JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT EXCAVATION REPORT

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FROM THE DIRECTOR’S STUDY

This issue of News & Notes gives us our first look at the Oriental Institute’s newest field project — Don Whitcomb’s excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar. With these excavations, along with Yorke Rowan’s Galilee Prehistory Project, the Oriental Institute is rebuilding its long-standing commitment to the archaeology of the southern Levant. The Mafjar excavations are especially noteworthy as the first American dig to take place in the Palestinian Authority. In this joint venture of the Oriental Institute and the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage of the Palestinian Authority, Mafjar project co-directors Dr. Don Whitcomb and Dr. Hamdan Taha are breaking new ground in both the world of archaeology and the realm of cultural heritage preservation.

Located in the oasis of Jericho in the Jordan River Valley, Mafjar was the seat of power for the Caliph Hisham of the Ummayads (eighth century CE) — the first Islamic dynasty. Excavations at Jericho are tremendously important because they can give us unique insights into the origins of Islamic civilization and the transformation of the Middle East from a Byzantine Christian dominated culture into the rich multicultural mosaic that emerged under Muslim rule.

As Don Whitcomb’s article makes clear, the Mafjar project is highly innovative in pioneering the use of advanced technologies such as the iPad to improve the quality, speed, and cost-effectiveness of excavations. Effective, affordable handheld devices such as the iPad have never been practical for archaeological use until now, and their effect will be transformative. This “paperless archaeology” has the potential to transform the way we conduct archaeological research by recording the excavations in digital form in the field at the exact moment that the discoveries are being made. Most archaeologists count on spending ten hours in the lab for every hour spent digging. Paperless archaeology will not only cut our lab time in half, but it will also allow us to analyze our data so quickly in the field that we can see patterns and adjust the way we excavate almost immediately. The new technology will also allow us to share data fully and quickly with our Palestinian colleagues. Overall, this project is developing new ways to do our work of excavation, recording, and analysis faster and smarter than has ever been possible before.

We can all look forward to the discoveries of the Mafjar expedition as it proceeds — they will give us fascinating insights into the origins of Islamic civilization.

COVER ILLUSTRATION:
Colored mosaic floor, Hisham’s Palace, Jericho. 8th century A.D. From Jericho, a Living History: Ten Thousand Years of Civilization, by Hamdan Taha and Ali Qleibo (Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2010), page 71.

Khirbet al-Mafjar
Field Season, 2010-11.

Twice a week water flows through the site of Khirbet al-Mafjar. In Arabic, mafjar means "flowing" (Photo by Donald Whitcomb)
Donald Whitcomb, Director, Jericho Mafjar Project

The past presents a twofold danger for archaeologists, a sort of double indemnity. The first aspect is the challenge of taking evidence — buildings, inscriptions, and sherds — and creating a historical interpretation, a narrative of the past. The second is that this narrative becomes part of the past and, like the original data, cannot be fixed but is subject to new interpretations. Archaeological writing is like the past itself, a moving target for new ideas.

This became clear to me in reactions to an article, written over twenty years ago, on the ceramics for Khirbet al-Mafjar and a reinterpretation of the chronology of that site. Mafjar is a monument near Jericho, a palace complex that has become an iconic symbol of artistic achievements in early Islamic Palestine. The excavations were undertaken during the 1930s and 1940s by the Department of Antiquities under the direction of Dimitri Baramki, with Robert Hamilton representing the British Mandatory authority. Happily, Baramki was a talented archaeologist who paid close attention to excavated ceramics. His detailed report on the Islamic ceramics has such a wealth of information that it seemed to me a simple, and satisfying, project to rework his materials into a new narrative. Though written while on an ACOR fellowship in Amman, this was an exercise in “armchair archaeology,” as I had no access to any of the pottery. Thus, the acceptance and influence of the article are due in large part to the quality of Baramki’s original work.

The accepted occupation of the site, as interpreted by Hamilton in his many articles and major monograph, was during the Caliphate of Hisham and his nephew, the Caliph Walid, a period of 724 to 744, and work stopped unfinished at the latter’s death or the earthquake of 748/9. Baramki had realized a more complex history; using his reports, I was able to show a continuing occupation of the palace complex well into the Abbasid period, that is, possibly until the eleventh century. There was also a limited reoccupation during the Ayyubid period, until the thirteenth century. This historical revision had a surprising result. During international meetings in Rome in 2008, the Palestinian director of antiquities, Dr. Hamdan Taha, approached me and exclaimed, “Whitcomb, I have proven you correct!” This is exactly what one likes to hear (especially for one given to rash re-interpretations). In this case, Hamdan had done a small excavation at Mafjar and obtained clear stratigraphic evidence of my suggested Abbasid and Ayyubid chronology.

One thing leads to another, as they say, and two years later the Oriental Institute formed a cooperation with the Palestinian Authority to begin new excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar. Again, this began with Hamdan Taha, as we were sitting in front of the palace; I reflected how nice this scene would...
within a day he was clearing pots broken in situ in the guard room of one bastion; the second bastion soon appeared with fine carved stones. Among the fallen debris were iron nails and plating that once clad the wooden gate. The massive threshold was gone, and the fine paving stones removed, except for a few. This left the plaster bedding, which looked like waves on the sea, especially in the full moonlight. What was intended as a small trench grew to reveal the entire gate, about 14 x 10 m in size; Awni and I would have happily continued, had not Hamdan finally suggested we save some for the future.

At the same time, Bassam Nasasira laid out a second trench near Hamdan’s excavations in 2006. He had found massive walls north of the bath that suggested a major building; Mohammed Ghayyada, who had more experience on the Bronze Age Tell Sultan, provided his expertise in this complex trench. Contrary to the experience of the gate, he found only some scrappy, late walls for over a week. Then, a well-laid line of stones appeared, and another below that with plaster coating, and another below that with fallen stones. The stones were removed to reveal yet another step of a monumental stairway, and more fallen stones. Mohammad continued patiently down the stairs. At this point I suggested that he would come to a door, with a jinn guarding it, and would be asked a question (the right answer yielding a room full of treasure). Such is the stuff of legends, and, regrettably, we had to stop work because of the danger of

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. There should be a north gate, a transition from the palace complex to the residential area, the town, to the north.

In mid-December of 2010, we began a trench on open, flat ground aligned with the south gate and a wall extending from the bath. The “we” enjoying the mild Jericho winter was a team under Jihad Yasin, field supervisor who had worked with me in Aqaba some fifteen years ago and played with my son John, also present though no longer riding on Jihad’s shoulders. Awni Shawamra worked with me on the gate; I selected him because he seemed a bit of a dreamy artist and soon realized he is an energetic and talented excavator.

An exciting and unexpected feature of the 2011 JMP season was the use of iPads as part of a system of digital recording of excavation results. Excavations generate a massive amount of data, ranging from notes on soil composition to descriptions of structures to ceramic analyses, and managing these data is a central concern for every project. The unlikely story of how we ended up using iPads began in the course of preparing for JMP’11, when we came across an article on the Apple website that discussed their use at Pompeii by the University of Cincinnati. After some discussion with members of the Cincinnati team, we decided to adopt the iPad as an integral part of our documentation methodology.

The advantages of the iPad exceeded our expectations and were quickly adopted by our Palestinian colleagues. I have a lasting memory of standing among the ruins of the bath hall while one of our Palestinian team members demonstrated an iPad to a group of Japanese visitors. The iPad allowed us to maintain a project database directly in the field, streamlining the traditional process that involves filling out locus sheets by hand and then typing these into the computer at a later time. Devoting time to data management might be unavoidable, but the iPad allowed us to spend more time doing archaeology rather than file work.

As we wrapped up the 2011 season, we spent a day at the Department of Antiquities in Ramallah, reminiscing about the previous two months at Mafjar. We printed out all the stratigraphic and ceramic data from each trench. Normally, this information would have taken months to organize. But with our new technology, we could share our results over tea with the colleagues who had worked so hard to help us make the project a success.

It is clear that there is great potential for the use of the iPad in the field of archaeology and that we will be seeing this technology at many more sites in the future.
collapse. We expanded with another trench and discovered a line of curving stones, which to my imagination was a massive tower. Gradually we realize this was a large water conduit, and Mohammed proved the identification by removing one of the capping stones.

**PROCEEDING TO THE NORTHERN TOWN**

As I suggested, stairs go down and they go up — and these seem to rise to meet some structure to the north. Both the north gate and the monumental stairway indicate an unimagined importance for the building complex of the northern area. This is a complex of buildings excavated 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. The work of isolating later building phases from high-quality original construction was a challenge for Michael Jennings, my student from NELC, and Prof. Enrico Cirelli from Bologna University. The two of them had worked together in Ravenna, unraveling the remains of a medieval monastery of similar complexity.

Patiently, they surveyed a new plan and created a typological phasing of walls, using a database created for the iPads. At the same time, Jihad took the lead in clearing a Jordanian trench, which revealed a large ornamental pool surrounded by white mosaic paving, clearly the remains of a pavilion gracing this early town plan. The result seems to be an important residential complex that may be considered an early Islamic town constructed in association with the palace complex to the south.

In addition to their architectural planning, Michael and Enrico excavated several rooms, finding little left by the Jordanians. When they turned to the baulks, the earth left between their trenches, there was a dramatic change. One baulk produced five complete lamps, numerous glass vials, storage jars, burnt basketry and seeds (even complete charred dates), beads and buttons, and more. The imagination runs wild at what the Jordanian excavators must have recovered. Perhaps just as important, these 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. On the other hand, the north gate was kept clean for most of its existence, leaving relatively few artifacts; but the stairway near the bath produced a wonderful sequence of Abbasid glazed ceramics, just as we had hoped and Hamdan had predicted.

![Figure 4. Michael Jennings sitting on the gate bench (Photo by Donald Whitcomb)](image)

![Figure 5. A Jerash-style lamp with Arabic inscription (Photo by Donald Whitcomb)](image)

![Figure 6. The North Area in March, 2010, from the south (Photo by Donald Whitcomb)](image)
SIGNIFICANCE AND A MODEL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It has been said that Islamic archaeology has as many definitions as there are practitioners. Each archaeologist brings a unique understanding of the mix of art and artifacts, using the combination for new historical narratives. Qasr Hisham is a fine exemplar of the phenomenon. Khirbet al-Mafjar is attributed to the time of the caliph Hisham (724–743) on the strength of an ostracon found there, apparently the draft of a letter to the caliph. There is no literary or historical documentation for the real name of these monuments. This is odd for a palace and especially the bath with its sumptuous decoration, the vast floors of mosaics, and walls covered with stucco panels and human figures (not to mention brightly colored frescoes). These arts give a new meaning to aesthetics of the Umayyad period, the earliest Islamic dynasty. This was a culture expected to place greatest value on poetry and singing. The combination of visual and oral arts has produced visions of Walid’s pleasure dome (the “frivolity hall,” in Hamilton’s terms), the dominant understanding of Qasr Hisham. While no one would want to deny that the Umayyads had some good parties, one might expect some more serious functions.

Beginning with the arts mentioned, one may note a curious combination of Byzantine traditions with strong Sasanian influences and less obvious Coptic aspects. More importantly, there should be evidence of Arabia from the traditions of the Hijaz and South Arabia (Himyarite materials). This is more than a new hybrid style, but the first material manifestation of Islamic culture. Finally, Khirbet al-Mafjar was intended as urban — a beginning for the Islamic city.

The first season of the joint Palestinian–American project has been fortunate in a series of discoveries that will change the interpretation of Hisham’s palace. This monument may actually double the size of the archaeological remains and change perceptions of the achievements of the Umayyads. The potential now exists for a new understanding of the origins and early development of the Islamic city. Perhaps of greater significance is the new chapter being written in cooperative research between the Palestinian Authority and the Oriental Institute. The excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar present an opportunity for greater understanding of the cultural heritage of Jericho and all of Palestine.

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THE JOINT PALESTINIAN-AMERICAN EXPEDITION AT KHIRBET AL-MAFJAR

Hamdan Taha, Assistant Deputy Minister, Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage

After the transfer of authority in 1994, the Department of Antiquities of Palestine began a large rehabilitation program at Hisham’s palace in cooperation with UNESCO, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, ANERA, USAID, and Birzeit University. The focus of the work was on conservation of the mosaic pavement and stone restoration, as well as upgrading the tourist infrastructure, including the access roads and walking paths, a site museum, and an interpretation center.

Following a small-scale excavation in 2006 by the Department of Antiquities, a joint program was agreed between the Department of Antiquities and the Oriental Institute for the scientific reassessment of the site. It had been some sixty-five years since the last season of excavations by D. C. Baramki and R. A. Hamilton. This new Joint Palestinian–American expedition, under the direction of Dr. D. Whitcomb and Dr. H. Taha, will provide the new momentum for intensive archeological research needed at this monument. The first season in 2011 succeeded in uncovering the north gate of the palace complex and began the exploration of the Umayyad town in the northern part of the site. This will lead to a more precise stratigraphic history of the site and an understanding of the spatial relationship between the palace and the Umayyad town.

The Joint Palestinian–American project begins a model for research and training and will be associated with community outreach activities in the city of Jericho.