

Irbid and Beit Ras Interconnected Settlements c. A.D. 100-900

The sites of Irbid and Beit Ras, Arbela and Capitolias of the Roman and Byzantine periods, Arbad and Beit Ras of the Islamic periods, are located on the fertile plateau of northwestern Jordan. Separated by only five kilometers, the two sites have been the foci of a long-term research programme since 1983.¹ Both sites have gradually been encroached upon by the development of the area in the last sixty years; thus, research is a combination of long-term strategies and salvage and rescue archaeological strategies in cooperation with the citizens and municipalities. Irbid, a walled site at least from the Middle Bronze Age through the Iron Age, and Beit Ras, originally a planned, walled Roman site, together bear witness to the long occupational history of the region.² How the two sites were interconnected during the period between c. A.D. 100-900 is dependent on two sources of data: archaeological and textual. It is not necessarily possible to merge the two data sets, as the former is concerned with the minutiae of the past and the latter generally is concerned with the governmental and administrative past.

During the Roman period, the two sites were in the region of the Decapolis: a loose confederation of cities within the modern states of Jordan, Palestine and Syria. Located in Jordan were the cities of Amman/Philadelphia, Jarash/Gerasa, Faḥl/Pella, Umm Qeis/Jadar/Gadara, Qweilbeh/Abil/Abila and Beit Ras/Capitolias.³ The most continuously excavated and best reported of the sites are: Amman, Faḥl and Jarash. Intensive research at Jadar, Abil and Beit Ras has only recently started. Irbid was never listed as one of the cities of the Decapolis;⁴ nor, was it ever declared a *polis*, "city", as Beit Ras was by the Roman authorities. It would appear, however, that the two sites

were both centres and urban in nature throughout the time period.

Unlike other sites in the region, neither Irbid nor Beit Ras are necessarily appropriate places environmentally for the location of sites. Water is not easily accessible, as there are no springs; however, the land, transected by small wadis joining the major east-west Wadi al-'Arab, has been noted throughout antiquity for its fertility. Lying presently within the 400mm isohyet, the land supports rain-fed grain agriculture as well as vegetables, olives and grapes. Archaeologically, the use of wheat, barley, lentils and olives in antiquity has been confirmed by palaeobotanical analysis. Although the fertility of the land accounts partially for the general growth and habitation of this section of Jordan, it does not account for the development of two centres following the Roman occupation of the area.

In order for there to have been these two centres, the water-supply problem had to have been solved to support the populations. The Irbid water system seems to have been partially a modification of the ancient Middle Bronze system, with the addition of a reservoir on top of the tell.⁵ Certainly, however, the system had to have been more intricate and is now obscured by the modern growing city. In Beit Ras, the system was carved from the bedrock: large cisterns with cut-channel run-offs to collect the rain water as well as a well-constructed reservoir formed the central elements of the system.⁶ In the 1989 excavation season, this system was better defined archaeologically; it would appear that it was used throughout the occupational periods of the site.⁷ Whereas to incorporate the tell of Irbid into a Roman city, and some would argue an earlier Hellenistic one, was what had been done at the other Decapolis cities in Jordan,

¹Cf. Bibliography under Lenzen; definitive statements on specific material culture remains are in preparation.

²Stratified remains indicate occupation at Tell Irbid since the Chalcolithic period, at Beit Ras since the Roman period.

³It remains unclear whether the tell located in the modern village of al-Ḥuṣn, south of Irbid, was Dion.

⁴This is *contra* to Ghawanmeh, 1986 and corresponds to the lists of Pliny and Ptolemy.

⁵Schumacher (1890: 153ff) discusses an ancient reservoir and a modern one (1885) outside the city, guarded by Ottoman soldiers. He does not mention the large reservoir on top of the tell, surveyed recently, and out of use by the 1930's, according to oral history.

⁶Glueck was the first to mention the system; cf. Lenzen and Knauf 1987b.

⁷One of the cistern walls was excavated, indicating a Mamluk rebuilding of the wall. The large reservoir seems to have been used from the Roman period on. The original suggestion by Lenzen and Knauf of the space being used for a theatre seems untenable after now. This is based on architectural analysis by Z. Zajd.

to build Beit Ras was to construct a city where there had been none.⁸ It would seem that the Roman authorities normally chose areas of population concentration and where a civil infrastructure already existed for their cities. These were then connected by well-made roads and played various roles in the eventual provincial and ecclesiastical systems.⁹

The intentionality of the construction of Beit Ras cannot be ignored. Ostensibly, there was no reason to build another city in close proximity to Jadar, Abil and Irbid. To be sure, the reason may rest with a group of citizens, who have gained wealth and status within the new empire, did not want citizenship within the existing territories; and, thus, they chose to build anew. However, the city was the smallest in plan¹⁰ of the Decapolis cities and it would seem that less was expended on it than others. The location of Beit Ras/Capitolias is simply a strategic one; all directions are generally visible from the "ras", the highest point north of the 'Ajlun mountains. The city was founded it would appear to make a statement concerning Roman authority.

There is little doubt from the textual evidence that Beit Ras took precedence over Irbid.¹¹ As well, the archaeological data argues for the site remaining urban in nature at least until A.D. 900.¹² Recent excavations on the "ras", at the northern section of the city wall and within the archaeologically designated Area A,¹³ all indicate the continuity of occupation following the foundation of the city in A.D. 97/98. The pottery *corpora* indicate only gradual changes over a long period of time. Lying below the sixth century church in Area A is an earlier Roman construction,¹⁴ paralleled by the foundations of the major walls throughout the Area. The same type of constructional techniques and changes were found at the city wall and on the "ras".¹⁵ What had been originally designated a public area, Area A, remained as such throughout the time period, as did the major wall construction on the "ras". At the city wall, however, the excavated gate underwent changes: the gate was blocked, back-filled and a tower was added to the outside, sometime during the late-eighth century.

Irbid, on the other hand, presents an altogether different archaeological picture. This is primarily due to the continuous occupation of the site¹⁶ and thus the altering of not only the tell's configuration but the surrounding area as well. Prior to 1986, little stratigraphic evidence had been

found to argue for a Roman, Byzantine and Islamic occupation of the site. The majority of the data originated with chance finds of the citizenry, early (pre-1970's) salvage excavations of the Department of Antiquities, records left by the nineteenth century explorers/travellers and from survey¹⁷ and wash layers excavated in 1984 and 1985. In 1986, excavations were continued on the north side of the tell in the archaeologically designated Area A.¹⁸

At the time of excavation, the municipality of Irbid was constructing shops to the north and east of the Area. What had been exposed was part of the Middle Bronze Age *glacis* and the curve of the same period basalt boulder city wall. In the process of constructing the shops, the contractors had bulldozed into the tell and, unhappily, had destroyed what was probably part of the seventh through ninth century A.D. water system; what remained was stratigraphically excavated. A plastered water channel, running under a wall, debouched into the remaining portion of what has been identified as a "tank". The pottery from these features dated to the end of the Umayyad period and the beginning of the Abbasid period. Admittedly, the data is slim; it is, however, the first stratified evidence for post-800 B.C. occupation of the tell.¹⁹

A review of the archaeological data from all available sources indicates that both Irbid and Beit Ras existed as cities or urban centres. Following the foundation of Beit Ras/Capitolias, Irbid/Arbela lost its earlier dominance and did not regain it until the Ottoman governmental seat was established there in the nineteenth century. This is a difficult notion to accept: two centres within such close proximity. It would seem, however, that this was indeed the case, leading one to question the roles of each and their interdependency. The five kilometres dividing the sites, although apparently part of the provincial boundary at an early point, was hardly a clear division. The fertile land between the two sites would have been used and formed part of the economic base for the region, particularly after the development of the late antique wine industry. The fact that as late as A.D. 724, an Umayyad caliph, Yazid II, lived in Beit Ras and died in Irbid, points to the continued connection of the two sites. Neither archaeological nor textual data will ever provide all of the answers; however, the integration of the data sets provide some understanding of the existence of two cities within such close proximity.

⁸Capitolias was built *de novo*, if the suggestion of an earlier Hellenistic "watch-tower" is accurate.

⁹Cf. Lenzen and Knauf 1987b.

¹⁰This is primarily based on Schumacher's drawings; however, the inaccuracy of his drawings should be taken into account.

¹¹Cf. Lenzen and Knauf 1987b.

¹²The date of A.D. 900 is rather arbitrary. The author does not necessarily agree with Walmsley (1987) either; although, it is clear that the change from city to village was gradual.

¹³Area A is north of the modern east-west road and east of the modern mosque, originally referred to as a "sunken area". Cf. Lenzen *et al.* 1985.

¹⁴Lenzen and Knauf 1987b contains an argument against there being a church; this proved to be a hasty conclusion.

¹⁵This conclusion is based on Zaid 1989.

¹⁶Cf. Lenzen 1988.

¹⁷Full survey data is in preparation by Lenzen; for the time being cf. Lenzen and McQuitty 1988.

¹⁸There was also a rebuild of the city wall, which has not yet been fully analyzed but seems to have been contemporary with the installations.

¹⁹This is *contra* to the original data published following the 1986 season.

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