

Donald Whitcomb

Summer was a time of presentation of the first season of **Donald Whitcomb's** excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar, also known as Qasr Hisham. The Jericho Mafjar Project (JMP) was the subject of a beautiful spread in summer *News & Notes* (#210, pp. 3–6, 2011). In addition to

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this medium, we launched a website giving much more information. Hamdan Taha, our co-director as well as director of antiquities, had his reservations but was very pleased with the publicity and positive reactions. The site may be found at www.jerichomafjarproject.org.

The fall began with a very curious return to the Aqaba excavations. This was through the medium of Kristoffer Damgaard, known to many in the Oriental Institute from his stay a few years ago. During that time he studied and copied all the records from our excavations at Ayla, early Islamic Aqaba, in preparation for his renewal of those excavations. This new Danish project was successful and led to his submission of a PhD thesis on the port and archaeology of the Red Sea region. I served as a reader for this fine research and had a pleasant visit to Copenhagen with Jan.

Back in Chicago I gave a presentation to the local chapter of the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) called “Before Cairo: The Egyptian Islamic City,” mainly taken from an article that had recently appeared. Later in the quarter, I went to New York city and gave a presentation on Khirbet al-Mafjar to the Bard Graduate Center; this was gratifying in that a number of prominent Islamic art historians had a first glimpse of what we are doing at that iconic site. The remainder of the quarter was spent planning our second season at this site, which took place in January and February (see separate *Jericho Mafjar Project* report).

At the end of our season we invited the scholars at the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem to visit the site. In turn, they invited me to give a talk on “my life in archaeology,” which did make me feel rather old. This provided an opportunity to reflect on or at least organize my experiences. My archaeological experience began in Iran with the Peace Corps and many visits culminating in my dissertation (1966–1975), I excavated next in Egypt at Quseir and Luxor (1975–1985), then in Jordan at Aqaba (1985–1995), some work in Syria (Qinnasrin), Turkey (Marash), and aborted efforts to return to Istakhr in Iran and to work in Saudi Arabia. I had visited Palestine in 1995, having written about Mafjar in 1988 and, after a fellowship at Hebrew University and a series of articles, found the amazing opportunity at Qasr Hisham open for me and the Oriental Institute.

Spring brought a nice change in teaching a seminar on the archaeology of the Islamic city, punctuated with a brief pause to attend the eighth ICAANE (International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East). This has included Islamic archaeology sessions, and we accepted some thirty papers for these meetings in Warsaw. I flew back to finish the quarter and then off to Berlin in June for a special conference on the “desert castles” or *qusur* of the early Islamic period. My paper attempted to cast the site of Mafjar in context with others and examine their economic foundations.

This year ended with another trip, even more unusual and especially pleasant. I have a special interest in the first excavator of Khirbet al-Mafjar, Dimitri Baramki, and have endeavored to find out as much as possible about his archaeological career and life. After some research I discovered that his son was living in Los Angeles; he and his wife graciously entertained Michael Jennings, my student, and me with albums and stories of this wonderful archaeologist. This connection has given us even greater enthusiasm to return and carry on research at Qasr Hisham, as Baramki always preferred to call the site of Mafjar.