

KHIRBET EL BURZ¹

by

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Introduction

Khirbet el Burz was surveyed by the authors over a period of two days in October 1984 on the instigation of Mr. Mahmoud Rousan and as part of Dr. C. J. Lenzen's survey in northwestern Jordan.² The site was again visited and surveyed in November 1984 by Lenzen/McQuitty and Dr. David McCreery, Director of the American Centre for Oriental Research, Amman. The only previous survey was that of Nelson Glueck in 1942.³

Location

Khirbet el Burz is situated in north-west Jordan, approximately seven kilometres north-west of the modern city of Irbid and two kilometres south-west of the modern village of Sama at grid reference 2253/2258.⁴ The area is characterized by deeply dissecting *wudyan* dating from the Late Pleistocene period which run into the east-west Wadi el 'Arab and by sloping hills which rise up to the watershed between Wadi el 'Arab and Wadi Yarmouk. The area receives an average rainfall of 400 mm. per annum and as there are no springs in the immediate vicinity of Khirbet el Burz, a cistern system is employed for water supply, making use of both surface water run-off collection and rainwater storage. The impression of the landscape today is similar to that of antiquity;⁵ extensive exposures of calcrete bedrock are covered with sparse vegetation. This impression was only slightly altered during Ottoman times when the few existing trees were cut down for fuel. The modern use of the land

has changed little over the centuries: wheat, lentils and olives are cultivated. In addition, the land is used for grazing, both by Bedouin flocks and those of the villagers. The Bedouin are in the area from late summer, after the harvest, until early spring.

The Site

The site lies on a low promontory at a height of 400.00 metres, bordered on the north, west and south sides by the Wadi 'Ish Ghurab. The site measures approximately 205 metres north-south and 288 metres east-west. The edges of the site are cultivated but the top remains fallow. The soil on the top is grey in colour due to the occupation and merges into the Mediterranean sub-rossa soil on the cultivated slopes.

To the north, the land drops steeply to the *wadi* while on the west and the south it slopes more gently. Over the whole site caves occur naturally which are now used by the Bedouin for stabling their flocks during the winter months. Traces of earlier construction were found in the caves which suggest occupation. The west side of the site is being bulldozed to make way for a new access road.

Survey Methodology

The aim of surveying the site was to discover which periods of occupation were represented at the site, both in material culture remains such as pottery, and in architectural remains, i.e., graves. Moreover, it was hoped to determine

¹ The site is also known as Khirbet el Birz and Khirbet el Bourj.

² Dr. C. J. Lenzen carried out a survey of part of north-west Jordan during 1984 as a National Endowment of the Humanities fellow at ACOR, Amman.

³ Nelson Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine IV*, AASOR, Vols. 25-28 (1945-1949) p. 148.

⁴ The map used was the 1941, 1:25,000 Transjordan series.

⁵ Personal communication, Dr. John Powell, the British Geological Survey of Jordan.

intra-site variability and density for the periods of occupation by gridding the site and surveying accordingly. The site was divided as shown in Figure 1. The approximate centre of the Khirbet was marked and from this three concentric circles of radii twenty, forty and sixty metres respectively were marked. Each circle was divided into four segments and fifteen minutes was spent collecting material culture remains (mcr's) in each segment by one person. The perimeters of the site were surveyed according to compass direction.

Results

Although further work on the mcr's is necessary before detailed statements about the intra-site variability can be drawn, primary conclusions can be made. Ceramically, the periods from the mid-first century A.D. through to the nineteenth century A.D. were represented with possible earlier sherds on the southern and western slopes. The Roman (A.D. 100-A.D. 334) and Byzantine (A.D. 334-A.D. 632) sherds were concentrated on the west and south-west sides of the Khirbet correlating with Byzantine shaft graves which clustered in the west (see discussion below). This sector of the site was also where the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid pottery was concentrated suggesting immediate continuity of occupation (A.D. 661-A.D. 950) from the Byzantine period. Ayyūbid and Mamlūk (A.D. 1100-A.D. 1516) sherds were most frequent in the east and south-east quadrants while those of the Ottoman period were found on the northern slope facing the modern village of Sama. Architecturally, the information was, for the most part, scanty; however, certain features stand out.

A. Structure A (Plate XXVIII, 1)

This structure lies on the highest point of the khirbet in the eastern half of the site. It is rectangular, measuring ten metres north-south by fifteen metres east-west, and one corner has been robbed out so that the squared blocks and plastered interior

are visible. Although no pottery was found directly in association with this, it could be interpreted as a look-out installation; underneath this there was a cave, possibly used for stabling animals.

B. Courtyard Complex (Figure 1: B)

This complex is located on the north-west side of the site overlooking the steep drop to the *wadi*. It consists of a stone perimeter wall within which are structural remains and two cisterns. This probably represents a housing complex dating from the latest village occupation of Khirbet el Burz in the early nineteenth century.

C. Underground Channel (Figure 1)

This channel or tunnel, exposed by the bulldozer, was accessible for a length of ten metres. It was carved out of bedrock and was supported by two sets of adjacent rounded arches with a visible height of one and a half metres, made of well-dressed stones. Mid-seventh century A.D. pottery was collected from the interior. It is conceivable that this channel was used for water transportation.

D. Cisterns (Figure 1)

As mentioned above, there are no natural springs within the area and, therefore, cisterns are used for water storage. These are concentrated at the western end of the site where the outcropping of bedrock is more consistent. They appear to be of two types: simple cisterns and those with drinking troughs adjacent (Plate XXVIII, 2). In many cases, the "channel" leading water to the cisterns can be traced (Plate XXIX, 1).

D. Graves/Tombs (Figure 1)

Again, the graves/tombs are concentrated at the western end of the site where the bedrock is visible. They range from simple stone-cut shaft graves (Plate XXIX, 2), to more complex loculi tombs. In spite of being robbed and thus having no associated material culture remains, stylistically these can be dated to the Byzantine period.⁶

⁶ Dr. John Davis of Grace Theological Seminary, USA, is presently compiling a typology of tombs in Jordan.

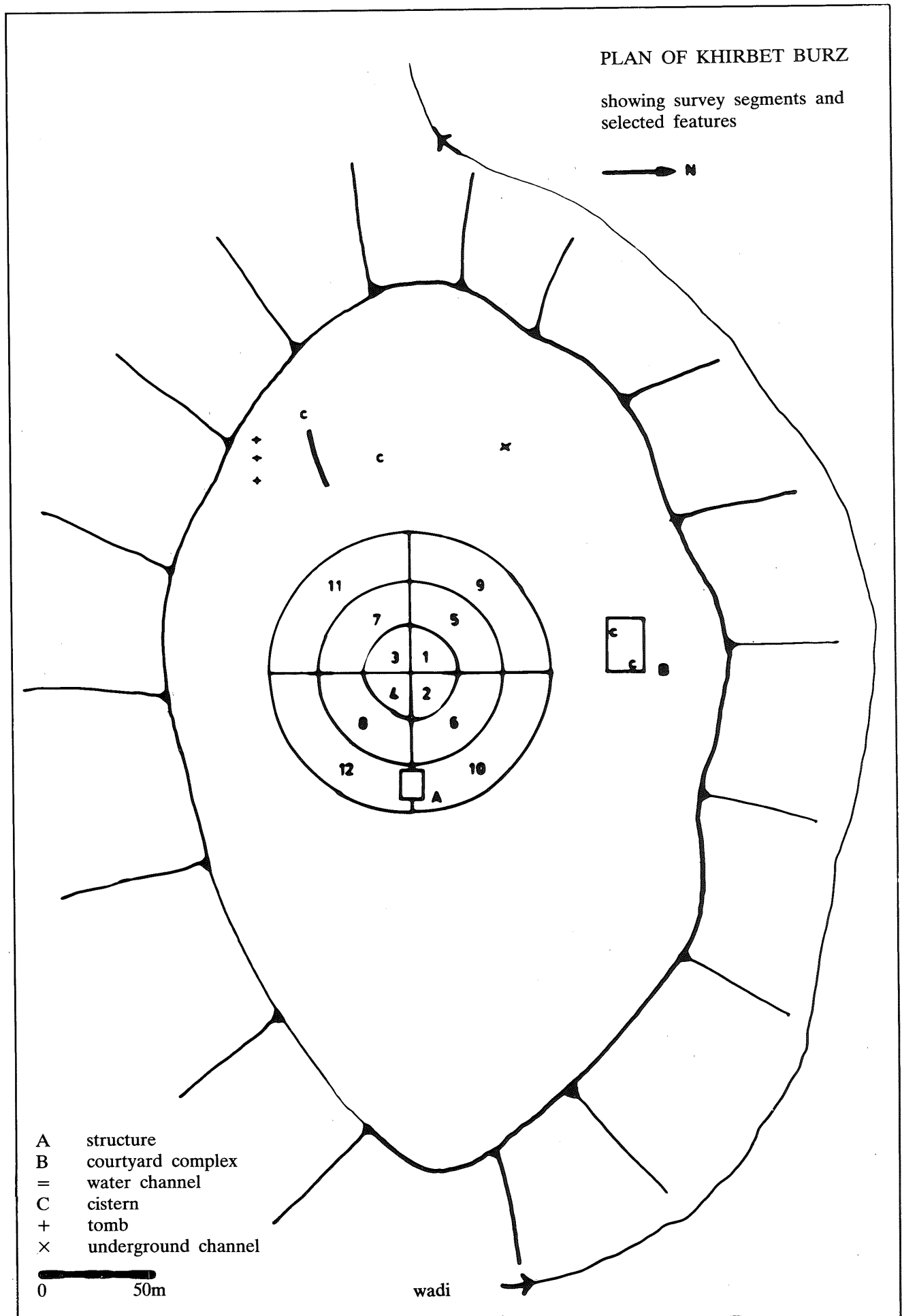


Fig. 1: Plan of Khirbet el Burz showing segments and selected features.

Conclusion

One of the most important aspects of the survey work at Khirbet el Burz has been that it shows that there was continuity of occupation in northern Jordan from the Roman period to the present day. In the sixteenth century Ottoman tax records tell us that el Burz was a thriving village.⁷ This belies one of the long-held beliefs concerning northern Jordan: that it was occupied only by nomads from the Umayyad to the Ottoman period. Excavation of this rich site, planned for the future, will determine the nature of this little known period of occupation, its fluctuations in intensity and its differences from earlier, i.e., Roman and Byzantine, occupation.

The site itself lies in a strategic position, primarily for trade, and within a fertile agricultural area. Survey work by Lenzen has shed light on a secondary road system along the Wadi el Arab⁸ which was probably in use during the Roman/ Byzantine (Decapolis) period, as well as during the later Islamic periods. Khirbet el Burz was, in all likelihood, a trade stop along the Wadi el 'Arab, itself one of the main trade arteries between the southern Hauran and Palestine.

Previous study of the Islamic periods in Jordan has concentrated on urban sites, e.g., Jerash, the Amman Citadel, Pella; or,

on unique sites, e.g., the desert "castles". There is a need to investigate secondary, rural sites so that a more balanced view of the nature of the settlement can be obtained. Because of its relatively untouched state, Khirbet el Burz provides an excellent opportunity to research this question.

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⁷ Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century*, Erlangen, 1977, p. 200.

⁸ The surveyed portions of the road lie between Irbid and el Burz. A report on this survey is forthcoming.