

**UMM UBTŪLAH: A NABATAEAN AND/  
OR ROMAN MILITARY SITE ALONG  
THE NORTH SIDE OF THE WADI EL  
HASĀ IN SOUTHERN JORDAN**

by  
Burton MacDonald

**Discovery and Work at the Site**

The large site of Umm Ubtūlah was discovered on 22 May 1982 by the Wadi el Hasā Archaeological Survey (WHS) while working along the northern edge of the so-called Edomite plateau in Southern Jordan.<sup>1</sup> Bedouin living in the area provided the name of the site.<sup>2</sup> The site itself is located on an entrenched meander in the Wadi el Hasā and on its north side<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1). Photographs were taken of the site on May 22 but it was not possible to visit the site at this date.

Subsequently the team was able to make visits to the site in late May and early June 1982. On the second of these visits two pottery samples were taken from the site. The first sample was collected from the southwest corner of the site and the field reading was 34 Nabataean/Early Roman; 5 Late Roman; 1 Early Byzantine; 2 Late Byzantine; 1 Late 'Ayyūbid/Mamlūk; 7 Undetermined. The second sample, taken from the southeast corner of the site, consisted of 3 Early Bronze; 4 Nabataean/

Early Roman; 9 Late Ottoman; 5 Undetermined.<sup>4</sup> No pottery could be found at the highest elevations of the site. As a consequence of this visit, made on a very hot day and around noon, very little pottery seemed to occur at the site.

On the basis of these field readings plus the observable architecture, it was concluded that the site was a Nabataean and/or Roman military installation which probably was associated with a line of Nabataean and/or Roman fortresses and watchtowers along the south side of the Wadi el Hasā.<sup>5</sup> The size and believed importance of the site, previously unreported, seemed to warrant a return to it in May of 1983 to draw a topographical plan and to attempt to obtain more information.

A team consisting of S. Balderstone, architect and surveyor; N. Beqa'in, representative of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan; G. Mattingly of Johnson Bible College, Knoxville, TN, and a two-year team member of the Central and Southern Moab Survey Project;<sup>6</sup> and the writer returned to the site for three days, 16-18

<sup>1</sup> Team members of the WHS 1982 were E. B. Banning; N. Beqa'in, representative of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan; B. F. Byrd; C. D'Annibale; B. MacDonald; and G. O. Rollefson. On the possibility that this site was seen by N. Glueck on a flight over the Wadi el Hasā on 5 November 1936 see his article "An Aerial Reconnaissance in Southern Transjordan," *BASOR* 67 (1937), p. 24 where he writes: "Continuing over the Wadi el Hasā we saw a great site on a high isolated knoll, situated in the Wādī el Hasā near its northern side. It is situated approximately halfway between er-Ruweihah on the south side of the wādī, and 'Aineh on the north side of the wādī; these sites are approximately 15 kilometres from one another down the length of the wādī. It was a very large walled site, which to judge from its general appearance might well date from the Early Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Situated above a large pool of water in the wādī, it made somewhat of the same impression as Kh. el-Medeiyineh overlooking the Wādī el-Môjib..."

<sup>2</sup> We are not completely satisfied with the name of the site. The name we first gave the site was Umm Umtūlah on the basis of what we heard the Bedouin calling the site. However, this name makes no sense. Arabists in Amman suggested that the site's name could be Umm Ubtūlah since the Bedouin change *b* to *m*. Thus the name would refer to a hanging, clinging plant that probably grew or grows in association with the water of the Wadi el Hasā.

<sup>3</sup> The highest point of the site is at coordinates 332335 on the 1:25,000 scale map, Qal'at el-Hasā, Map Sheet 225/025.

<sup>4</sup> The pottery from the 1982 season was read by S. Thomas Parker.

<sup>5</sup> A report on this Nabataean and/or Roman military monitoring system along the south side of the Wadi el Hasā is presently in preparation.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Miller, Archaeological Survey of Central Moab: 1978, *BASOR*, 234 (1979) p. 43-52; Archaeology Survey South of Wadi Mujib, *ADAJ*, XXIII (1979) p. 79-92.

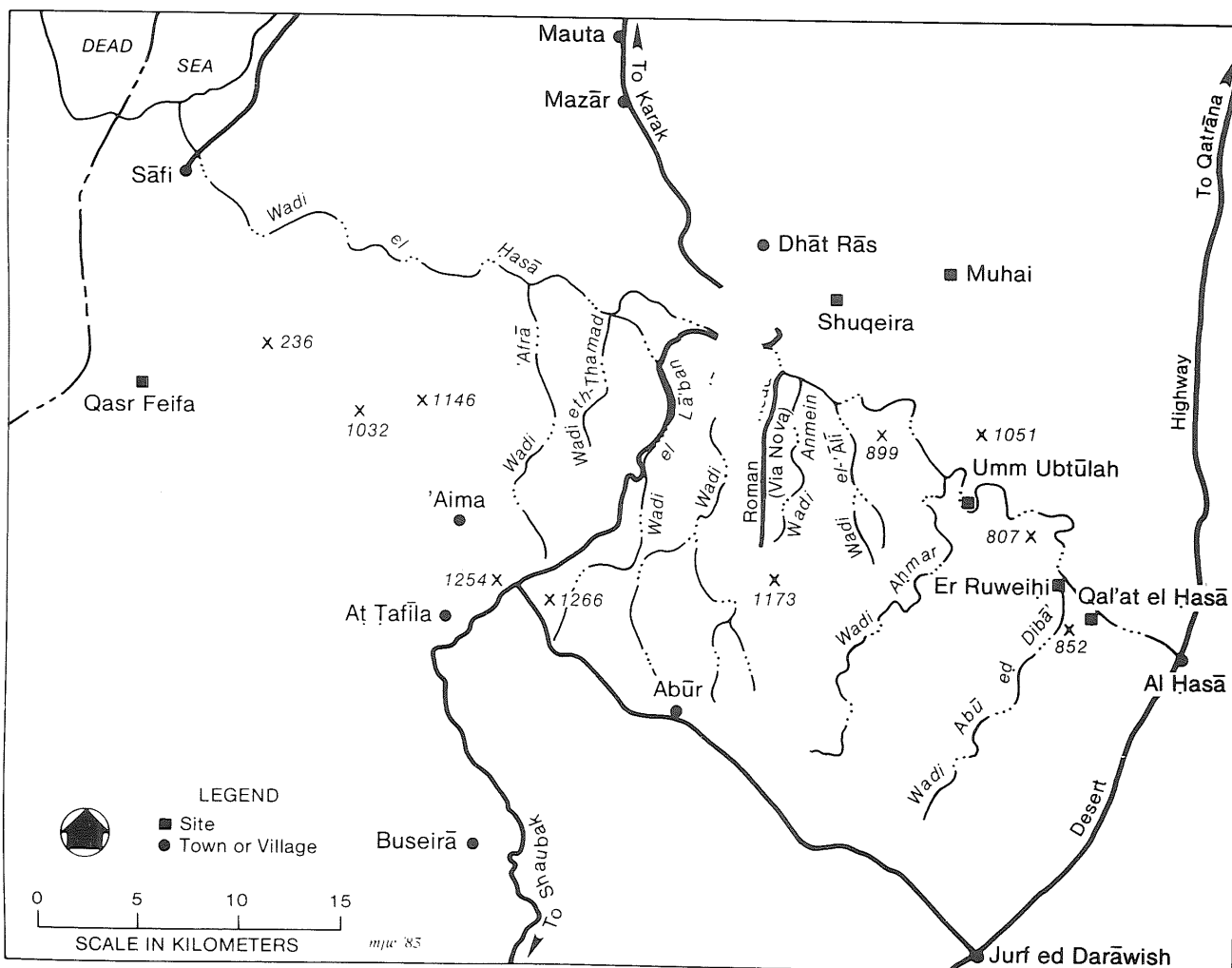


Fig. 1: WHS area and location of Umm Ubtulah.

May 1983. During this three day, working stay at the site the team drew a topographical plan (Fig. 2) took numerous photographs and collected five more pottery samples. In general, an attempt was made to learn as much as possible about the site.

To our pleasant surprise, a great deal of pottery was noted and collected from the lowest elevations of the site. Moreover, while making the topographical plan, the team discovered pottery among the numerous structures planned on the east side of the upper segment of the site. Furthermore, four sherds were collected from a recently robbed tomb (Pl. XXXVII: 1) on the south end of the upper segment of the site. This pottery will be discussed below.

### Description of the Surrounding of the Site

As previously noted, Umm Ubtulah is located in a huge bend in the Wadi el Hasā (Fig. 1). The lower segment is located on a

south-facing slope on the north side of the wadi while the upper segment is located on the crown of an associated ridge immediately to the north (Pl. XXXVII: 2).

The site is surrounded by good agricultural land on three sides: south, east, and west. The crop being grown in the immediate vicinity of the site is wheat. In early June of 1982 we encountered tomato farmers down the wadi to the northwest of the site at a distance of approximately two kilometres. We did not visit this area in May 1983. On the 1983 visit a bulldozer and a crew of three men were at work clearing more land for the growing of tomatoes approximately one kilometre up the wadi to the east.

Abundant water was noted in the wadi on the occasions of both the 1982 and 1983 visits. A pool, directly below the site to the east and called Birkat Umm Ubtulah by the land-clearing crew, contained a great deal of water. A gasoline pump was noted at Birkat Umm Ubtulah and water

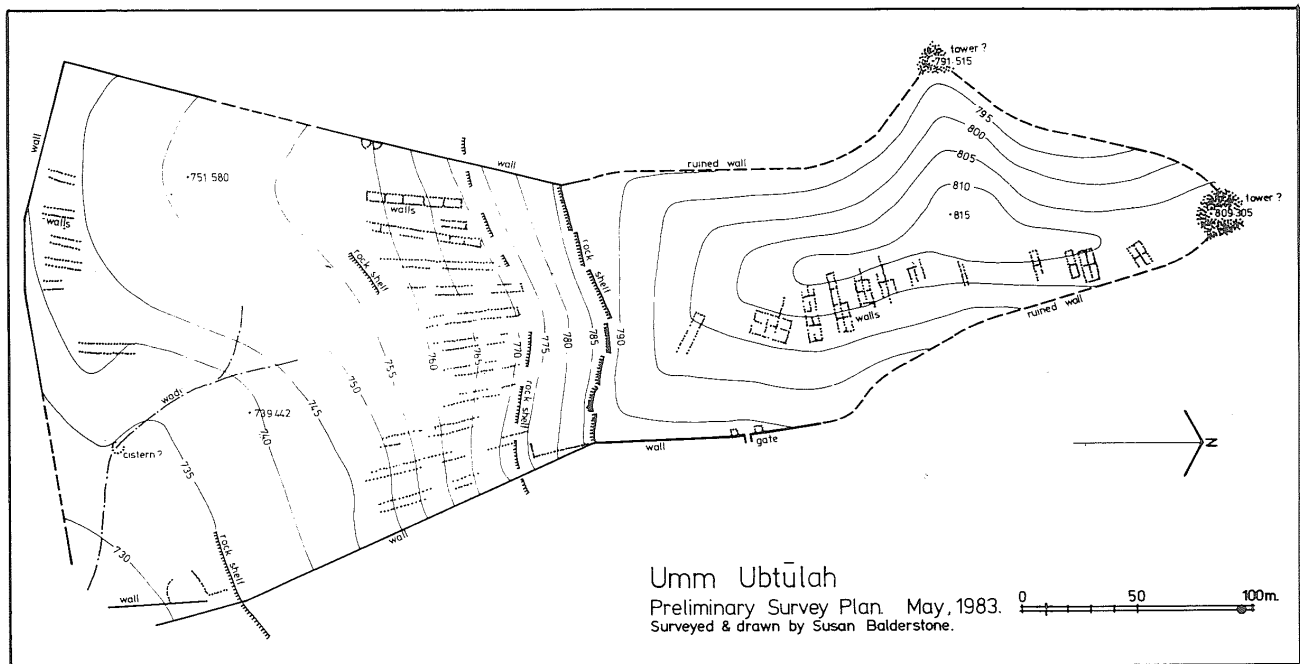


Fig. 2: Topographical plan of Umm Ubtūlah.

pipes lead up to a field on the south side of the wadi to the east of the site. A concrete foundation for a pump was noted on the north side of the wadi, also to the east of the site. Moreover, an aqueduct, chiseled out of bedrock, was noted leading from the pool to a field along the north side of the wadi immediately below Umm Ubtūlah. Other pumping stations and irrigation canals were noted both to the east and north-east of the site.

The vegetation along both sides of the wadi to the south, east, and west of the site was very lush. The growth was so thick that it was impossible to approach the water of the wadi in some places without suffering bodily damage. However, even at these places water could be heard falling over small (?) obstructions in its path.

Sheep and goats are herded by the Bedouin of the region. In both the 1982 and 1983 visits to the site a very large herd of camels was seen on the plateau to the south of Umm Ubtūlah. Bird life in the area of the site is extremely abundant.

There are no permanent dwellers in the wadi in the vicinity of the site. Two Bedouin tents were noted on the north side of the Wadi to the east in 1983 while in 1982 a Bedouin tent was located im-

mediately to the west of the site. The people working in the area told us that the farmers who grow the tomatoes along the Wadi come from El-'Ainā, and just come to the area for the planting, growing, and harvesting of their crop. The wheat in the area is probably harvested by the local Bedouin.

Access to the area of Umm Ubtūlah is presently difficult. The only apparent vehicle road into the site is from the Desert Highway to the east (Fig. 1). The site is approximately 22 km. from the Desert Highway by this road. The road is in poor condition for the most part and the driving time from the Desert Highway to Umm Ubtūlah is approximately 45 minutes. During parts of the rainy season of the year the site is inaccessible by even a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Access by foot or animal is possible along the wadi to the east from Er-Ruweihi<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 1). This route passes directly below Umm Ubtūlah. From this point paths can be taken further along the wadi to the north-west as far as Wadi el-'Ālī; to the south-west up the west side of the wadi Ahmar to Rujm Bakher on the northern edge of the Edomite plateau;<sup>8</sup> to the north and northwest to Muhai and

<sup>7</sup> B. MacDonald, G. O. Rollefson, E. B. Banning, B. F. Byrdm and C. D'Annibale, *The Wadi el Hasa Archaeological Survey 1982: A Preliminary*

Report, *ADAJ*, XXVII (1983).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Dhat Ras respectively (Fig. 1). It is difficult walk from Umm Ubtūlah (westward) to the main Karak to Tafilā road along the Wadi el Hasā, although the route from this main road to the Wadi el-‘Ālī is readily accessible (Fig. 1). It is the area directly east of the Wadi el-‘Ālī which makes this route quite difficult for both animals and men because of the steepness of the cliffs on both sides of the wadi.

### Topographical Plan of the Site

In making a topographical plan of the site care was taken not to exaggerate what could be seen on the surface of the ground and in the photographs. We attempted to avoid putting on the plan lines of which we were uncertain. A comparison of the photographs taken of the site from various angles and the topographical plan will show the conservativeness of the latter. We did not want to draw an imaginary plan of the site. We also avoided drawing features which we believed were not ancient. For example, the animal pens which show recent use and which appear in the pictures of the lower segment of the site do not appear on the plan. Furthermore, the piles of stones on the upper segment of the site in which we could clearly see human bones are also not on the plan. These piles of stones are presently burials. They could, however, cover ancient features of the site.

For the sake of description, the site will be divided into main enclosure wall, upper segment, and lower segment.

#### Main Enclosure Wall

The site is enclosed by a very impressive limestone wall (Pl. XXXVII: 2). The enclosed area measures 520.00 m. (North-south) x 250.00 m. (east-west) at its greatest extent. This enclosure wall is constructed of two skins of dry-stone walling with rubble infill. In some places on the east and west sides of the site the enclosure wall still stands over a metre high and its thickness is 1.50 m. on the average. For the most part, the wall is now a heap of rubble. However, even in this state it is impressive especially on the east side near the top of the lower segment of the site. The limes-

tone to build this wall as well as other features of the site would have been available in the immediate vicinity of the site.

#### Upper Segment

The upper segment of the site is separated from the lower segment by a rock shelf (Fig. 2); (Pl. XXXVII: 2). This part of the site encircles the crown of a ridge and measures ca. 270.00 m. (north-south) x 115.00 m. (east-west) at the rock shelf. The upper segment widens out to ca. 120.00 m. at the tower (?) located on the west side of the enclosure wall (Fig. 2).

The enclosure wall of the upper segment of the site appears to follow the contours of the ridge on the west side. On the east side, however, it rises from a small gate (Fig. 2) towards the northern tower (?).

As mentioned above, there are two possible towers on the upper segment. One is located at the northern extremity of the site and is now a heap of rubble (Pl. XXXVIII: 1). It measures ca. 20.00 m. in diameter (Fig. 2). The other is located on the western extremity of a spur running out towards the west. This structure now measures ca. 12.00 m. in diameter (Fig. 2).

The enclosure wall on the west side of the upper segment is most ruined. However, the descent towards the wadi is quite steep here and perhaps the wall was never very strong at this point.

There is a large number of indeterminate structures on the east side of the upper segment (Fig. 2; Pl. XXXVII: 2). These structures are made of rough limestone blocks and appear to be aligned on the slope. The ones at the southern end of this alignment are not parallel to the ones to the north. The probable reason for this is that their orientation has been changed to follow the direction of the slope. These structures are made from large field stones as pillars with smaller stones lying between the pillars. Some of these stone pillars still stand to a height of approximately one metre. The structures are 2.70-3.00 m. wide (north-south) between the walls. They descend the slope in a terrace-step fashion and measure ca. 6.40-4.80 m.

(east-west) from terrace-face to terrace-face. A triple-unit width structure is located on the southern end of the upper segment (Fig. 2). The width of the two exterior units is 6.30-6.50 m. while the width of the interior unit is ca. 4.60 m.

There is a small entrance way located in the eastern wall of this segment. It measures 1.90 m. wide and is flanked on the interior of the wall by two structures measuring 2.70 m.<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2) Birkat Umm Ubtūlah is located in the wadi directly below this section of the wall. No apparent path, however, was observed leading from this entrance to the source of water.

There do not appear to be any structures on the western side of the ridge within the enclosure wall (Pl. XXXIX: 1). This could be due to sheetwash erosion or to the fact that this is the windy side of the site. Our work at the top of the site was hindered each afternoon by a very strong northwesterly wind.

There are many burials located at the highest point of the site. Human bones were seen among the stones of the northern tower (?) and among a pile of stones at the highest point of the site. These burials probably overlie ancient structures and are most likely built using the stones from these structures. This fact caused difficulties of architectural interpretation and made it impossible to draw a more precise plan of the upper segment. One of the burials had been robbed between our visits to the site in 1982 and 1983 (Pl. XXXVII: 1).

### Lower Segment

The lower segment of Umm Ubtūlah is irregular in shape and measures 250.00 m. (east-west) x 230.00 m. (north-south) at the widest point. It measures 115.00 m. at the rock-shelf separating it from the upper segment of the site. It is located for the most part on a steep slope leading down to the Wadi el Hasā (Pl. XXXIX: 2).

There are more indeterminate structures located in this segment of the site. The walls of these structures measure ca. 0.90 m. thick on the east side of the upper segment of the site. The structures themselves measure from 2.60-3.20 m. on the

interior. They, like the similar structures on the east side of the upper segment, are arranged in a terrace-step, like fashion. They too are aligned in rows running down the slope (Fig. 2; Pl. XL: 1). They measure 7.90-8.30 m. from terrace-face to terrace-face.

The most-westerly observed row on the slope is now comprised of five units (Pl. XL: 1). It is, however, badly eroded. It is impossible to tell how many units originally comprised this and the other rows of these structures.

The topography of the lower segment is such that there is a natural runoff towards the southeast corner of the site. This is probably the cause of the erosion at this corner (Fig. 2; Pl. XL: 2). What may be a cistern is located along the line of this natural runoff (Fig. 2).

Several recently-used enclosures or animal pens are located at the southern segment of the sites (Pl. XXXIX: 2). These pens now separate the rows of similarly-appearing indeterminate structures discussed above from structures on the slope just to the north of the south wall of the site. These two series of structures may have originally been joined. Now, however, because of the animal pens and erosion it is difficult to say just what was their relation in antiquity.

There is no sign of a gate or entrance associated with this segment of the site. However, part of the west enclosure wall is in a very ruined state and the south-east corner of the site is completely eroded (Fig. 2).

An inner wall appears near the south-east corner of the site (Fig. 2). Perhaps this wall was built to replace the outer wall damaged by erosion. Now both walls are cut by an erosional gully (Pl. XL: 2).

### Description of the Pottery from the 1983 visit

Five pottery samples were collected during the 1983 working-visit to the site. The field reading for these samples are as follows:

1. West Corner of Site, lower Segment: 35 Nabataean (1st-2nd c.A.D.); 18 Byzan-

- tine; 1 Late Hellenistic or Early Roman; 1 Roman (1st c. A.D.)-piece of ribbed, red-ware; 5 Undetermined;
2. Southeast portion of the site, lower segment: 7 Nabataean (2nd c. A.D.); 9 Early Bronze, probably Early Bronze I; 8 Late Islamic;
  3. Central region of site, lower segment: 18 Nabataean; 1 late Roman; 4 Ottoman;
  4. East side among structures, upper segment: 31 Early Bronze, probably Early Bronze I--five indicator pieces;
  5. Recently robbed tomb, south end of upper segment: 4 Early Bronze, probably Early Bronze I--red burnished ware; all pieces probably from the same vessel.<sup>9</sup>

Combining the pottery from the 1982 and 1983 visits and dividing it up into the sherds collected on the upper and lower segments of the site one gets the following break-down:

1. Field reading for sherds collected from the upper segment: 35 Early Bronze, probably Early Bronze I;
2. Field reading for sherds collected from the lower segment: 12 Early Bronze, probably Early Bronze I; 60 Nabataean (1st-2nd c. A.D.); 38 Nabataean/Early Roman; 1 Late Hellenistic/Early Roman; 1 Roman (1st c. A.D.); 6 Late Roman; 18 Byzantine; 1 Early Byzantine; 2 Late Byzantine; 1 Late Ayyubid-Mamluk; 8 Late Islamic; 4 Ottoman; 9 Late Ottoman; 17 Undetermined.

### Interpretation and Concluding Remarks

On the basis of the sherds collected at Umm Ubtūlah in 1982 it was concluded, as previously mentioned, that the site was probably a Nabataean and/or Roman camp which was associated with a line of fortresses and watchtowers from the same period along the south side of the Wadi el Hasā. With the discovery of Early Bronze sherds in fairly large number (35) during the 1983 visit our first interpretation was thrown into doubt. Once again we realized the

dangers of dating a site merely on the basis of the sherds collected. What caused even greater concern was the fact that the only sherds found on the upper segment of the site were all dated to the Early Bronze period. All these sherds were collected from among the indeterminate structures on the east side of the upper segment. It seems strange that if the upper segment of the site was inhabited during the Nabataean-Byzantine period that not a sherd was found from this time frame in this upper segment. On the basis of the sherds collected at the site it can be concluded that at least sections of the site were "inhabited" during the Early Bronze period, the Nabataean-Byzantine period, and again during the Late Islamic period.

The architecture of the site is likewise problematic. The building construction of the enclosure wall appears to be similar on both the lower and upper segments. However, it is certainly possible that the enclosing of these two parts of the site is not contemporaneous. The indeterminate structures on the east side of the upper segment as well as on the slope and bottom section of the lower segment appear on the surface at least to be of the same construction technique. It is not unreasonable to conclude that they are contemporaneous. However, they need not be. These indeterminate structures are so regularly aligned that they give the impression of a military settlement.

Following a lecture I gave in June of 1983 at the American Centre of Oriental Research (ACOR) in Amman, I was informed that a similarly appearing and positioned site, called Umm al-Tawabbīn, is located east of Safī on the south side of the Wadi el Hasā. This site was discovered by Dr. David McCreery, Director of ACOR, and included in Dr. Geoffrey King's survey of Byzantine and Islamic Sites in 1982. The latter reports that the site is quite easily the largest in the Ghôr and that it is dated to the Roman period.<sup>10</sup> Thus both Umm Ubtūlah and Umm al-

<sup>9</sup> The pottery from the 1983 season was read by James A. Sauer and Nabil Khairy.

<sup>10</sup> More information on this site will be published by King in a forthcoming issue of *ADAJ*.

Tawabbīn probably served as bases for Nabataean and/or Roman soldiers who served in the fortresses and watchtowers along the Wadi el Hasā.<sup>11</sup> Excavations are needed to provide more precise dating and more detailed architectural information on

Umm Ubtūlah.

Burton MacDonald  
St. Francis Xavier University  
Canada

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<sup>11</sup> I am most grateful to Professor G. W. Bowersock for his comments on this paper. I wish also to thank the members of WHS 1982 for their contribution to the preliminary work at Umm

Ubtūlah. This paper could not have been written without the help of N. Beqa'in, S. Balderstone, and G. Mattingly.