

## JERICHO MAFJAR: HISHAM'S PALACE SITE AND MUSEUM PROJECT

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A brief report on the preliminary stages of the project to reinstall the site museum at Khirbet al-Mafjar (Hisham's Palace), Jericho, can be found in the Museum section of the *Oriental Institute 2012-2013 Annual Report* (p. 193), which reported on our January 2013 site visit. The project was completed in May 2014, resulting in a fully installed site museum with approximately 150 objects displayed in seven display cases, with three installations, eleven graphic panels, and a video slide show. In addition, sixteen new graphic panels were installed on the archaeological site for visitors.

Preparations and Skype meetings began in summer 2013, followed by a physical consultation visit in October 2013 by Jack Green and Erik Lindahl of the Oriental Institute Museum. Meetings and site visits with stakeholders of the Hisham's Palace site and museum project took place over a one-week period in Nablus, Ramallah, and Jericho within the Palestinian Territories. The visit was highly beneficial for us as we were able to meet and discuss details of the project with staff of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) and the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH), the architects (Midmack) and exhibit designers (Al Nasher), and to assess proposed display-case materials, dimensions, specifi-



Figure 1. The Hisham's Palace Museum prior to object label installation and the opening, late May 2014 (photo by Maher Barghouti)

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cations, and potential manufacturers. The Museum and Site project was managed by the Non-Governmental Organization DAI (Development Alternatives, Inc.) as part of the Compete Project, a USAID-funded initiative to build economic sectors within the West Bank and Gaza, including tourism. The Oriental Institute Museum's role as consultants for DAI on the project, in close collaboration with Jericho Mafjar Project co-directors Hamdan Taha (DACH) and Donald Whitcomb (Oriental Institute), was to develop and provide an overall concept for the museum, interpretive content for the site and museum panels, advice and expertise on various aspects of the project, as well as provide labor and materials for making mounts for objects.

Over the following months, preparations were made on the content, then integrated into graphic panels beautifully designed by Abed Ramadan of Al Nasher. English DACH-approved text was translated into Arabic by Nour Merza and Osama Abu Eledem of the University of Chicago and subsequently edited and reviewed by DACH staff. Thanks also go to Anthony Lauricella and Tasha Vorderstrasse of the University of Chicago for assistance with object labels. Display-case designs were developed jointly between Al Nasher and Midmack, and subsequently built by a bathroom and kitchen company outside Ramallah. These sturdy, customized cases utilize laminated safety glass and steel frames, and are faced with durable Corian marble panels. The conservation and object registration component of the project was provided by DACH staff. We are grateful for the support of DACH conservator Mohammed Diab, Director of Museums Feras Aqel, and Curator of Hisham's Palace Elham Alama.

The site visit for object installation took place between May 12 and May 24. Our exhibits installation team from the Oriental Institute Museum was made up of Jack Green (chief curator), Erik Lindahl (lead preparator), and Brian Zimerle (assistant preparator). Brass and acrylic mounts prepared in advance over a two-week period in Chicago by Erik and Brian and were modified further within the Jericho Mosaic Workshop at Hisham's Palace. In addition to DACH staff already mentioned, especially DACH Director Dr. Hamdan Taha, we are extremely grateful for the support of Ihab Daoud, Jihad Yasin, and Eyad Hamdan. During the hot days and long evenings we worked through the mounts, gradually installing the museum objects and making final edits to the object labels. We are especially thankful to mosaic restorer Imad Doudeen for all his help (see fig. in Whitcomb's *Individual Research*), as well as for the tea, coffee, and good humor he provided during our stay.



Figure 2. Donald Whitcomb giving a tour of the museum during the opening, May 28, 2014 (photo by Maher Barghout)

This new museum opened to the public on May 28, 2014 (fig. 1). Although Jack Green, Erik Lindahl, and Brian Zimerle were unfortunately unable to attend the official opening due to scheduling constraints, Donald Whitcomb represented the Oriental Institute (fig. 2). The opening was officiated by the Minister for Tourism and Antiquities for the State of Palestine,

Rula Ma'ay'a, and the Mission Director of USAID for the West Bank and Gaza, R. David Harden.

The museum itself features bilingual graphic panels and thematic displays. These include, in the north section of the gallery, an introductory museum panel presenting a time line and maps that situate the site over time and space; a panel about Palestinian archaeologist Dimitri Baramki and his contribution to the early excavations in the 1930s; a display entitled "Ceramic Traditions," which utilizes Baramki's pottery sequence from the late Umayyad to Ayyubid periods (ca. AD 750–1250); a display about the economic role of the site as an agricultural estate; a display about hospitality and entertainment drawing upon vessels related to food and drink; and objects of daily life, including coins, personal ornaments, and

cosmetic implements. In the museum's central and south section, there is a focus on architecture and elaboration, including a reconstructed cupola (dome) from the audience hall's diwan and a niche from the facade of the audience hall. Many fragments of carved stucco figures of humans, animals, and vegetal and geometric friezes are presented in one large display case. Graphic panels provide information on wall paintings and mosaics of Hisham's Palace, supported by a video slide show. Lastly, a "touchable" exhibit consisting of fragments of building materials is presented in a display entitled "Building Hisham's Palace."

The site panels were printed on ceramic tile (fig. 3), seen as the most durable option for the site, and incorporated into a new visitor route. New panels that have not been previously available to the public include: "The Grape Press," "The Northern Area Mosque," "The Stables," and "The Abbasid House." New walkways to complement the new site signage were in the process of being completed.

The site of Khirbet al-Mafjar is a popular tourist destination as well as a key site for Palestinian school children and families. Visits to the site are part of the school curriculum, and therefore all children visit the site as part of their history education. A focus on public and curricular education is yet to be fully integrated into the new site and museum, although there is an intention to integrate this element in the future. The current improvements to the site and museum already enhance visitor's understanding and appreciation of the importance of Jericho's rich cultural heritage for years to come. In addition, the benefit to the local economy in terms of tourism is obvious. With more to see, this will encourage greater interest and investment in Jericho as a cultural destination for visitors. Overall, the Oriental Institute's involvement in this project shows how excavation and research is just one element of archaeological fieldwork. Cultural heritage management, museums, and community archaeology are also an essential part of preserving, displaying, and learning about the past.



*Figure 3. Installed ceramic-printed site panel for the Abbasid Stables in the Northern Area of the site (photo by Jack Green)*