

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT

**Donald Whitcomb**

The last report for the Jericho Mafjar Project began with an explanation of the substitution of “remote sensing” instead of excavations. We proceeded to find amazing information on structures located beneath the surface in virtually every part of the site. In October my co-director, and Director of the Department of Antiquities, Hamdan Taha, retired after twenty years of leading the new department for the Palestinian Authority. We celebrated this event with a symposium in Jericho and the publication of our book on the Khirbet al-Mafjar mosaics. The new director is his long-time assistant, Jihad Yasin, who has been our field director for the project. I thought that Jihad would want to slow the research during this transition. I was pleased to find that Jihad came to Mafjar with his senior staff and we had a normal season of excavations, albeit somewhat shortened.



*Figure 1. Greg Williams on the balk*

## 2015 Excavations

As in the past seasons of this project, we discussed the goals and procedures for these excavations. The concern of Jihad was the continued clearance and beautification of Qasr Hisham as an archeological park (see below). Our agenda for archaeological discoveries placed less concern with the mess we might make. And so we compromised, as we had done for the previous four seasons.

The old excavations of the 1950s by Awni Dajani had left no records or reports (or even artifacts); but they did leave massive baulks (the meter-wide unexcavated earth between his trenches). We have been removing them and using their stratified materials as best we could. Jihad asked us now to remove a massive baulk crossing an open area between the Abbasid house and the stables, making both buildings more visible for visitors and giving a better sense of the Abbasid estate. The winter rains had been abundant and there was thick vegetation to knee height, and new trees towering over us. All this greenery had to be removed first; then Greg Williams and Mohammad Shalalda, the most talented of a group of students from al-Quds University, began careful excavation of the baulk, layer by layer (fig. 1).

Meanwhile, our main attention was focused on the long-neglected northwestern corner of the Red Building, as we call the original Umayyad estate. Again there had been some excavations of the 1950s leaving vague walls and baulks. Michael Jennings went to work on a large baulk next to an early wall, where he consulted with Ignacio Arce, our Spanish architect archaeologist about the complex sequence of walls and rebuilds as the building changed over time. For the most precise and talented digging I could rely on Awni Shawamra, who had worked with us since 2011. He began uncovering a large room in which he patiently revealed the burnt beams and fallen bricks of the roof. He was also teaching his skills to Nabila Barham, a young woman from Jericho who had just finished her degree in archaeology from al-Quds University (fig. 2).

As we expanded our excavations to the south, the sharp-eyed Awni saw some colored materials in the grass. We cleared the loose surface debris around a small baulk and an

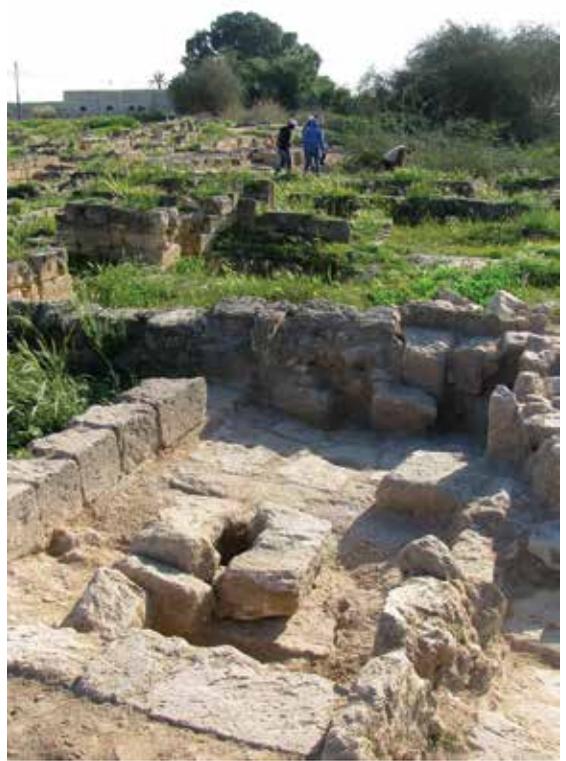


*Figure 2. Nabila excavates materials on a burnt floor, including sherds, iron tools, and tesserae*

interior room. We gave the responsibility to Nabila, who cleared burnt debris from the floor, in which were broken vessels and iron tools — perhaps chisels. Next to the ash were piles of tesserae, which she sifted into numerous buckets. These were not the stone cubes used for floors, such as those in the Audience Hall; the tesserae here were small pieces of colored glass, including some gold-leaf pieces, prepared for fine wall mosaics. While visions of wonderful church mosaics of Constantinople danced in our imaginations,

Nabila quietly collected the small tesserae and debitage (the waste flakes when the cubes were cut), and then she washed them and began sorting the colors. This was a formidable task and not finished before we had to leave. Likewise, it remains unclear whether this was an Umayyad workshop, or materials collected for reuse in the Abbasid period.

Greg Williams and his team finished the large baulk and began removing small remnants of the old excavations. We asked him to clear a small baulk labeled B2d, just east of the new walkway, where there were some Abbasid structures. He cleared the vegetation and removed the soil down to a floor. In the middle of the room was a nicely constructed toilet, not unlike the ornate one we found within the Abbasid House. The walls and floor were made of tightly fitted stones and there was a drain in the corner suggesting the room was also used for bathing (fig. 3). This bath(room) was similar to one we found about 10 meters to the northeast, and south of the small mosque. One begins to picture a sophisticated community living in the Abbasid estate, rehabilitated from the older Umayyad palace complex.



*Figure 3. The new toilet and bath discovered in the Abbasid town*

## And New Technologies

After a season of “remote sensing” at Khirbet al-Mafjar, Michael Jennings suggested that we follow the “remote sensing” of last season with the new recording possibilities of an “unmanned aerial vehicle” (UAV) or drone. He had learned to use a Phantom (DJI) at Aqaba and so brought this noisy but extremely valuable research tool to Jericho. The impact of these high-definition photos of the site was amazing. We now had precise, vertical photos of each building and each trench, and even more details of interesting features and objects. The drone can take angled photos showing relationships of buildings, structures, and trenches. Further, it can move out over the landscape surrounding the site, bringing new visualizations of its physical contexts. Perhaps the most sensational are the films of slow fly-overs, moving into a close-up of a special find or building. The recording possibilities are limited only by one’s imagination in expressing and analyzing the archaeology. As with any new technology used in the Jericho Mafjar Project, the emphasis was on training the Palestinian staff and students — in effect, creating a transfer of knowledge that will outlive the project. And the results are shared and printed immediately!

After we left in 2014, the department had finished a new series of signs, pictures, and information baked onto ceramic tile for tourists. There is now a well-marked pathway and,

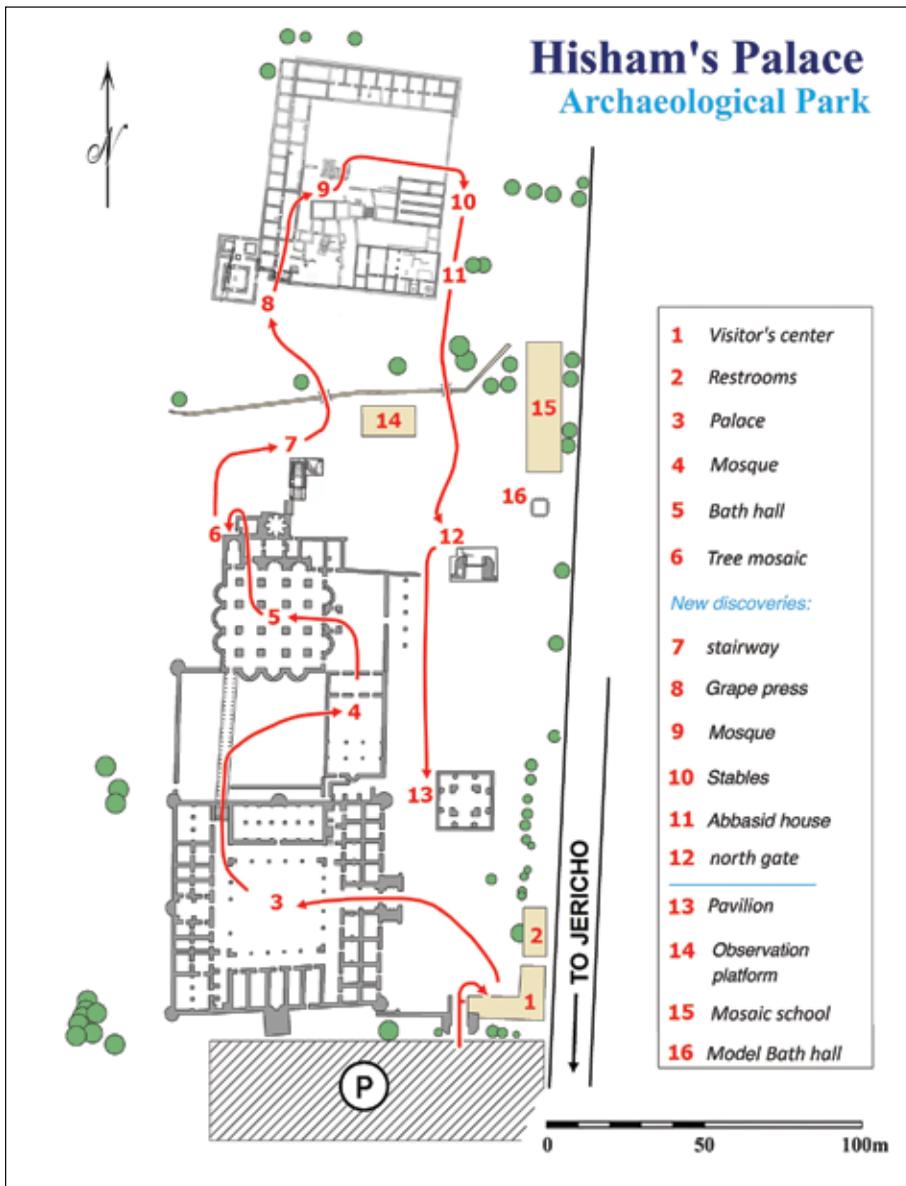


Figure 4. Tourist map of Hisham's Palace Archaeological Park

across the excavations of the northern area, a raised wooden walkway (fig. 4). The placement is perfect and allows for a close view of the structures without damage. In short, with the new museum completed last year, we are well underway to having this iconic, monumental site as an interpreted archaeological park. And we can claim this a triumph of Palestine and Chicago cooperation. The understanding of Qasr Hisham, or Khirbet al-Mafjar, continues to become more complicated, and the archaeological park more interesting. Now the visitor may tread along the walkway, looking left to see a fine example of a grape (or wine) press, and to the right to see a fine toilet and bath — that may need a new sign.