

JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT

Donald Whicomb

This is the last presentation of the Jericho Mafjar Project, which has finished its fieldwork and proceeds into aspects of research and publication. This is a natural progression and the following is an account of activities during the last year.

From the beginning of this project, Hamdan Taha insisted that we publish the new photographs of the mosaics taken by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in 2010. Few persons realize that these magnificent mosaics were available only in black & white and water color images from 1959. Hamdan and I reorganized the old presentation made by Hamilton and published a new mosaic book in Ramallah in 2014. This volume has limited distribution, so we agreed to publish a second edition at the Oriental Institute, *The Mosaics of Khirbet el-Mafjar, Hisham's Palace*, in 2015. One can be easily reminded

of the Mafjar mosaics by checking the Aramco World 2016 calendar. The editor, Dick Doughty, put together a monthly display of photographs from our mosaic book with fine descriptions and essays. The calendar is available from Saudi Aramco World and a few copies are still available at the Oriental Institute.

Perhaps even more exciting, from a more local, archaeological point of view, is the PhD dissertation of Michael Jennings, *Beyond the Walls of Jericho: Khirbet al-Mafjar and the Signature Landscapes of the Jericho Plain* (June, 2015). This thesis fulfills the original premise of this project, that Mafjar was constantly tied to the city (and ruins) of Jericho. Jennings analyzed this relationship from the Hasmonaean through Islamic periods from an original perspective of natural and political landscapes.

Two years ago there was a small symposium in Jericho during which the mosaic book, mentioned above, was presented. This was also the occasion of the announcement that, after twenty years of service, Hamdan Taha would retire. This meeting and

celebration was followed by a very different Jericho symposium in London (June 29–30, 2015), organized by Bart Wagemakers (director of The Non-Professional Archaeological Photographs Project [NPAPH]). The symposium was mainly attended by British archaeologists, many of whom remember the early days of Kathleen Kenyon (1950s), with some more recent Italian and Chicago excavations. This symposium was an appropriate venue to denounce the “Orientalist mythology” of Robert Hamilton, still accepted by many scholars there; this denouncing will appear in the conference proceedings.

In August the project took a different turn. The department applied for a grant from the Ambassador’s Fund through the American Consulate to restore the synagogue at Ain Deuk,

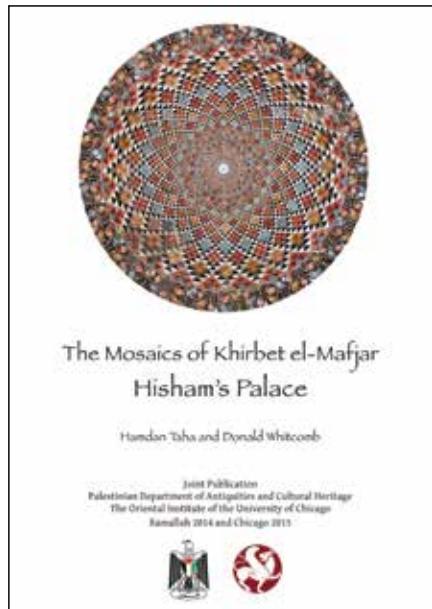




Figure 1. Gazelles in mosaic: (left) from 'Ain Deuk (Na'aran) synagogue; (right) from The Mosaics of Khirbet el-Mafjar, Hisham's Palace (p. 117, B4)

about four kilometers northwest of Mafjar. I endorsed the project, never realizing I would be called upon to research and write up the mosaics of this synagogue. We had visited the site, situated on a beautiful bluff above the springs and nestled among banana plantations. The synagogue has a central zodiac, which I restored on the basis of contemporary fifth–sixth century synagogues in Palestine. Indeed, comparing the gazelles in the synagogue with those in the Diwan of Mafjar suggests the synagogue was still visible in the eighth century or later. (fig. 1). As Hamdan said, “This is part of our cultural heritage and must be preserved for visitors to Jericho.” Unfortunately it cannot be opened yet, due to settlers who break inside and use the building for prayers.

As mentioned in my personal research, we put together a Mafjar panel at the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) November meetings in Atlanta on our most recent seasons of fieldwork. A number of members commented on the main theme, a hypothesis by Ignacio Arce that there may have been a Roman fort long before the Umayyads arrived. This hypothesis is now published as a series of perspectives in *Near Eastern Archaeology* magazine (79.2 [2016], pp. 78–87). One purpose for this presentation is to suggest future directions for research at Mafjar.

The most recent publication is a fine volume by Hamdan Taha, *The Umayyad Palace at Khirbet al-Mafjar* (Ramallah: Dar al Nasher, 2016). This book summarizes the monuments and excavations in Arabic, much needed for Palestinian visitors, and especially for the many teachers who bring their students to Jericho each year. A visitors’ guide remains a needed contribution, in addition to our work on the new museum and signage for the archaeological park. Our efforts combine with the Palestinian archaeologists in these new interpretations, and we must now turn to presenting the new archaeological data for future research.