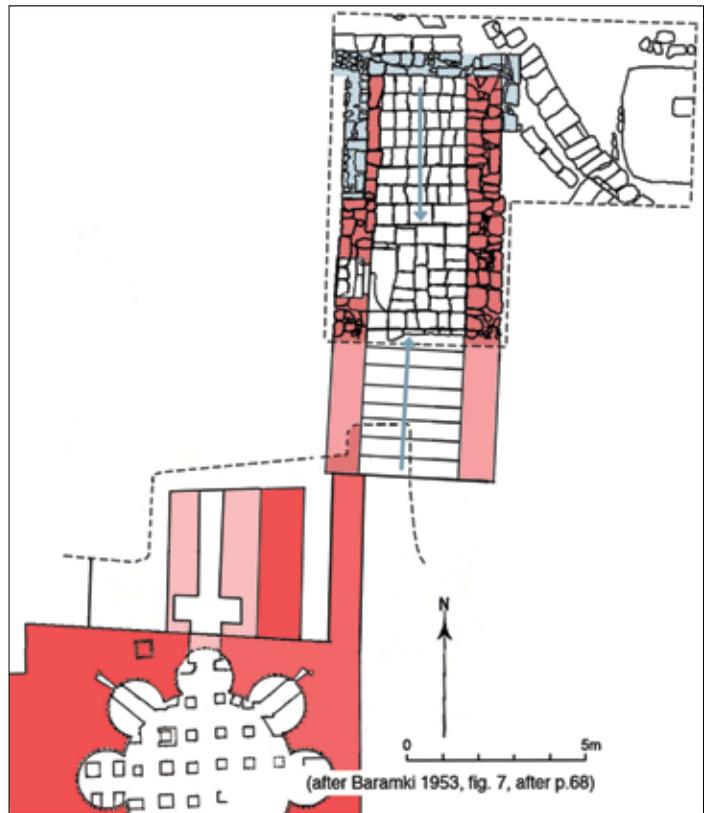


Figure 3. Plan of the area north of the bath with the excavations of the monumental stairway

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## The Call of the Northern Area

Both the north gate and the monumental stairway indicate an unimagined importance for the building complex of the northern area (fig. 4). When this site was first described by

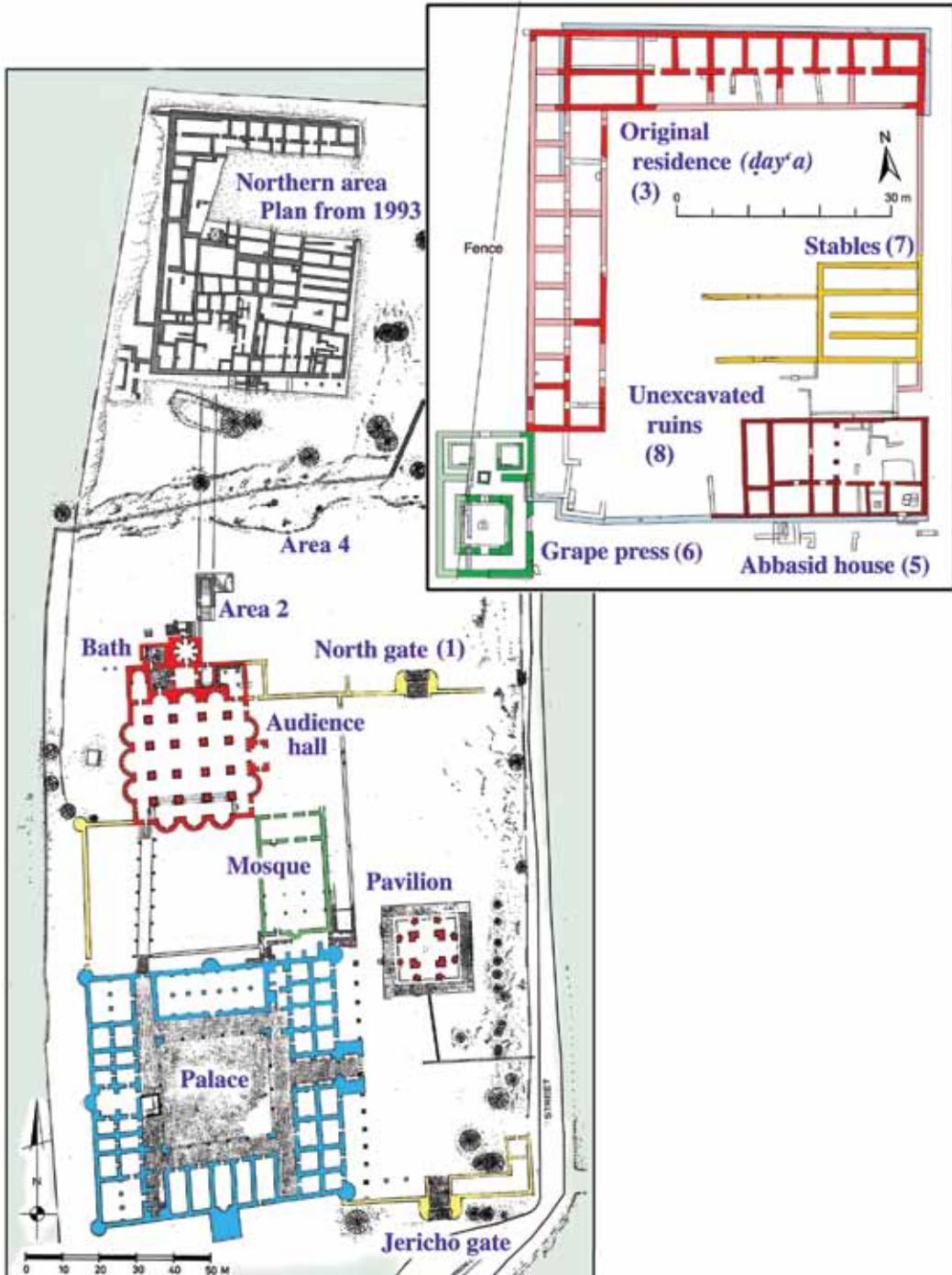


Figure 4. Plan of the entire site of Khirbet al-Mafjar with trenches and discoveries in Northern Area

Bliss in 1894, this was the northernmost of three massive mounds and the only one being actively looted. The complex of buildings revealed was investigated by Awni Dajani during the 1960s under Jordanian authority. Regrettably, all records and materials from these extensive excavations have been lost and one is now confronted with walls, platforms, cisterns and other features of many different periods. Michael Jennings and Enrico Cirelli began the work of isolating building phases using a database they created on iPads and then created a typological phasing of walls.

We excavated a series of soundings at Area 3 in 2011, often finding little left by the Jordanians. The baulks, the earth left between their trenches, were dramatically different. One baulk produced five complete lamps, numerous glass vials, storage jars, burnt basketry and seeds (even complete charred dates), beads and buttons, and more. These artifacts were stratified in two layers: the earlier was Umayyad and possibly earlier than any other place excavated; and the later was Umayyad-Abbasid transition of the eighth century, more typical of finds elsewhere.

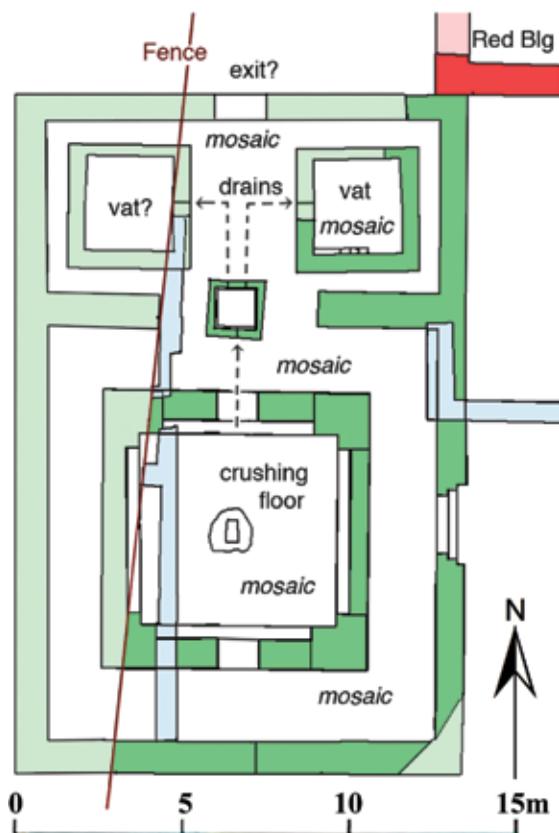
The 2012 season began a serious effort in the Northern Area by removing great mounds of the backdirt from the excavations of the 1960s and by pruning a forest of trees that obscured many of the structures. One hypothesis was that a main street ran from the new, North Gate and that architectural remains were concentrated on its western side. Area 4 was a new trench in which the walls of a shop had been robbed of stone, indicating fine original construction (fig. 5). Within this shop we found the articulated skeletons of five young goats, ready for sale; dense ash suggests they died in a sudden fire. This may have been part of an animal market and one may imagine a long *suq* selling food and local products at the end of the Umayyad period.

Jihad Yasin discovered white mosaics on the western side; this became Area 6, only partially excavated in the 1960s. The plan revealed a grape press almost 14 x 20 m in size; a low crushing floor had a basalt base for a screw mechanism, a paved passage around this, and drains leading to a settling pit and two vats for the grape juice in the north. Many wine presses are known from the region, though rarely so well-designed (fig. 6). The press was built at the same time as the exceptionally fine walls of the adjoining original residence, clearly in the Umayyad period. We labeled this structure the Red Building, due to the fine stone set into the red clay of natural soil. The plan seems to indicate sets of rooms around a central court, suggesting another *qasr* or palace, perhaps unfinished.

In the southeast corner of the Red Building, the walls were completely removed and, in their stead, was a large house of the Abbasid period (Area 5) (fig. 7). There was a large courtyard (16 x 8 m) with a covered



Figure 5. Trench in Area 4, showing goat skeletons with ash



area on the east marked by spolia (columns and pilasters) from the palace. South of this yard were a series of rooms including a vestibule (C) and toilet (D), the latter made of a balustrade from the pavilion. On the east was a large hall (B) with paving stones, apparently taken from the paving of the North Gate. The remaining rooms seem to have been service areas (H, J). The building stands a coherent structure, datable to the early Abbasid period, the late eighth century. Nearby are less clear buildings of the same and earlier periods (Area 8), a jumble of elements to be sorted out in the coming seasons. Immediately north of this house is a well-defined building which may be identified as stables for horses (Area 7). The proximity of the *hayr* or extensive enclosure to the west may suggest a function of horse-breeding on the estate.

Figure 6. Plan of the wine press excavated in Area 6

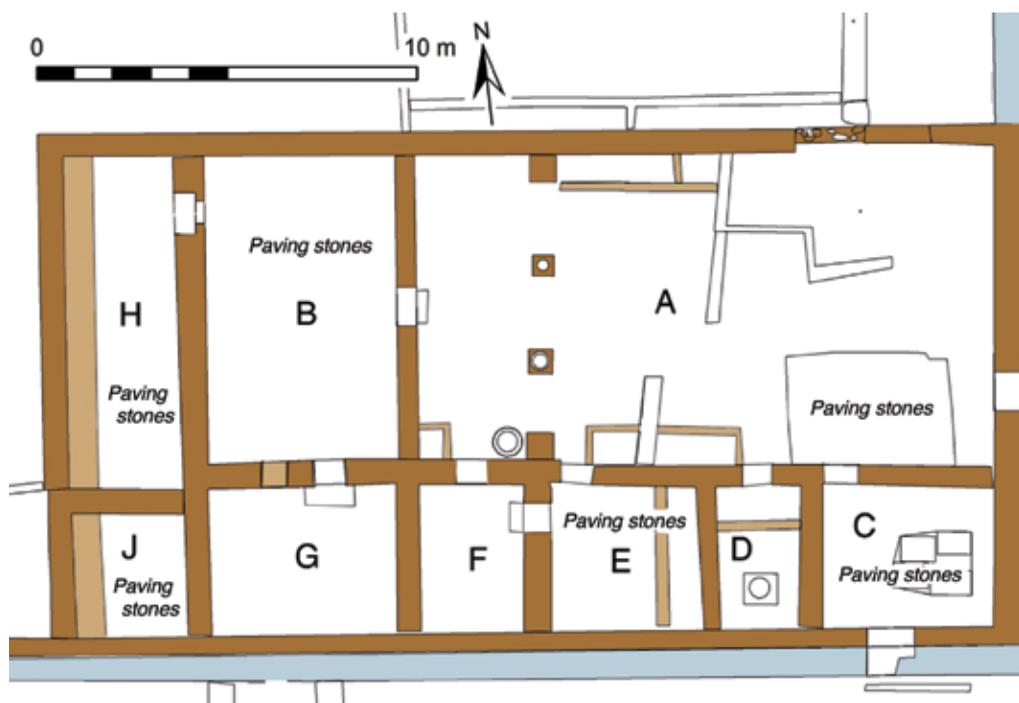


Figure 7. Plan of the Abbasid house excavated in Area 5



Figure 8. General view of the Northern Area, looking to east; the wine press is in the foreground, then the Red Building on the left, unexcavated Area 8, and Abbasid house with trees in the courtyard

## Significance and a Model for Future Research

These excavations have shown that the Northern Area was far more than a laborers' settlement or simple caravanserai (fig. 8). Rather, two hypotheses were advanced last year: first, that these northern structures represent the original settlement around another "palace"; or, alternatively, the residence and other structures represent a major Abbasid settlement. Not often can one claim that elements of both guesses seem proven correct. The outline of a first, well-constructed building resembles the later palace to the south, as well as many other *qusur* of the early Islamic period. This structure was contemporary with a well-designed wine press, indicative of intensive agricultural activities of an Umayyad estate.

The Northern Area presents a new dimension to the site of Khirbet al-Mafjar; this was an agricultural estate (*day'a*) providing the economic foundation for support of the palace complex of Qasr Hisham to the south. More importantly, this agricultural estate is one of the first excavated examples of a widespread phenomenon of the Umayyad and Abbasid historical periods, the eighth and ninth centuries CE. There is abundant textual evidence of the development of estates (*diya'*) by early Islamic elites, first in the Hijaz, then in Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria), Iraq, and elsewhere. The potential for this research is to provide

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a model for similar sites and to expand our knowledge of daily life and activities of early Islamic settlement systems.

The first two seasons of the joint Palestinian-American project have been fortunate in a series of discoveries which will change the interpretation of Hisham's palace. This research project has actually doubled the size of the archaeological remains and will change perceptions of the achievements of the Umayyads. This may expand into the more important aspect of 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, as implied in the name of the Jericho Mafjar Project, has historical importance for Palestine and the Middle East.

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