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Restoration or Revolution? Jordan Between the Islamic Conquest and the Crusades: Impressions of Twenty-Five Years of Archaeological Research

Confronting a "Dark Age" in Jordanian Archaeology

Historical "dark ages" are notoriously difficult to comprehend, both from the perspective of material culture and social history. By definition, supposedly "dark age" societies lack major cultural identifiers, particularly large and ordered urban centres, monumental public architecture, major works of art, flourishing long distance trade networks, a productive rural sector, and evidence for a prosperous market economy. "Dark age" societies are classified as such precisely because most, if not all, of these cultural identifiers are missing from, or missed in, the contemporary archaeological record.

Conventionally the later eighth to eleventh centuries AD have been viewed as a vacant and irrelevant "dark age" in the history of Jordan, typified by the widespread, progressive and eventually almost total abandonment of settlements, "Bedouin"-nomadic encroachment and extensive depopulation. It seemed as though the last vestiges of Classical urban civilisation that had underpinned Umayyad culture were permanently lost, precipitating a dramatic and fateful break with a millennium of Graeco-Roman culture. Jordan's resulting "medieval dark age" was not overcome until the arrival of the Crusaders (twelfth century) and the subsequent Mamluk revival of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. Having supposedly little to contribute, the archaeology of this period has become little more than a supplement to historical studies; an ancillary field of research useful only to illustrate aspects of an established political history and incapable of offering an independent analysis of socio-cultural developments in the transition from the ancient world to the modern.

In the last quarter century, the archaeology of Jordan in the earlier Islamic periods has determinedly set out to define a more dynamic relationship with historical studies on the Rashidun, Umayyad, 'Abbasid and Fatimid-Saljuq periods. In the 1980s a core group of archaeologists moved to explore a range of sites, village and town, paying special attention to, and even concentrating on, the periods of Islamic occupation. Initial results and analyses gained exposure in the Islamic session of the Fourth International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan of 1989 held in Lyon.[1] With the general theme of 'Sites and Settlement Patterns in Jordan', this gathering marked a critical stage in the formation of Jordanian Islamic settlement archaeology. A series of papers forcefully questioned existing conventions on earlier Islamic, especially post-Umayyad, site occupation in Jordan, arguing for continuity of settlement although within an environment of cultural and economic change. The salient points of the papers were masterly summarised by session rapporteur Professor Heinz Gaube, but unfortunately this important commentary was not published as an adjunct to the papers in the Studies volume.

In the decade since Lyon, Islamic archaeology in Jordan has become a shining example to neighbouring countries, pioneering research into many major issues in regional studies and comparative history and culture.[2] Crucial in this development is the very positive working environment offered by the people and government institutions of Jordan to visiting scholars, with collaborative projects increasingly becoming the norm. Work in the last ten years has tackled a widening range of questions in order to forge a link with historical studies, with varying success. A few of these issues invite brief comment.

Firstly, although most archaeologists of the Islamic periods in Jordan acknowledge the use of dynastic terms is inappropriate, attempts to replace dynastic periodization notably Whitcomb's proposed chronological divisions

[1] The proceedings of the conference are published in *SHAJ* IV 1992. See especially the papers by Johns, King, Walmsley and Whitcomb.

[2] Although it is usually not appropriate to single out individuals, in this instance it is only proper to acknowledge the considerable intellectual and practical contribution of Dr. Ghazi Bisheh (whose own work on, in particular, the Badiyah sites is well known) in the gestation of Islamic archaeology in Jordan.

have not been widely adopted.[3] Generally archaeologists have opted for a neutral, non-historic chronological structure by talking in centuries, usually AD. However this can, in the early stages of excavations, force the inappropriate imposition of absolute chronologies on archaeological results, whereas a relative chronology would be wiser (and potentially less misleading) in the first years of a field project.

Secondly, there has been a particular emphasis on socio-economic and cultural studies, especially questions of "continuity" and "change" from late antiquity into the middle Islamic periods of Jordan, roughly from the sixth to eleventh centuries.[4] The objective has been to identify elements of social and cultural continuity and restoration, and periods of revolutionary change. While the quality of the work has been mixed and results diverse (and at times contradictory), at least the research objectives have shared many features.

Thirdly, socio-political questions have been rarely addressed, with political and military issues usually tackled by reference to historical references rather than by the application of archaeological source material. Admittedly a major obstacle to such analyses is the shortage of detailed archaeological data, especially reliable survey results and focused site research design. The work of Brown in the Karak area indicates that an archaeological treatment of these issues is not an impossibility.[5]

Lastly, there has been a disturbing and mystifying persistence in evaluating the Islamic periods of Jordan from a "Biblical" and "Classical" archaeological perspective, which has resulted in undue emphasis on, and search for (mostly in vain, not surprisingly), cultural indicators irrelevant to Islamic studies, and to Islamic archaeology. Betraying a Eurocentric bias, it is a criticism that can be applied equally to material culture studies and interpretative analyses of archaeological data.

How dark "Dark Age" Jordan? The Tenth and Eleventh Centuries

It would be foolish and restrictive to deny that Jordan in the late eleventh century, just before the arrival of the Crusaders, was socially, culturally and economically quite different from its early seventh century counterpart, that is during the last decades before the Islamic conquest of 633-640. Change was particularly swift in the later ninth and especially the tenth and eleventh centuries, and this change can be classified as "systemic". Initial analysis suggests an interplay of causes: economic, political and religious.[6] Many of the processes of change that marked this period had their genesis in the decades before the Islamic conquest and cannot be solely attributed to it. Equally, these changes set up a new socio-political and military environment that facilitated the twelfth century Crusader occupation of Jordan, resulting in even further change and on a major scale. Can this period of major change be adequately described and explained, and was it "revolutionary" in the social history of Jordan? Our perspective can be, and indeed should be, historical, geographical and archaeological.

Written Sources

Three Arabic geographical sources, namely al-Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal and al-Maqdisī (al-Muqaddasī, d. 390/1000), provide an amiable view of the lands east of the Jordan Rift Valley in the tenth century (FIG. 1).[7] Each writer, in their own way, depicts the region as amply populated with villages and towns, the latter being the traditional power centres of 'Ammān, Maāb (Rabbah) and Adhruḥ (Udhruḥ). However the sources also reveal a growing interest in religious sites, notably Mu'tah/ al-Mazār south of al-Karak, and ar-Raqīm near 'Ammān, site of the Cave of the Sleepers (Qur'an 18: 9-26, "al-Kahf"). Specifically the map accompanying Ibn Ḥawqal's text features al-Balqā' (for 'Ammān), nearby ar-Raqīm, Ruwāth (chief town of al-Jibāl), Mu'ān (Ma'ān) and Zughar on the lake of the same name (the Dead Sea, although the town is misplaced) for the area east of the River Jordan and south of Damascus (FIG. 2). The primary economic activity in the region centred on primary industries, especially the cultivation of fruit and olives, the production of honey and the herding of sheep and goats. Al-Balqā' was noted for its many villages, fields and water mills, whereas the warmer climate of the Jordan Valley was ideal for the cultivation of dates, indigo, rice and bananas.

Consistent with these accounts are the descriptions provided by the Crusader (Frankish) sources of conditions in early twelfth century Oultrejourdain.[8] Dates grew at Zughar, while Shawbak was blessed with "fertile soil, which produces abundant supplies of grain, wine, and oil". Wādī Mūsā was "very rich in the fruits of the earth" with "luxuriant olive groves which shaded the surface of the land like a dense forest" and had mills on its streams.

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[3] Whitcomb 1992a: 113; 1992b: 386. The difficulties with Whitcomb's archaeological periodization stem from his use of 'early', 'middle' and 'late' Islamic (it is, for instance, difficult to see the fourth/tenth century as still 'early Islamic') and the arbitrary division of periods into blocks of two centuries. As a consequence the periodization remains based on historical factors, not archaeological definitions.

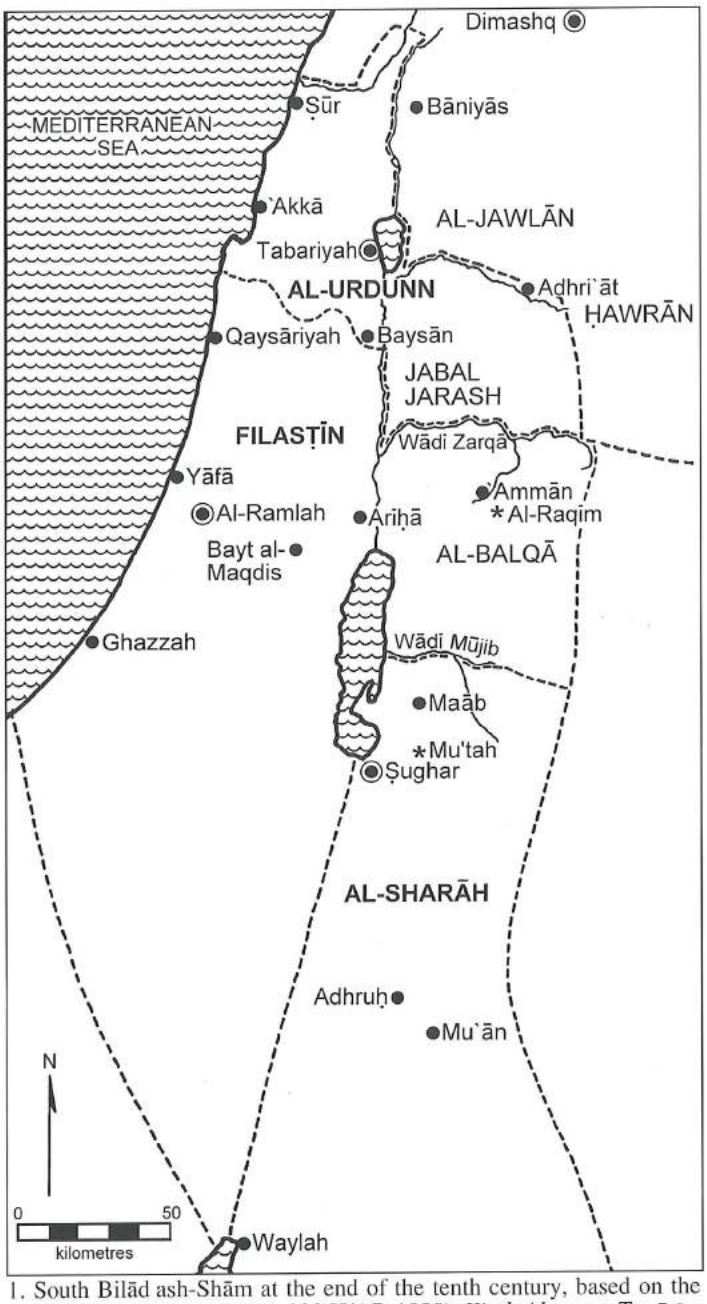
[4] See a recent joint analysis by an historian and archaeologist in Shboul and Walmsley 1998.

[5] Notably Brown 1993.

[6] A fuller (although by no means complete) consideration of the topic can be found in Walmsley 1999; see also the study by Schick 1997.

[7] Ibn Ḥawqal 1938; Iṣṭakhrī 1927; Maqdisī 1906. For a translation of Ibn Ḥawqal see: Ibn Ḥawqal 1964; and for al-Maqdisī see: Muqaddasī (al-Maqdisī) 1994.

[8] The following quotes are from Fulcher of Chartres 1969: 146-47 and William of Tyre 1976 <1941>-a: 506-8; 1976 <1941>-b: 145.



1. South Bilād ash-Shām at the end of the tenth century, based on the account of al-Maqdisī (d. 390 H/AD 1000), *Kitāb Aḥsan at-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm.*

In other areas were "many Christians living in villages" who left to resettle in Jerusalem with their "flocks and herds". Camels and asses were common booty from raids. Although these are only isolated references, the sources portray Jordan as having a mixed settled and nomadic population actively engaged in agricultural and pastoral pursuits.

One significant and permanent change preserved in the Arabic and Frankish sources was the progressive shift of political power in the tenth and eleventh centuries away from the traditionally powerful population centres that had dominated Jordan for much of the first millennium AD. The trend is first noticeable in south Jordan: al-Karak, the Jarrahid stronghold, supplanted Maāb (Rabbah); Wādī Mūsā returned as the chief settlement in ash-Sharāh in place of Udhruḥ; and Ruwāth replaced Gharandal in al-Jibāl. This change does not imply the abandonment of the former power centres; the excavations by the author at Gharandal have shown continuous settlement during this period.[9] Rather it would seem to reflect political shifts to new tribal leaderships located in other (and often equally ancient) settlements. The rise of these new power centres was reflected in the military campaigns of the Crusaders, with Wādī Mūsā the principal object of expedition of Baldwin I (r. 1100-18) in 1100. A similar shift also occurs in the north of the country: the settlement of Jarash was eclipsed by Jabal 'Awf (the Jabal Jarash of al-Maqdisī, now Jabal 'Ajlūn) and equipped with a stout castle in 1188-92;[10] and 'Ammān gave way to as-Salṭ, also provided with a castle, this time in 1220.[11] The political developments of the eleventh century, especially the Fatimid struggle to dominate Palestine and the rise of local tribal elites, favoured those sites with strong natural defences, such as al-Karak. This change was cemented by the events of the twelfth century, notably the Frankish occupation of south Jordan and the dispute with the atabegs of Damascus for control of the north, and inherited by the Ayyubid princes after the defeat of the Franks at Ḥaṭṭīn (1187).

In summary the Arabic and Frankish sources reveal:

- a continuing active economy, based on both agricultural and pastoral sectors;
- a mixed population, settled and nomadic;
- a major shift in settlement and political power away from the traditional centres to (re)emergent towns, characterised by a strategic location and natural defences;
- the rise of tribal shaykhdoms.

These sites and their emergent elites grew in stature in response to Fatimid ambitions in the region, and form the social and political structure in force on the eve of the arrival of the Frankish Crusaders in the Holy Land.

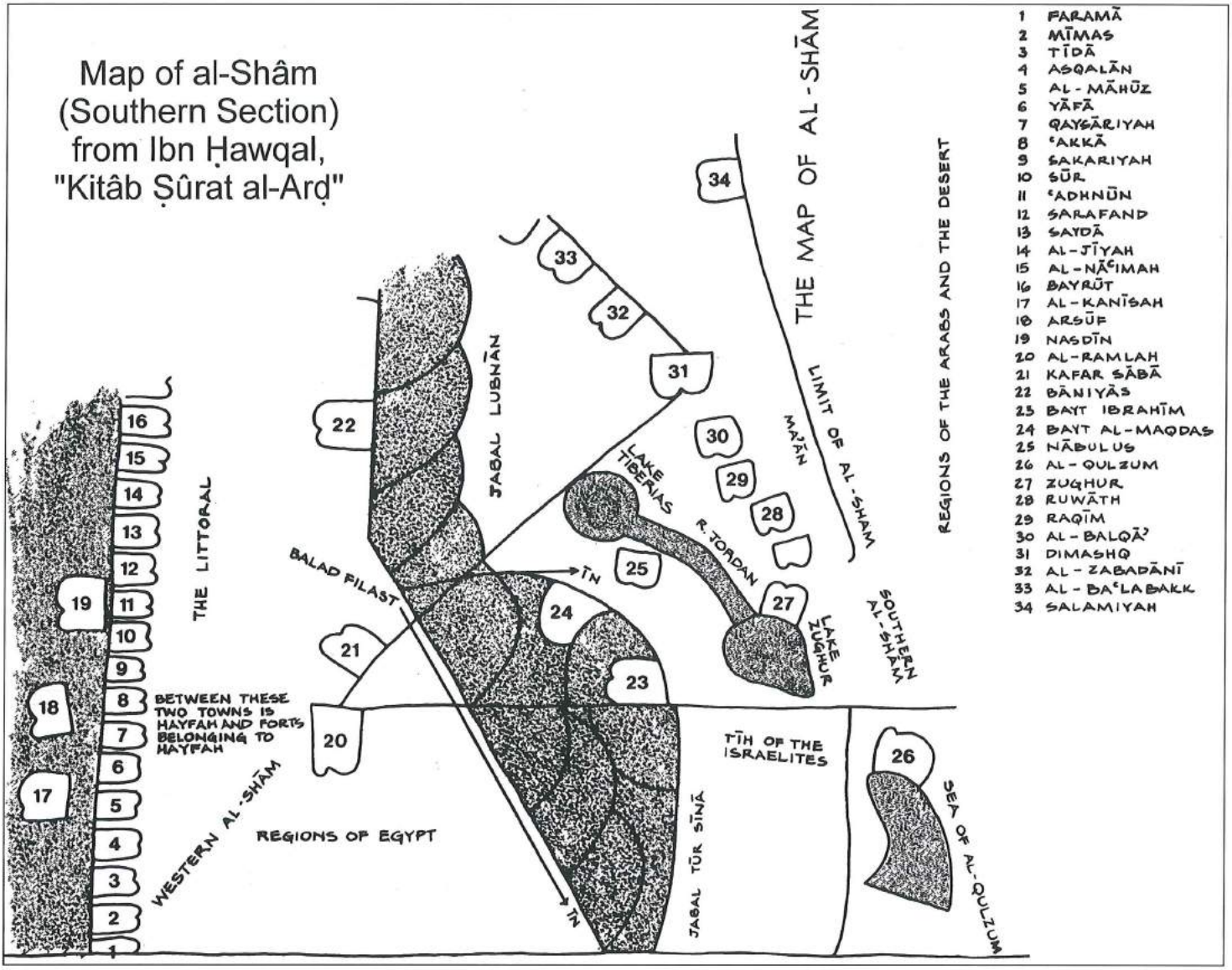
The Archaeological Evidence

As besets the archaeology of many periods, the archaeological evidence is patchy and frequently unreliable, although the situation seems especially bad for the Islamic periods. Few excavations or surveys have devoted any real energy to the tenth and eleventh centuries in particular, and this disinterest and often neglect has introduced major distortions to settlement profiles in Jordan.

9 For preliminary reports on the first season at Gharandal see: Walmsley 1998a; 1998b; also Walmsley and Ricklefs 1997.

10 On the castle at 'Ajlūn see: Humphreys 1977 for the date of 1188-1192, and the architectural report in Johns 1932.

11 The as-Salṭ castle is largely destroyed; see: Bakhit 1995; Duncan 1928.



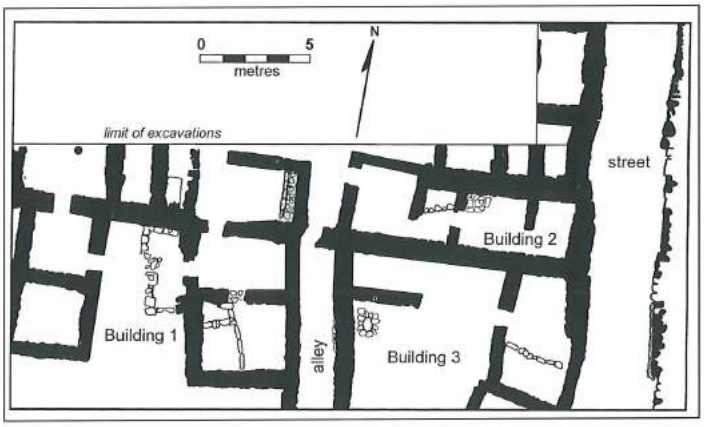
2. Translation of a map of southern Bilād ash-Shām accompanying Ibn Ḥawqal's *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-'Arḍ*, composed in AD 988. Reoriented to place north to the top.

The continuing use of stone buildings and the application of ambiguous ceramic typologies could well account for the absence of identifiable remains datable to these two centuries. Also contributing to this problem is the general lack of excavations dedicated to this period, or even the publication of work at a number of key sites, for instance Maāb (Rabbah) and Udhruḥ. In other instances the substantial redevelopment of leading eleventh century centres during and after the Frankish period would have destroyed settlement evidence from that time, for example undoubtedly at al-Karak and probably ʿAjlūn.

Nevertheless the picture is not all bleak or negative. Evidence from a selected number of sites, from district centres to village settlements, has revealed a continuing settlement history after the rise of the Fatimids and their push into Palestine (969-70) until the arrival of the Crusaders. Interestingly the archaeological evidence from the major sites, specifically ʿAmmān and Ayla (al-ʿAqaba), illuminates the politico-administrative and urban decline in the tenth and eleventh centuries as indicated in the written sources of the period.

Excavations on the ʿAmmān Citadel by C.-M. Bennett and A. Northedge on behalf of the Department of Antiquities from 1975 to 1979 uncovered clear evidence for occupation in the Umayyad Palace complex and adjacent domestic structures in the eleventh century.[12] Labelled Stratum III, the last significant period of occupation on the citadel, it represented an unbroken continuation of the previous stratum (IVb, ninth–tenth century). Revealed by the excavations were two streets and four building complexes of ʿAbbasid date but substantially modified in Fatimid times (Area C, FIG. 3). These were probably de-

[12] For the important eleventh century strata on the ʿAmmān citadel see the final report of Northedge 1992: 159.

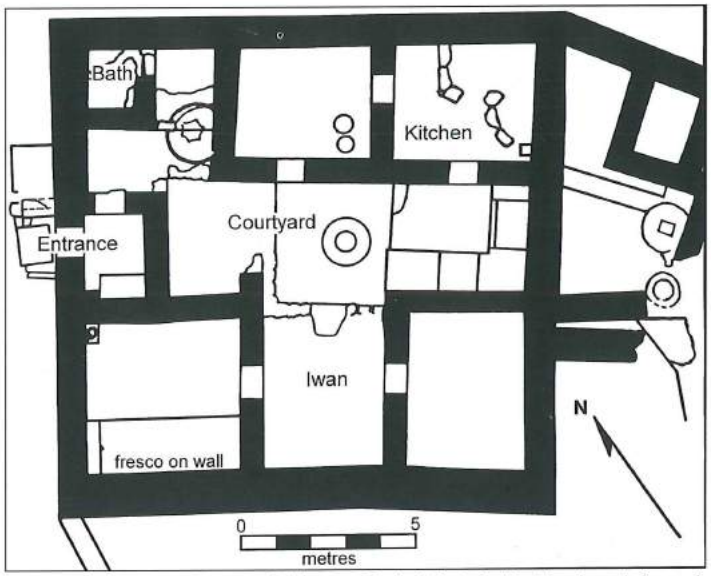


3. Stratum IVb-III houses on the 'Ammān Citadel, with occupation spanning the ninth to eleventh centuries. Adapted from Northedge 1992: fig 134.

stroyed in the earthquake of 1068. Similarly in Areas B and D Umayyad-period houses were occupied and modified until the Stratum III destruction. The Umayyad Palace was also occupied into Fatimid times but was subdivided into smaller residential units, suggesting a reduced or non-official role for the palatial complex by the eleventh century. The grand Reception Hall was roofed over, thereby converting it into a self-contained building.[13] The diminution of the citadel's official function is further indicated by the eclipse of the fortification wall of the upper terrace, for this had been built over by the 'Abbasid-Fatimid domestic structures in Areas C and D.[14]

The last phase of settlement at Islamic Ayla, which was ended by the Crusader conquest of 1116, saw continuous use of the original Umayyad and 'Abbasid structures, although modifications were of a poorer constructional standard. Excavations of the gates and wall towers, the Egyptian street, the Central Pavilion building, the congregational mosque, and the beach-side *sūq* by the south wall have revealed an uninterrupted sequence from late 'Abbasid into Fatimid times. Particularly revealing is the conversion of the Pavilion Building.[15] Originally an open public monument at the junction of Ayla's four axial streets, the structure was transformed into a well-appointed residence of eight rooms around a central courtyard, onto which opened a deep *īwān* (FIG. 4). The wall of one room was decorated with a polychrome fresco, and from this room and another an astounding collection of luxury ceramics and other objects were recovered, including a dirham of al-Ḥakīm (996–1020).

The settlement history of 'Ammān and Ayla in the sec-



4. Plan of the Pavilion Building at Fatimid Ayla/al-'Aqaba. Adapted from Whitcomb 1988: 208, fig1.

ond half of the tenth century and early eleventh century was characterised by a severe reduction, if not end, to their political and administrative functions. Significantly public buildings were usurped and converted into private dwellings, and while construction techniques were generally mediocre, levels of personal wealth were still good as indicated by the material culture.

The evidence for tenth and eleventh occupation at other major centres in Jordan is limited, but nevertheless what exists suggests a settlement profile similar to 'Ammān and Ayla. At Bayt Rās urban structures were continuously used in Phase IVb (900–1100), including a line of vaults in Area A, thought to have been a market place.[16] The 'Abbasid town centre of Fiḥl (Pella) continued to be used, perhaps into the early Fatimid period, although significantly the use appears mostly domestic.[17] Continuity of occupation throughout the Fatimid and Saljuq periods is attested at Zughar, modern Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Īsā, based on survey results.[18]

Evidence for village settlement in the tenth and eleventh centuries is limited, although information is better for the Jordan Valley. At Tall Abū Qa'dān (Gourdan), a long sequence of courtyard surfaces separated by mudbrick collapse spanned the Islamic periods in nineteen phases labelled between A and T.[19] As the houses were of mudbrick and required frequent rebuilding a representative early to middle Islamic sequence has been preserved. However dating is a problem, as the excavations did not

13 A. Northedge 1992: 78, 81, 83-84, 88.
14 Wood in A. Northedge 1992: 124-25.
15 Informative preliminary reports in Whitcomb 1988a;, 1988b
16 Lenzen 1995: Lenzen and Knauf 1987. The continued operation of the town's marketplace indicates the importance of Bayt Ras in Fatimid times.
17 Walmsley 1995; note the comments on the end of Phase E at Tall Abū Qa'dān immediately following.
18 D. S. Whitcomb 1992a: 115-117.
19 Franken and Kalsbeek 1975.
20 Sauer 1976. A detailed review of the Tall Abū Qa'dān chronology is currently underway as part of the final report on the 'Abbasid Town centre at Pella/Fiḥl.

aim to establish an absolute chronology for the ceramics. A review by J. Sauer of Franken and Kalsbeek offered a chronological frame for the book,[20] but an improved understanding of Islamic pottery now allows the presentation of a revised chronology. The earliest phase of occupation, Phase A, is probably eighth century, either late Umayyad or very early 'Abbasid. The sequence fully begins with two phases datable to the early 'Abbasid period (Phases B–C, ninth century), and is followed by a major late 'Abbasid to early Fatimid occupation (Phases D–G, tenth–eleventh centuries). The stratigraphic and pottery evidence combine to suggest that the major "destruction" marking the end of Phase E matches the ruin of the 'Abbasid town centre at Pella, maybe early in the Fatimid period. If so Phases F and G would be firmly Fatimid, and specifically of eleventh century date. Phases H to T continue the sequence into the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, making eight centuries of settlement that, contrary to the view of Franken and Kalsbeek,[21] would not allow for any significant gap in site occupation.

A similar picture of settlement continuity emerges from the important excavations at Tall Qudsiyah in the north Jordan Valley, located 15 km south of North ash-Shūna. As at Tall Abū Qa'dān the building material was predominantly mudbrick, and the superimposed deposits preserved an unbroken occupational sequence spanning late Antiquity to the Ottoman period.[22] The Fatimid levels, made up of ash, soil and mudbrick layers, were dated by glazed wares including lustre glazed and decorated cream wares.

On the Jordanian highlands the identification of tenth and eleventh century settlement has largely eluded archaeological surveys and site excavations. One of the few exceptions is the Khirbat Faris Project, where excavations at the stone built House 2 have revealed continuous occupation from its construction in the 1st century AD.[23] Relevant here is Stage 3, which consisted of a series of living surfaces 60–70 cm deep dated between the ninth and twelfth centuries. This time period was hardly recognised in the surface sherding survey, which further demonstrates the unreliability of regional survey results as a source of data to reconstruct settlement profiles, especially in an area where stone is the primary building material.[24] Hence the poor showing of the tenth and eleventh centuries in many regional surveys has much to do with methodological problems (e.g. recovery and identification), and to simply argue for widespread site abandonment and a major break in settlement during the Fatimid period evades a more considered approach to issues of human land-use in transitional periods.[25]

A major factor in the low representation of tenth and eleventh century settlement in Jordan is the very poor understanding of Fatimid material culture, especially ceramics. In those areas where middle Islamic pottery is better understood, survey results have been considerably more successful in identifying settlement, for instance in the north Jordan Valley.[26] The eleventh century ceramics recovered at 'Ammān and al-'Aqaba pinpoint the problems, particularly:

1. strong continuity from the preceding centuries, especially the predominance of local wheel made jars and bowls;
2. the rare appearance of glazed wares (10% at al-'Aqaba, and this is a special case where the figure could be expected to be higher);
3. the appearance of the first handmade wares, and the first showing of painted decoration on this type;
4. new styles of lamp, easily mistaken as later in date.

The 'Ammān Citadel and al-'Aqaba pottery demonstrates that wheel made wares and early handmade wares were important features of the ceramic repertoire of the eleventh century. It is to be suspected that the misallocation of these two major types to earlier and later periods respectively has been a major factor in the formation of an archaeological "dark age" in Jordan's history.

Strategies for Reinterpreting a "Dark Age" in Jordan's History

Unfortunately the application of inappropriate archaeological methodologies has created an artificial "dark age" in the history of Jordan. Imperfect ceramic typologies and unrepresentative survey data have underestimated levels of tenth and eleventh century settlement in Jordan, perhaps considerably so. Clearly there were important differences with the situation in the late sixth-early seventh century, but simply to suggest a settlement "gap" sadly hinders a full and honest assessment of social change during an important transitional period in Jordan's more recent past.

Accordingly, we must rethink the way we see tenth-eleventh century Jordan. There needs to be a positive strategy to tackle a self-created "dark age" in the country's history. Greater attention needs to be paid to sites with a high level of settlement probability in the Fatimid period. Ceramic typologies need radical improvement. Notoriously unreliable survey data must be treated with

21 H. J. Franken and J. Kalsbeek 1975: 2.
22 Kareem 1987: 92-123.
23 See the full preliminary reports in Johns, McQuitty and Falkner 1989; McQuitty and Falkner 1993.
24 Johns 1994: 3-9.
25 The repeated warnings on the limited value of survey results (e.g. Brown 1991: 229-32; J. Johns 1994; Miller 1991: 19-20) are, unbelievably, still unheeded. It is crucial to be honest about what regional site surveys can and cannot achieve if the results of archaeological research are to have historical relevance, and indeed to avoid bringing disrepute on our discipline.
26 Kareem 1987: 450-52.

suspicion. Use and adaptation of existing structures should not be scorned. A shift in emphasis is required; a shift away from "monumental" archaeology in favour of economic and population studies that take into account the dynamics of cultural continuity and change and the complexity of transitional studies.

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