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Umm Qeis—A Northern Jordanian Village in Context

The village of Umm Qeis, overlooking the hot springs in the Yarmouk valley from the south, and the Lake of Tiberias from the southeast, occupies the site of ancient Gadara. Gadara was a city of the Decapolis, famous for its poets and philosophers. Founded as a military colony by the Ptolemies, the settlement was granted the rights of a city by the Seleucids; it figures prominently in the Greek and Latin sources until the Islamic conquest. During the past 10 years, excavations have been conducted in the ruins of the decapolis city, outside the village of Umm Qeis. The village itself offers the archaeologist and anthropologist one of the best preserved Late Ottoman villages in Jordan and represents an important stage in the long history of settlement in the region.

In order to expand the classical-archaeological excavations, plans were made to resettle the inhabitants of Umm Qeis and bulldoze the beautiful old houses. In 1984, Heinz Gaube of Tübingen University together with Seteney Shami and Birgit Mershen of the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Yarmouk University, began a rescue project in an attempt to record the architecture, material culture and social life represented at Umm Qeis. The architecture and history of settlement as well as an ethnographic study will be presented in a separate report. This paper will present an outline of the social system that brought villages like Umm Qeis into being.

An understanding of the history of Umm Qeis necessitates going beyond the visually concrete manifestations of social and economic life. The remains and buildings of Umm Qeis certainly attest to its moments of prominence. However, the importance of Umm Qeis may not be in its unique features but rather in the common history that it shares with the other villages of the region. In many other villages, however, the material evidence of settlement processes has been overridden by structures of concrete and steel which give the impression that history started only yesterday.

The history of the region should be sought not only as a series of events (the occupation and abandonment of sites), and not only as the social structure of discrete units (a village, a tribe), but as a regional social system that will provide a framework for understanding the interrelations between groups and the wider political and economic context within which these interrelations are played out. Thus placing 19th century Umm Qeis both in context and perspective may help delineate the paths of inquiry necessary in reconstructing the history of a poorly understood period and region.

Three aspects which illustrate the relationship of Umm Qeis to the wider world in the late 19th century are: land use systems, the process of land registration and ownership, and trade networks.

The key to understanding land use systems in the region is in the particular mix of agriculture and pastoralism. Dryland farming, that depends only minimally upon irrigation, results in extensive rather than intensive use of land. Animal herds are also kept by the villagers as an important source of subsistence as well as an insurance against bad seasons or periods of drought. At times of poor returns from agriculture, groups of people and even whole villages may abandon agriculture and pursue other economic activities till conditions favouring agriculture are once again established. It is in this context that we may understand the wide variations in travellers' accounts of the size of settlement and population at Umm Qeis in the nineteenth century. While some travellers report no inhabitants at all (Burckhardt 1822, Lynch 1849), others only "miserable huts" (Schumacher 1889:50, Buckingham 1825). Several mention that the inhabitants lived in the caves and passageways of the Roman ruins (Seetzen 1854, Tristam 1866, Oliphant 1880). One mentions that the "tribes" lived in Umm Qeis for only part of the year (Tristam 1866; 463). Estimates of the population range from 6 to 7 moslem families (Seetzen 1854) to 200 moslem inhabitants (Buckingham 1825) to only a few people (Merill 1881). It is important to note, however, that the travellers who see no inhabitants do mention cultivated fields (Lynch 1849) and tobacco (Harnisch 1854).

These accounts indicate that settlement at Umm Qeis was indeed sporadic in the nineteenth century. However it does not establish the nature of this settlement. Given that in the late sixteenth century, Umm Qeis was a thriving village of 24 *hanes* (households) and 15 *mujarrads* (individuals), paying tax on wheat, barley, summer-crops, fruit, goats and honey (Hutteroth and Abdul-Fattah 1977), how is its later abandonment to be explained? A full explanation has to take into

account the interplay of several factors, demographic (Hutteroth and Abdul-Fattah 1977), ecological (Marfoe 1980) and political (Swedenburg 1980), affecting the region as a whole. The pattern that suggests itself is one where under favourable conditions agriculture expands, new lands are brought under cultivation and previously abandoned villages are resettled. On the other hand, unfavourable conditions, drought, heavy taxation, fear of conscription and so on leads to the abandonment of villages and turning to pastoralism, sharecropping and wage labour in towns. This would explain the discrepancies in travellers' accounts of the population. It would also explain why under certain conditions, the population did not build houses but lived in temporary shelters or caves. This system of fluidity across space and social boundaries indicates that our usual assumptions and distinctions of urbanite/peasant/pastoralist, as well as desert/sown need to be re-examined.

It was fixing this fluidity that the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 had as one of its aims. Ottoman attempts in this period at promoting agriculture in Bilad al-Sham were also aimed at political centralization and increased state control (Baer 1969). The Land Code of 1858 made it mandatory to register land that was to be cultivated. In addition, land that was left fallow for more than three years could be confiscated by the state (Baer 1969). Enforcement of such laws, however, would have required more control than the Ottomans actually had over the region (Owen 1981). Although one of the aims of the Land Code was to rid the taxation system of the tax-farmers, who as intermediaries between the state and the immediate producers grew rich at the expense of both, the result was the rise of a new intermediary in the form of urban based absentee landlords who registered large tracts of land in their name (Khoury 1983). In the Hauran region, however, this did not take place. Instead, the region saw the rise of peasant-landlords (Khoury 1983). An examination of the process of land registration at Umm Qeis illustrates this latter pattern, and the gradual stratification of the village community into *mellakin* (landowners) and *fellahin* (cultivators).

Based on oral history, land registration at Umm Qeis appears to have taken place around the 1870s or 1880s. About 15 heads of households registered land with the encouragement and initiative of Falah al-Rusan, who later became the *Mukhtar*, the main merchant and the Ottoman Representative at the village, and also the owner of the largest and most imposing house. At the time, the Rusans were the most numerous lineage comprising five heads of households divided into two descent groups. In their case, as in the case of other families who came to Umm Qeis at that time, a clear pattern emerges. These families had lived in nearby villages such as Sama Rusan and Malka. Since the land in those villages had been registered by the more powerful members of the family and village, they had been excluded and had to go and seek land elsewhere. Therefore there was not only direct pressure from the Ottoman government that all cultivated land had to be registered, which perhaps could have been evaded given the tenuous control

of the Ottoman administration over the region, but there was also local pressure as some people took advantage of the land registration process and pressured others to do so as well. Thus officially registering land may have become a necessary form of protection and security vis-a-vis other landowning peasants. The history of Umm Qeis indicates that people registered lands that they had occasionally cultivated while living in other villages. Ultimately, however, it was not the fact that land at Umm Qeis was fertile, nor its strategic position, that brought these families to settle at Umm Qeis. Rather it was the fact that, as present-day villagers say, there was no one there, a comment that should be interpreted to mean no one who could afford to register land.

One effect of land registration was therefore the breaking up of large kinship groupings. These breaks apparently occurred along already existing lines of tension within the group. The other effect was the increasing stratification of the community. Not only did a landowner have to pay a registration fee for the land, but he also had to shoulder the yearly taxes (Khoury 1983). Yet in spite of this individualization of land ownership, agricultural practice maintained aspects of its communal character at Umm Qeis, and this factor mitigated the consequences of stratification.

The people of Umm Qeis registered around 1,800 *dunums* of agricultural land, and 1,800 *dunums* of pasture land. The agricultural land was divided officially into 62 shares and each head of household registered a certain number of shares. For cultivation purposes, however, the land was divided into four parts of 15.5 shares each. These quarters were also divided into three kinds of land, depending upon the quality of the soil: the plain, the valley, and the slopes. The four parts were periodically redistributed every two to four years among the landowning families.

This *musha'a* system of land use was wide-spread in Bilad al-Sham and further research is needed to analyze how it worked in practice. The interesting feature, here, is the persistence of this system in the face of individual land-ownership imposed by the Land Code. Thus a number of different families holding a different number of shares were partners in each quarter of the village lands. This partnership was not an equal one. There were four main landowning families, each dominating one quarter, and a number of attached follower, landowning families. This relationship was clearly a power relationship and not merely a technique for the easier distribution of land. The basis of this power relationship probably lay in the way in which these families came to settle in Umm Qeis: the leading families coming first and then facilitating land registration for the follower families.

Thus although the Ottoman Land code aimed at establishing private landholdings (Baer 1969; Owen 1981), what in fact emerged was a communal, but non-egalitarian, use of land. This is clearly reflected in the architecture of the village with the leader landowning families at the top of the hill, the sharecroppers and tenant farmers in small scattered houses, and the follower landowning families divided between the two sets

of houses.

The third important feature to be examined in determining the wider context of Umm Qeis, is the trade network that linked the village to other villages and cities in the region, and indirectly to international markets. The latter half of the 19th century saw an expanding market in grains in Bilad al-Sham. To some extent this was due to the loss of Ottoman control over the rich grain producing lands of the Balkans. However it was also linked to the increasing commercialization of agriculture in Bilad al-Sham with the penetration of European economic interests into the region (Khoury 1983; Owen 1981). Although villages like Umm Qeis were not directly linked to the outside world market, they were affected indirectly. First of all, regional trade increased and the peasants of Umm Qeis began to market their products in greater quantities in the nearby towns of Samakh and Tiberias on Lake Tiberias. Secondly, two of the landowners went into partnership and began buying produce from the village and transporting it by camel to Acre, one of the export routes to Europe. These merchants of Umm Qeis grew wealthy and opened shops in which articles from Damascus, such as cloth, were sold.

Three kinds of trade took place in Umm Qeis. Firstly, via the merchants to Damascus and the coast of Palestine. Secondly, the trade carried out by the individual peasants, mainly by barter and in which agricultural products were exchanged for other products, livestock and household utensils. This trade linked Umm Qeis to other villages in the region as well as to the town of Irbid. And thirdly, the sale of products and animals to the Ottoman government. This last could be considered as a form of tax since it was obligatory and since the government fixed the prices at rates lower than the market prices.

In these ways, the economic conditions of the villagers were affected not only by local but also by national and international forces. The changing economic situation and the growing differentiation between the villagers is clearly demonstrated in the development of the houses in which they lived. As the houses of the wealthier people grew larger and more elaborate, other houses were subdivided and split up. The structure of the village of Umm Qeis and the structure of the individual houses are clear reflections of the economic, social and political environment of the village. Without an in-depth understanding of this environment, the study of the buildings themselves remains a study of static form with very little content.

Acknowledgements

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