

## **Settlement History and Village Space in Late Ottoman Northern Jordan**

### **Introduction**

This paper aims at an understanding of the processes which regulated the history of settlement in late Ottoman northern Jordan, in a period characterized by a high degree of population movements and a new trend towards more intensive land-use and increasing socio-economic stratification, and how these processes were reflected on the spatial-material level, shaping what today is perceived of as traditional villages. The focus is on the environmental, socio-economic and political determinants of the settlement patterns of Umm Qeis, Shaṭana and Nabi Hud,<sup>1</sup> three villages sharing basic environmental and historical features which allow for the comparison of the villages' respective developments in the late 19th through the early 20th century, leading to distinctive spatial and architectural features. The sources are the oral history and material culture of these villages supplemented by accounts in European travelogues.

### **Spatial and Temporal Setting**

In the centuries following the last Ottoman tax-registers in the late 16th century, many regions of Bilad ash-Sham underwent a marked shift in the pattern of land-use. The agricultural system in Jordan during the 17th through mid-19th centuries was characterized by extensive land-use and subsistence rather than market oriented economy. Due to a variety of ecological as well as political factors this low-intensity phase had ended a period of agricultural intensifications during the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods (Mershen and Knauf 1988: 137). The flexible, mixed pastoral farming system of the late Ottoman period found its spatial expression in the mode of settlement, which often was characterized by its temporary nature of occupation. On the material level this was expressed by the preference for low-cost involving shelters, such as natural caves or simple structures made of readily available

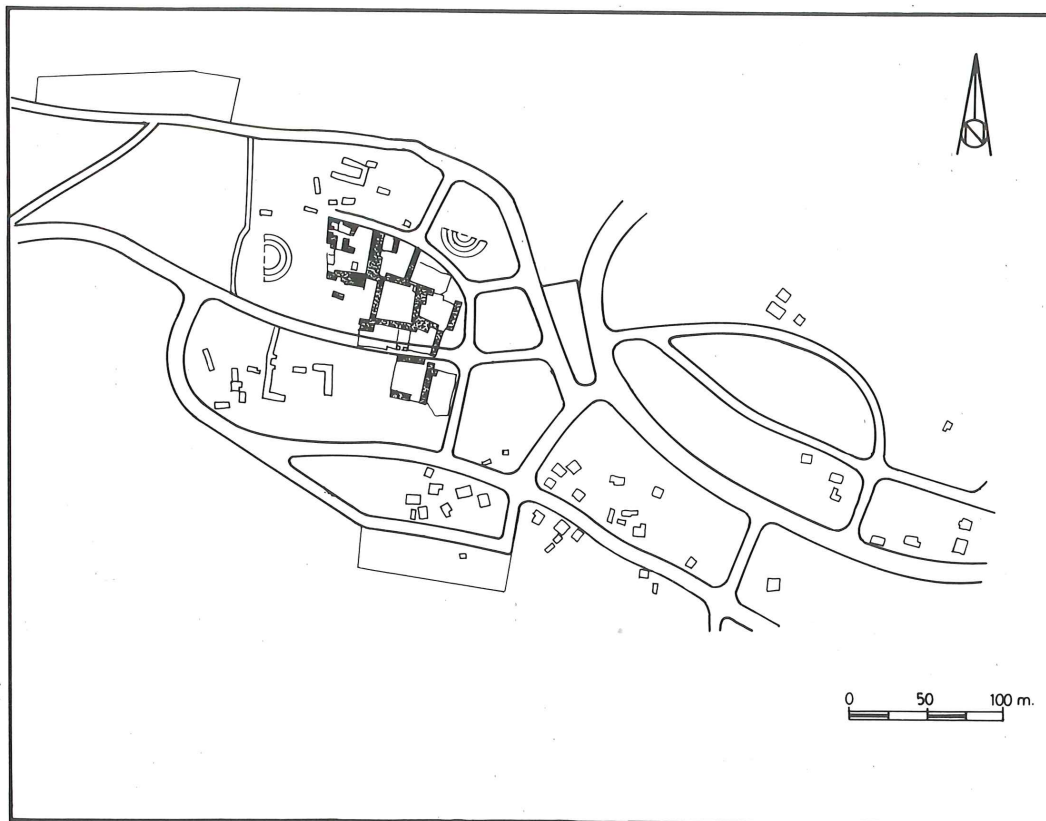
materials. On the spatial level this situation was reflected in the frequent shifting of settlement location. Oral history on the 18th and 19th centuries is a history of internal migrations, where families or tribal segments would move from one village to another in irregular intervals of several years. Such migrations were caused by social, political, economic or ecological factors. They involved movements within Palestine, Jordan and southern Syria and occurred into both directions of the Jordan river. In the late 18th and in the 19th century, families from Palestine and Syria settled in the northern highlands of Jordan which then acted as a refuge — more often from over-taxation and from blood feuds within the tribally structured social system than for fear of Bedouin raids (cf. Owen 1981; Lewis 1987; Shami forthcoming; Knauf 1987). The highlands east of the Jordan river furthermore offered arable land available for registration. The registration of farmed land was presupposed by the new land-laws enacted in 1858 within the Ottoman efforts to develop the agricultural potential of the country, and consolidate their empire. The consequences for both the social and the economic history of the country are evident: the registration of land with all the subsequent obligations could only be afforded by the wealthier people. At the same time, the gaining importance of grain export from the region to world markets through the Palestinian sea-ports promoted the investment of capital and labour into agriculture (Shami 1987). The new legislation resulted in a change in the mode of settlement which came to be of a more permanent nature again. The trend towards a more market-oriented economy and the related socio-economic processes were reflected in increased building activities and the growing prosperity of many villages.

### **Choice of Village Site**

Such is the historical setting within which the empirical data

---

<sup>1</sup>From 1984-1988 field research on the architecture, social history and material culture of the three villages was carried out by the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at Yarmouk University and the Oriental Institute of Tübingen University.



Drawn by: ALI OMARI

1. Sketch plan of Umm Qeis' old upper and lower quarters, based on municipality map and Mershen and Knauf 1988: FIG. 2.

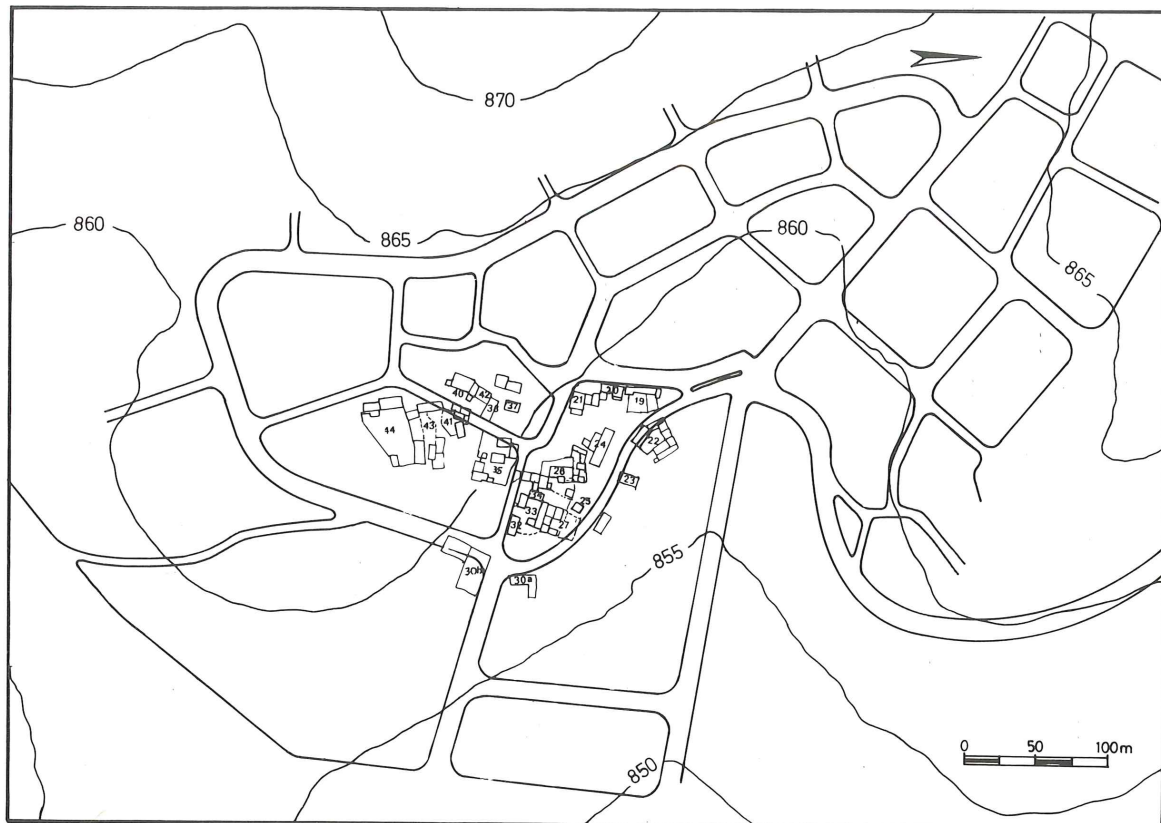
on space and architecture of Umm Qeis (FIG. 1), Shaṭana (FIG. 2) and Nabi Hud (FIG. 3) shall be compared and correlated with their environmental, socio-economic and political determinants.

The three villages are located in the highlands, within an altitudinal range of c. 500 to 900 metres. Shaṭana is located at the hill-foot at 860m; Nabi Hud and Umm Qeis are hilltop settlements at an altitude of c. 700m, respectively 500m. All three sites were resettled after a period of no permanent occupation: Nabi Hud during the 18th century; Shaṭana and Umm Qeis during the 19th century. The earliest intact houses date to the mid to late 19th century.

Umm Qeis, on the road from Damascus to Tiberias and hence to the Palestinian seaports, overlooking Lake Tiberias and the Golan Heights, has been the location of a settlement of varying occupational nature since the second/third century B.C. It was resettled by families from surrounding villages during the second part of the 19th century. Prior to this, some of the families used to come to Umm Qeis seasonally in order to farm the surrounding fields. During the ploughing and harvesting seasons they lived in ancient cave tombs, huts or tents (Merrill 1881; Tristram 1866), but after completion of agricultural work they returned to their village. Their permanent settling in Umm Qeis occurred in the context of land-registration in order to confirm and legalize their rights upon the

surrounding farming land. It thus provides an example of a satellite settlement on a former "*khirbeh*" (for a detailed discussion of the *khirbeh* problematic cf. Gerber 1985).

As evidenced by a large number of cave tombs, Shaṭana too has been the location of an antique settlement. The 1596 Ottoman tax-registers mention Shaṭana as a village of 25 households paying taxes on wheat, barley, various summercrops, vineyards, fruit trees, goats and bee hives (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 205). Left by its population during the early 19th century (Peake 1958: 149), Shaṭana was resettled around 1860 by Christian families, the majority of which belong to a descent group who came from Damascus. From there they fled in the 18th century, because of, as oral tradition transmits, quarrels between the Christians and the Kurds. They migrated into the Ajlun mountains and settled first in 'Ain Jannah, and then in Kufrenjeh. There, it seems, they were able to integrate into the village community, after they had won the respect of the local inhabitants through an act of bravery against cattle robbers who had stolen the village herds. Later, however, blood-revenge between the Christians and a large local family of the village of 'Ibbin forced the former to leave the area. Several Christian families, most of them related through kinship, came to Shaṭana, which, as not located on a major road, was a somehow isolated location. The arable land of good quality was of limited amount, due



2. Shaṭana, southern quarter, sketch plan based upon municipality plan and drawings by Heinz Gaube.

to the number of surrounding villages. But, as the families arrived to Shaṭana at a point in time when agricultural interest was growing and more intensive land-use just about to start, and as the newcomers lacked the socio-political status of the larger and well-established local families, they had to confine themselves to the land which was not claimed by anybody else and thus available for registration. The socio-political advantages of Shaṭana's location were related to its proximity to the town of al-Ḥuṣn, then a well established settlement with a strong Christian population component.

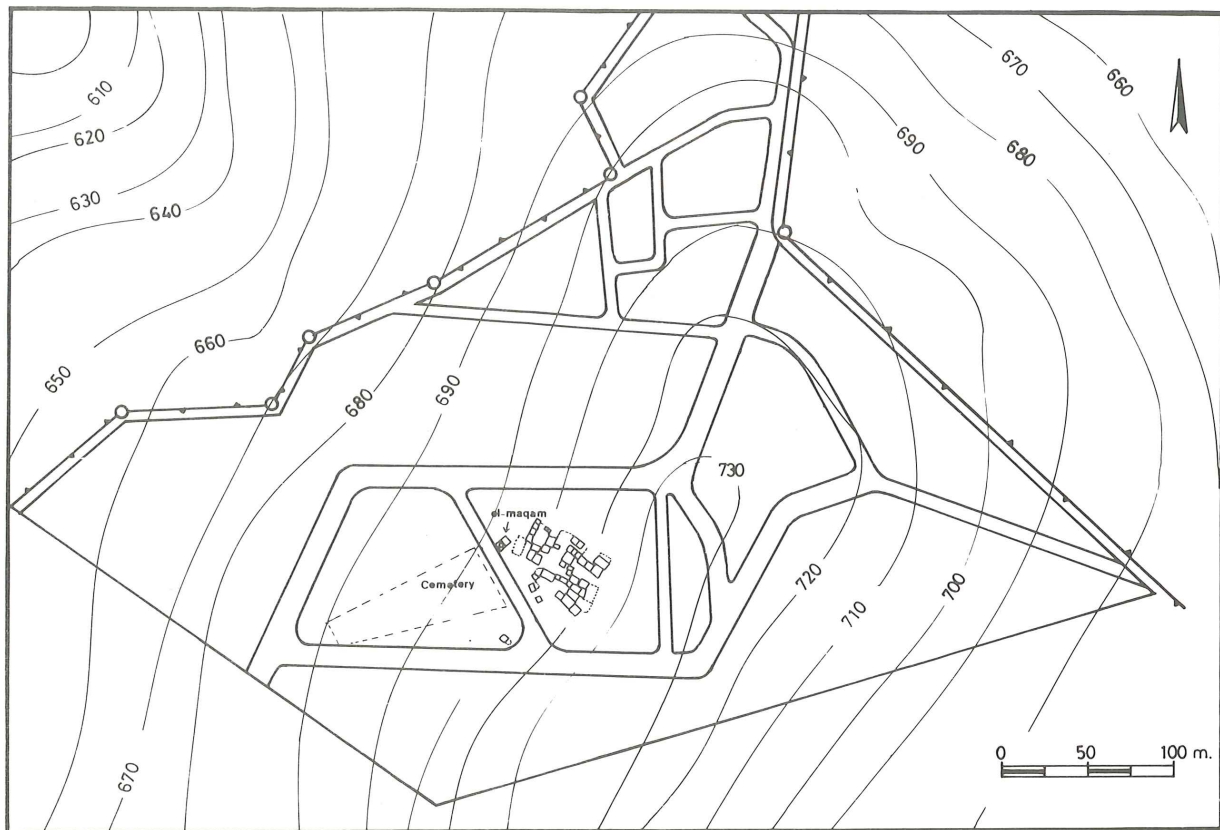
Nabi Hud, the small village on a hilltop opposite Jarash, was resettled prior to the land-legislation related developments by a Muslim family in the 18th century. The site was chosen for settlement on behalf of the sanctuary of the prophet Hud (FIG. 4). The new settlers who originated from the West Bank and had lived in the village of Jazaza for some years, settled near the sanctuary and became what might be described as its guards. In this context Schumacher's mention of Nabi Hud around 1900, as a village inhabited by "Fo'ara", i.e. here pious men (Steuernagel 1925: 137) is valuable information. Besides religious motivation, certain economic resources related to the sanctuary apparently were a decisive factor for the establishment of the village.

In all three villages settlement started with cave-dwelling

in either natural caves or cave tombs. Whereas in Nabi Hud, the settlers later shifted their settlement location, from the caves in the hill-slopes to the flat surface of the hilltop, the villagers of Shaṭana took further advantage of these caves by making them the nucleus of the developing house compounds and thus firmly integrating them into the village morphology (FIG. 5). The same holds true for Umm Qeis' lower quarter (cf. below).

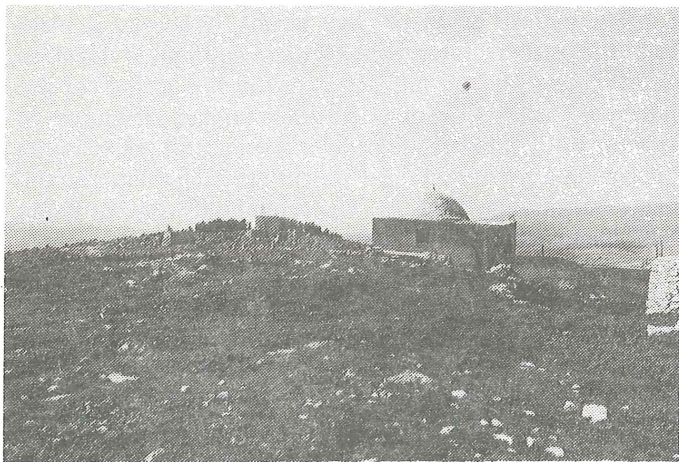
#### Social Stratification and Settlement Patterns

The considerably differing social history of the discussed villages laid the basis for their developing spatial layout and growth. In Umm Qeis, the socio-economic stratification of the community into landowners and cultivators (Shami 1987) was reflected in the vertical stratification of dwelling space from hill summit to foot: whereas the cultivators inhabited quarters in the east and south-east of the tell with smaller houses of two or three rooms, built from roughly cut limestone, with simple beam roof constructions and no central courtyards, the landowners lived on the tell. Here a dense cluster of large house compounds around central courtyards developed. The houses were built from hewn black basalt and white limestone. The characteristic construction features were the cross-vaulted, double-arched and even domed rooms, as well as an upper storey on two houses. With only one street running through the quarter,



Drawn by: ALI OMARI

3. Nabi Hud, sketch plan of the old quarter, based upon electricity plan and drawings by Heinz Gaube.



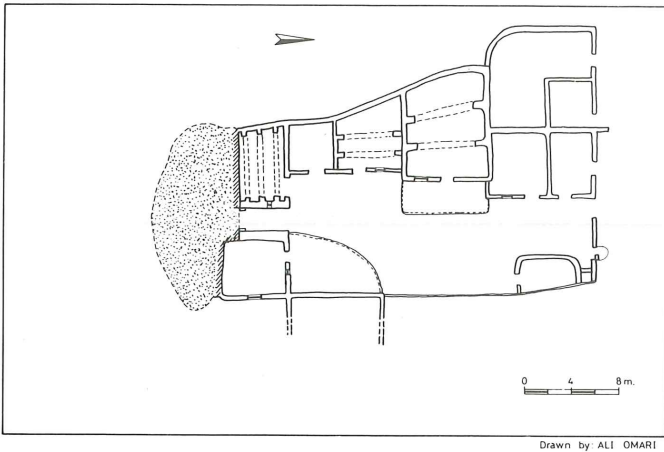
4. Sanctuary of Nabi Hud and adjoining cemetery. Photo. Y. Zubi.

the high and sometimes reinforced walls with few openings of the landowners' quarter is of a rather fortified appearance. In fact, only in this quarter was there wealth from agricultural and grain trading activities which might have needed protection, more probably from the landless, than from the Bedouins.

In both Shaṭana and Nabi Hud, little spatial diversity as a

reflection of socio-economic stratification is observable. In Shaṭana the pattern of settlement is along kinship lines, with each of the three large families occupying a quarter together with the smaller families allied to them through landownership. The latter families had settled in the village at a later stage and as co-believers were given shares of land by the already settled clans. Stratification in Shaṭana did not give rise to a splitting of the community into landowners and cultivators, but on a limited scale led to different sizes of landholdings in the early 20th century. The limited extent of arable land, the location and the communal cohesion of the religious minority, might have accounted for the lesser degree of socio-economic stratification, and in turn the more homogeneous appearance of the village. Built in terraces on two hill slopes, it consists of several dense clusters of house compounds (FIG. 6), smaller than in Umm Qeis' upper quarter, but partly also arranged around central courtyards. The building material is white limestone with mud-plaster for the old houses. Almost all older rooms are double-arched. A large number of devices to hide people and properties, especially caves, but also hidden cisterns inside of rooms, reflected people's fear of violence through Ottoman tax-collectors and soldiers, often mentioned in the oral history of the village.

The spatial development in Nabi Hud was that of a



5. Shaṭana, sketch plan of house compound 26a with integrated natural cave based upon drawing by Heinz Gaube.



6. Shaṭana, general view of the southern quarter. Photo. Y. Zubi.

village with almost no socio-economic stratification on any substantial level until the late 19th century, as the village was inhabited by only one clan. The village developed concentrically around an open central space, north of the sanctuary, the only building in the village that might be called impressive. The three agglomerations of house compounds were built from roughly cut limestone. Only the door- and corner-stones of the older buildings are of a larger and hewn quality. The amount of open space, which in rare instances only might be designated as enclosed courtyards, gives the village a rather open appearance. The strictly subsistence oriented pastoral and farming economy, with occasional revenues from the visitors to the sanctuary and cemetery, implied that there was little material wealth in need of protection from theft. The "holyness" of the sanctuary, furthermore, provided a secure storage facility, from where nobody would have dared to steal.

In the three villages the development of the individual compounds up to their greatest extension took place in several building phases over two or more generations. Spatial extension was necessitated by either family growth or socio-economic causes.

#### Functional Division of Space and Change of Room Functions

The main spatial division in the villages' house compounds is the one between space for people and space for animals. Human space again is subdivided into a private and a public sphere, designated as "*maḍafa*", the room for the reception of guests. Further subdivision of the private space into living, bed- and workrooms and kitchens is only a recent development. Prior to this, the multifunctional unit was the so-called "*sakan*", i.e. dwelling room, where different activities within the realm of domestic economy took place, where meals were taken and where people slept. In Umm Qeis' upper quarter the number of *sakan* rooms in proportion to other space is much greater than in Shaṭana

or Nabi Hud. It is a reflection of the prevailing family structure with extended households, where two or more generations lived in one compound, and most men were married to more than one wife. Each wife had her own room, where she and her children would live. If further division of *sakan* rooms took place in Umm Qeis, it was seasonal rather than functional: into a winter-room and a more airy summer-room. The *sakan* in this social context was a woman's room. Men, on the other hand, did not have their own *sakan*; the place where they would gather was the *maḍafa*, the functions of which thus exceeded the literal meaning of the term. In the *maḍafa* the men of a compound would spend their time, often take their meals or sleep there. With changing family structures around the middle of the 20th century, the functions of *sakan* and *maḍafa* started to change: with monogamous marriages prevailing, the *sakan* lost its character as the room of a certain wife and became the living room for the whole family. Once the *sakan* ceased to be a solely female domain, the *maḍafa* lost some of its former functions and came closer to what the term designates: a guest room.

The architectural correlates of rooms in Umm Qeis which were built as *sakan* rooms were transversal double-arches and in some cases cross-vaults. The correlates of rooms built as *maḍafa* rooms were cross-vaults or domes. Stables usually were constructed as double-arched rooms, unless very small and supported by wooden beams only. Whereas the latter construction did not demand the skills of a professional mason, the arched and particularly the cross-vaulted or domed rooms required the work of professional masons who were brought from Palestine. The expenses related with the construction of cross-vaults, explain why they were limited to the *maḍafa* and to some *sakan* rooms, and that their construction was esteemed a matter of prestige.

The smaller house compounds of Shaṭana consist of a

courtyard, one to two *sakan* rooms, one to two stables and eventually a *maḍafa*. In case that two *sakan* rooms exist, one of them has usually been transformed into a kitchen in the recent past. The *sakan* rooms are arched, often very big multifunctional rooms with a wide range of built-in storage devices. They clearly reflect the underlying concept of an all-purpose one-room house, though with the restriction that animals were excluded from this room.

A true all-purpose one-room house has been the characteristic dwelling unit in Nabi Hud until the late 19th century. Until then, the houses of the village consisted of only one room with an open space around it. These rooms were small, and the reed and mud roofs were supported by wooden beams. No arched rooms were known in Nabi Hud at that period. The one-room houses were inhabited by extended households comprising two to three generations, as well as the animals owned by the family. The non-existence of transversal arches, which in other settlements usually provided a means of interior spatial division, resulted in the lack of any material remnants of spatial divisions.

House compounds around courtyards in both Umm Qeis and Shaṭana developed over several years and then eventually split up into two or more units by the buildings of dividing walls through the courtyard. In Shaṭana this used to occur at an earlier stage in the history of a compound than it was the case in Umm Qeis. Thus, the development of larger units never reached the spatial extent of house compounds in Umm Qeis. Only in the latter village did the economic conditions allow the big landowning families to support extended households of forty and more persons.

The history of individual large house compounds in Umm Qeis reveals great flexibility in the function of rooms. It even seems that the spatial functions of individual rooms underwent a continuous process of change. *Sakan* rooms which were in a bad state of repair often were turned into stables and storage rooms, as new *sakan* rooms were constructed. A compound might thus feature a large number of rooms with the constructional and interior attributes of *sakan* rooms, while only a small number of them is actually used as such. Stables often became storage rooms; *maḍafa* rooms became *sakan* rooms, and even stables sometimes were transformed into *maḍafa* rooms, due to their location far off the living rooms. The comparison of data on functional change and addition of rooms of several house compounds in Umm Qeis over some decades reveals certain patterns determined by socio-economic variables. These are related to different trends in the socio-economic development of the settlement. In the early 20th century, when property was not split up yet, and when some families were gaining in economic importance and social status, the upper quarter saw a considerable rise in the number of both *maḍafa* rooms and stables for working and transport animals. The

total amount of dwelling space likewise increased during this period, whereas it decreased in proportion to the amount of space allocated to economic and social activities. The factual individualization of landownership in the late 1930's with the subsequent splitting up of the big landholdings in the course of inheritance and land sales, set an end to this development. Stable space drastically started to decrease once Umm Qeis had lost its importance in grain trade, since the late 1940's.

The high amount of space allocated to stables in proportion to dwelling space remained a more stable feature in the case of Shaṭana, where not only transport and working animals, but also the sheep and goat herds were kept in stables overnight. Unlike Umm Qeis, where the herds were herded by employed shepherds at several hours distance from the village, in Shaṭana, where the villagers very much relied upon pastoralism and the secondary products of the animals, the sheep and goat herds were an integral part of daily life.

### Concluding Remarks

Division of space, room functions and the change of spatial functions were shown to be related to social and economic determinants: the changing function of *sakan* rooms in Umm Qeis was the result of changing family structures; economic determinants are apparent in the mutual interaction between developments in subsistence strategy and in dwelling complexes. The one-room dwelling as multi-purpose and multi-generation dwelling unit disappeared in response to the shift towards more intensive forms of production, with the related greater extent of division of labour, the privatization of property and the impact of urban social structures, resulting in a decrease in the size of domestic units.

The observations on Umm Qeis, Shaṭana and Nabi Hud reveal the emergence of particular settlement patterns in late Ottoman northern Jordan, which are related to a community's subsistence strategy and social structure. The spatial and material correlates of socio-economic, political and ideological factors belong to a defined historical horizon, and are not to be generalized. Yet, such features as the flexibility in the use of space and the multi-functionality of rooms would be of importance to archaeological contexts and should figure on interpretive checklists, as they might provide key stones for the decoding of a given archaeological record.

### References

- Gerber, H. 1985. *Ottoman Rule in Jerusalem, 1890-1914*. Berlin: Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, Bd. 101.  
 Hütteroth, W.D. and Abdulfattah, K. 1977. *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century*. Erlangen.

- Knauf, E.A. 1987. Berg und Tal, Stadt und Stamm - Grundzüge der Geschichte Palästinas in den letzten fünftausend Jahren. Pp. 26-35 in G. Völger, K.V. Welck and K. Hackstein (eds), *Pracht und Geheimnis, Kleidung und Schmuck aus Palästina und Jordanien*. Köln.
- Lewis, N.N. 1987. *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan, 1800-1980*. Cambridge.
- Merrill, S. 1881. *East of the Jordan: A Record of Travel and Observation in the Countries of Moab, Gilead and Bashan*. London.
- Mershen, B. and Knauf, E.A. 1988. From Ġadar to Umm Qeis. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 104: 128-145.
- Owen, R. 1981. *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914*. London, New York.
- Peake, F.G. 1958. *History and Tribes of Jordan*. Coral Gables, Florida.
- Shami, S. 1987. Umm Qeis - A Northern Jordanian Village in Context. Pp. 211-213 in A. Hadidi (ed), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, II*. Amman.
- , forthcoming. Settlement and Resettlement in Umm Qeis: Spatial Organization and Social Dynamics in a Village in North Jordan. In J.P. Bourdier and N. Al-Sayyad (eds), *Dwellings, Settlements and Tradition*. University Press of America.
- Steuernagel, C. 1925. Der 'Adschlūn. *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 48: 201-392.
- Tristram, H.B. 1866. *The Land of Israel: A Journal of Travels in Palestine*. London.