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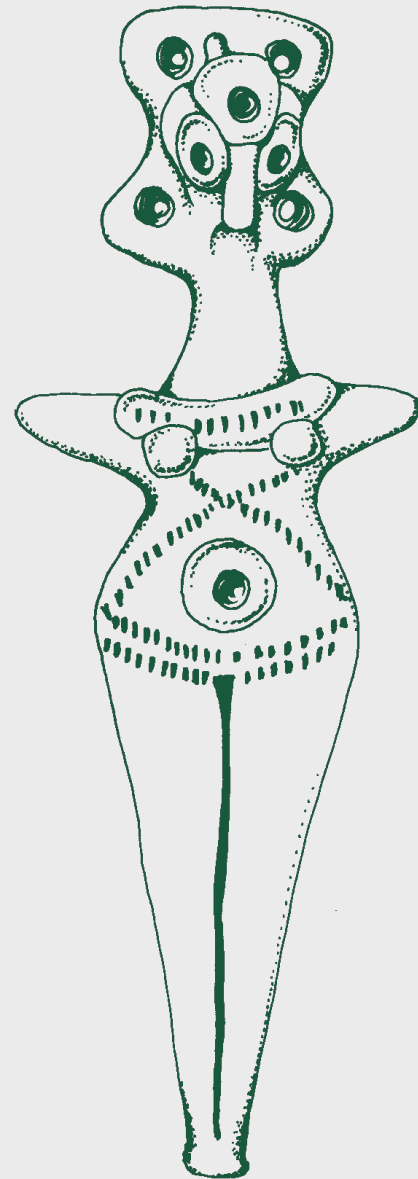
ICAANE

Proceedings of the 2nd International Congress
on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

Volume 2

Islamic Archaeology, General

Islamic Archaeology, Symposium



Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna
Eisenbrauns

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the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*

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Edited by

Ingolf Thuesen

with the assistance of Alan George Walmsley

Department of History and Cultures, University of Bologna / Eisenbrauns
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Then and Now—Now and Then: Strategies for Islamic Archaeology in the 21st Century

ALAN WALMSLEY
University of Western Australia

Genesis of a Workshop/Symposium

In the last days of the Seventh International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan, held in Copenhagen during June 1998 and just days after the convening of the first ICAANE meeting in Rome, a number of archaeologists interested in Islamic Jordan puzzled over a suitable forum for a workshop on Islamic archaeology in Bilād al-Shām (“Syria-Palestine”; for principal regions and sites, see Figure 1). The discussion resulted from a feeling of growing frustration. There was increasing dissatisfaction with existing venues for presenting and discussing archaeological advances in the newly emergent field of Islamic archaeology in Bilād al-Shām, and the desire to reach a much larger audience, both in terms of geographical area and discipline boundaries. In the years before, several venues had been explored to promote Islamic archaeology, but not with a lot of success. There had been the “desert and sown” series at the ASOR conferences, coordinated by Cherie Lenzen and Alison Betts, but topically restricted in scope and without an established successor program. Also, individual scholars had also explored the American-based MESA congress, but the interest in Islamic archaeology appeared limited. Overall, the perception was that there were significant regional and subject drawbacks with these conference venues: problems not really resolved by the Jordanian series either due, in this case, largely to limitations of geography. Therefore Jeremy Johns, Alison McQuitty, and Cherie Lenzen—among others—proposed we should “give it a go” at the next International Congress on the Archaeology of the ancient Near East, at which a special topic in Islamic archaeology had been accepted.

The task of organising an Islamic workshop (which grew in size and purpose, and eventually took on the character of a symposium) was handed to me. While some of the original instigators of the symposium were not able to make it to Copenhagen for 2ICAANE, I was pleased and grateful to have been offered this opportunity to advance our subject further. The general consensus at our June ’98 informal gathering was that the symposium should focus on the future direction of Islamic archaeology in Bilād al-Shām and the Jazīrah, building on the achievements (and failures) of the last decade or two. In keeping with the overall theme of 2ICAANE, the objective was to scrutinize Near Eastern archaeology at the beginning of the 3rd millennium A.D., specifically “The State of Islamic Archaeology”, and search for the way(s) ahead. Hence the symposium title: “Strategies for Islamic Archaeology in Bilād al-Shām and the Jazīrah”.

Then, and Now: a brief history of the discipline

In the last ten to twenty years the “concept” of an Islamic archaeology, with its own identity, objectives and procedures, has gained considerable strength in Jordan, propelled by

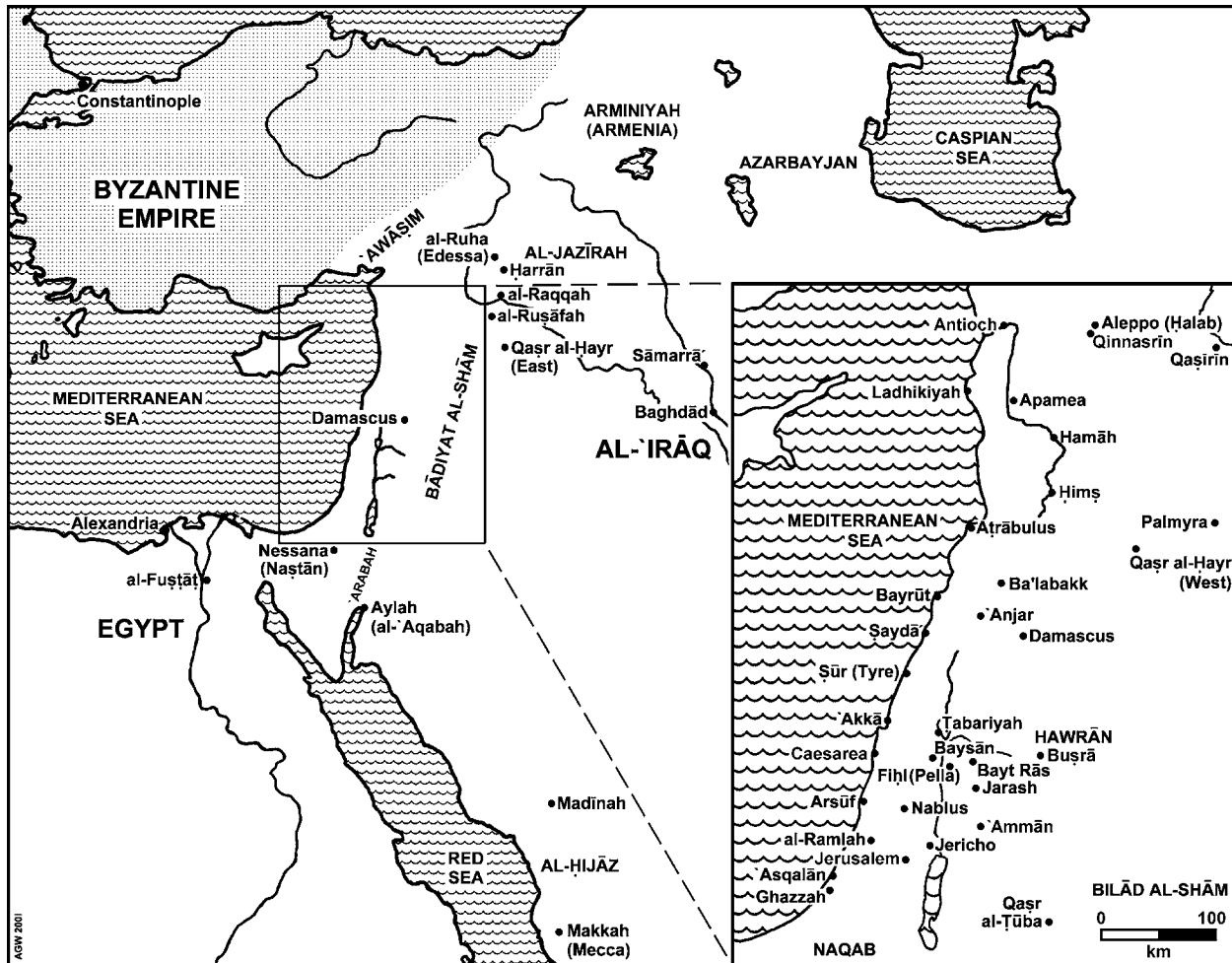


FIGURE 1. Map of Bilād al-Shām and the Jazīrah in the first Islamic centuries, showing principal sites mentioned in the text.

significant archaeological projects at important sites such as al-‘Aqabah, Khirbat Fāris, Bayt Rās and Pella/Fihl, which followed on from pioneering work at Ḥisbān, Pella and ‘Ammān Citadel. The change in attitudes and research objectives promulgated by a reasonably small, yet growing, body of archaeologists from a diversity of backgrounds between the early 1980s and the early 1990s was profound. Probably the most significant, if rather controversial (at the time), turning point in the formation of an Islamic archaeology in Jordan was the 1989 Lyon conference (The Fourth International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan; see especially the papers of Johns, Walmsley and Whitcomb). Since Lyon, approaches have matured and attitudes mellowed—in some quarters at least (see the review in Schick; also the comments of Whitcomb). Yet major impediments clearly remain, and one of the objectives of the symposium was to identify and characterize these as a path to focus future research.

Levantine archaeology, forked between the three “archaeologies” of prehistory, biblical studies, and classical history, has been ill equipped to tackle the Islamic periods. The theories and methodologies of these archaeologies, each focusing on an earlier period, had grown out of a different and, for Islamic archaeology, often quite irrelevant set of objectives. These disciplines, furthermore, often brought with them considerable cultural baggage, thereby intro-

ducing, regrettably, entrenched attitudes (indeed prejudices) irrelevant and inappropriate to the study of pre-modern Islamic societies. To some extent, especially early on, the intellectual tradition of each archaeologist was also reflected in their work: ancient/medieval historian, architectural historian, art historian, or a “dirt” archaeologist from a classical, biblical and/or prehistoric background. While, in the last decade or so, a certain “blurring” of backgrounds has occurred, gaps still exist between major discipline groups, notably historians, art historians and archaeologists—both dirt and architectural. Another drawback has been that, with only few exceptions, the academic goals of project directors and, even more disturbing, those of their funding bodies have severely discriminated against the appropriate consideration of Islamic remains, both in terms of excavation strategy and publication record. The problem is compounded by the fact that modern international tourism only rarely places an equal priority on sites with a predominantly Islamic heritage. This is sadly true for the whole region, but hopefully the recent pioneering “Museum with no Frontiers” project, featuring sites of early Islamic Jordan, will begin to break down this unreasonable bias.¹

Now and Then: the application of the discipline

Field archaeology of the Islamic periods in Bilād al-Shām and the Jazīrah could be summed up in two words: sporadic and haphazard. Of course, I would not want to underrate or discredit important work that has already been done, nor fail to acknowledge the establishment of an increasing number of structured research programs in the last few years. However, research into the Islamic periods has traditionally been identified with architectural and urban studies into places such as Damascus, Aleppo, Jerusalem and the so-called “desert castles”, and clearance excavations at large sites such as Anjar and Khirbat al-Mafjar, the latter originally thought to have been Hellenistic in date.

Until recently at least, archaeological field projects have been dogged by a “now and then” approach, a direct outcome of funding shortages, the (unquestionable) priority of rescue survey and excavation work in the face of modern development, and the continuing disinterest in “irrelevant periods” by project directors and their funding organizations. In this respect, the last 50 years have seen few changes. One only has to casually observe the recent career paths of a number of north American archaeologists to recognize the equivocal commitment of many institutions to Islamic archaeology and its practitioners, with only rare—if most welcomed—exceptions.

Observing these setbacks, it is not surprising that Islamic archaeology still struggles to make a real and credible contribution to the social history of pre-modern Bilād al-Shām; the promise may be understood, but the information has not been forthcoming. Few Islamic historians have found it possible to access archaeological and, likewise, numismatic sources, simply because of the scarcity of a comprehensive data set and the unreliability of that which does exist. It is incumbent upon us as archaeologists to deliver that information.

Pointers towards New Strategies for Islamic Archaeology

The forging of lines of communication and a focussing of purpose is what I thought the symposium might begin to achieve. Yet, I don’t think I am so naive to believe that any one

1. Only with incredulity can I recall the telling by a tourist guide in Jordan that the large circular reservoir on the ‘Ammān citadel was used by Roman soldiers garrisoned in the adjoining complex to wash their horses. An Islamic attribution for the citadel complex seemed inconceivable to both the Jordanian guide and his international clients.

event such as this symposium could bring about systemic change in the way our discipline is practiced and presented. That will require a more regular series of meetings, each tackling a different issue, possibly within the already established framework of ICAANE. Nonetheless, the workshop has provided a valuable summation of where we stand at a particular point in time, the opportunity for people to crystallize current practise, and a chance to communicate and discuss future “strategies”—the first of the strategies required to promote our discipline at the start of the 21st century. Often, I feel, we are striving towards a common goal, using similar approaches and obtaining comparable results, yet we fail to communicate this effectively, both to others and among ourselves!

During the symposium, speakers addressed several significant themes within a rather loosely imposed session structure, and these tackled, to varying extents, many of the issues outlined above. Unfortunately, some of the participants were able to meet the publication deadline for the congress, and not all of the papers appear in this volume.² However, a short summary of the published papers, grouped according to their sessions, may be worthwhile here.

In the first session (Thursday 25 May, 9: 00–10: 40 am), four papers dealt with the question of “Archaeology and the State”; that is, how archaeology records the origin, development and changing dynamic of the ruling elite and the way they projected themselves in early Islamic society. Two of those papers are presented here:

1. Mirko Novák, “Change of Caliphate Ideology in the Light of Early Muslim Architecture”, which offers the long view on this issue; and
2. Alastair Northedge, “‘Al-Ḥayr’ in ‘Abbāsīd Iraq”, a study of hunting reserves from Sāsānid to ‘Abbāsīd times.

The second session (Thursday 25 May. 11: 00–13: 00) dealt with the topic of “Sites and their Contexts”. Fortunately, all five papers were submitted for publication, each focusing on excavations at a specific site and evaluating the implications of this work for our understanding of social and urban developments in early Islamic times. The papers as published are:

1. Ignacio Arce, “Early Islamic Urban Patterns and Features at Amman Citadel: Analysis and Discussion”, which presents and analyses the important new discoveries in front of the early Islamic “audience hall” (gateway) on the ‘Ammān citadel;
2. Kay Prag, “Umayyad Building II in Jerusalem”, offering evidence for a likely corrective to the destruction date of the Umayyad complex south of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem;
3. Alexandra Uscatescu and Teresa Marot, “The Ancient Macellum of Gerasa in the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods: The Archaeological Evidence”, in which they reconsider the final phases of early Islamic date at the macellum in Jarash;³
4. Israel Roll, “Early Islamic Arsûf: the Archaeological Aspect of an Urban and Maritime Centre of the Eastern Mediterranean Coast”, where more than a decade of ar-

2. My editorial objective was to seek constancy within each paper, rather than over the whole collection. Therefore, the reader will find variations between papers within the symposium, such as with the spelling of place names.
3. Within the context of Syro-Palestinian archaeology, the period ca. 324–640 (that is, from Constantine the Great to the Islamic Conquest) is conventionally termed “Byzantine”. See the table at the end of this introduction.

chaeological discoveries have uncovered a major early Islamic Mediterranean commercial centre and port; and

5. Sami el-Masri, “Islamic Archaeology in the Lebanon. The Contribution of the Beirut Excavations to the Understanding of Islamic Ceramics of the Eastern Mediterranean”, an exceptionally valuable report on discoveries at another Mediterranean port, Bayrūt, within the (largely undeveloped) context of Islamic archaeology in Lebanon.

In the third session (Thursday 25 May, 14: 30–15: 30), three papers dealt with the issue of early Islamic settlement profiles. The two offered here are:

1. Jodi Magness, “Making the Invisible Visible: the Case of the Early Islamic Period in Palestine”, which decisively upgrades the extent of settlement in the Negev desert of south Palestine during early Islamic times through a reinterpretation of published archaeological data from Nessana (Naṣṭān); and
2. Alison Betts, “Water Systems and Settlements in the Badiyat al-Sham”, which explores the socio-political context of the creation of water systems in the Jordanian *bādiyah* (steppe lands) in Byzantine times, and the implications of these developments for early Islamic settlement in this marginal zone.

The fourth and fifth sessions concentrated on architecture within the context of sites. Three papers are presented here:

1. Andrew Petersen, “Approaches to the Islamic Built Heritage”, a critical analysis of current practise in the study of architectural remains, using examples from Lebanon (‘Anjar, Ba’albak and Tripoli);
2. Cristina Tonghini and Guido Vannini, “The Contribution of ‘Light’ Archaeology to the Study of Fortified Sites in Northern Syria”, which details work on fortified settlements in Syria using modern techniques that focus on matters of architecture and environment within their socio-historical context; and
3. Julia Gonnella, “The Citadel at Aleppo: the Islamic Periods”, which presents a (surprising) study of the historical attribution of standing architecture on the citadel in the face of modern restoration work, and results from the Islamic levels of excavations within the citadel.

Participation at the symposium, which reached an unanticipated 50 delegates or more in some sessions, confirmed the growing acknowledgment of Islamic archaeology as a distinct and valuable discipline. The sessions served the important function of continuing to forge new lines of communication between historians, art historians, architectural archaeologists, and dirt archaeologists and, critically, served to further break down the increasingly blurred boundaries separating each discipline area.

The symposium did involve some preliminary effort, but I was very happy with our sessions and the subsequent papers for publication, and genuine thanks to everyone for their considerable cooperation and enthusiastic participation. I would specifically like to thank Jere Bacharach for overseeing proceedings and offering observations at the end, Claus-Peter Hasse for adopting the symposium within the special theme area of Islamic Archaeology, and Ingolf Thuesen along with other members of the organising committee of 2ICAANE for taking the symposium on board. May it be the first of many such meetings to enhance and promote the growing discipline of Islamic archaeology.

Table of Chronological Periods in the Archaeology of Bilād al-Shām

Hellenistic Period

- Early Hellenistic, 332–198 B.C.E. (B.C.)
- Late Hellenistic, 198–63 B.C.E.
- Nabataeans, 312 B.C.E.–106 C.E. (A.D.)

Roman Period

- Early Roman, 63 B.C.E.–106 C.E.
- Late Roman, 106–324

Byzantine Period

- Early Byzantine, 324–491
- Late Byzantine, 491–640

Islamic Period

Dynastic

- Orthodox Caliphs, 632–661
- Umayyad, 661–750
- ʿAbbāsīd, 750–969
- Fāṭimid-Saljūk, 969–1099
- Crusader, 1099–1187
- Ayyūbid, 1173–1250/60
- Mamlūk, 1250/60–1517
- Ottoman, 1517–1917
- Modern, 1917–present

Archaeological (Whitcomb)

- Early Islamic 1, 600–800
- Early Islamic 2, 800–1000
- Middle Islamic 1, 1000–1200
- Middle Islamic 2, 1200–1400
- Late Islamic 1, 1400–1600
- Late Islamic 2, 1600–1800
- Modern, 1800–present

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