

## From Decapolis to al-Urdunn: The Cities of Jordan in the Early Islamic Times

*Hints of continuity of settled life in major Roman cities of Jordan can be already found in the Arabic sources of the Abbassid period. Recent excavations bring systematically new proofs of such continuity in Jordan and, less conspicuously, in Bilād ash-Shām in general. It is already clear that the transfer of the seat of government to Baghdad did not affect immediately the city life. It seems, however, that a break took place some time during the ninth century. Is this time limit just another fallacy due to our inadequate knowledge of pottery? The shrinking of Christian communities about that time could be a major factor of change in the settlement pattern.*

The starting point of this paper is of course my own experience in the 'Jerash International Project' in 1981-83, which has revealed to me the importance of the Islamic phase in the history of this city and of Bilād ash-Shām in general. Ever since, this interest in a field that was before quite alien to me stays very much alive. It was a gratifying surprise to see that about the same time several other scholars, usually Islamic specialists in the first place, found parallel evidence on other sites in Jordan and elsewhere. Unexpectedly, the problems I have met in Jarash appeared to be in the mainstream of research of the last ten years or so.

The previous great excavation program in the 1930s revealed Jarash as a Byzantine site, with a dozen churches and other eloquent evidence of flourishing in Late Antiquity (J. W. Crowfoot in Kraeling 1938: 171-262). Only half a century later it became clear that ancient Gerasa continued for quite a while as Jarash under the Caliphs.

It is probably impossible for archaeologists, as for anybody else, to detach themselves entirely from the common knowledge of their own time and its prejudices. One should not blame the Kraeling team for not being able to look at what they have found with our eyes. The idea of decline attached to the then current view of the Islamic conquest and the end of the ancient world was so deeply entrenched that the archaeologists interpreted the uppermost layers as Byzantine without a shred of doubt,

while expressing some surprise that these layers contained Islamic coins. I do not think this attitude should be explained merely as a reflection of contemporary political situation of the Near East, at least not directly. Our older colleagues had received a much more thorough Classical education than is generally available now and adhered very strongly to the values of this education. If the post-modernist climate of our time allows us to appreciate better other civilisations (and this is a great gain), we do pay a price for it, too.

Some excellent authorities affirm that the transformation of *polis* to *madina* is basically a phenomenon of the sixth century AD, in other words that it was mostly completed before Constantinople lost its sway over Bilād ash-Shām (Kennedy; Haldon). The decline of cities would be thus a hard fact to remain, but no more to be laid at the door of the conquering Islam. The archaeological evidence available does not seem, however, to support this view. The plague, earthquakes, and mass deportation experienced by many cities of the Near East in the sixth century did cause, of course, a serious damage, but there is no proof that the effects were long-lasting.

The city of the sixth century was naturally very different from the Early Roman one. Not only there were no more temples and there were many churches instead, but the social and political changes of the time brought about the demise of the urban upper class responsible for the local self-government and for embellishing of the city with monumental buildings. Still, the inherited urban network has largely survived, some major monuments still standing and the colonnaded streets still largely open. For quite a while after the Conquest, the majority remained Christian, and the general aspect of old cities remained as before. The Muslims settled mainly in the newly founded *amṣār* (Whitcomb 1994a; 1994b), and their interference in the existing cities, while confirmed by a few well-known cases, should have been at the beginning marginal.

The only remains conceded by the Kraeling team to



the Islamic period in Jarash were “squats” in the middle of the main street and on the Oval Plaza, removed without regret or record. Judging from recent finds in Palmyra (As’ad and Stepniowski), they were rather the remains of a *sūq* installed about the end of second/eighth century by a urban community perhaps condensed in space but prosperous enough to expand economically (FIG. 1). Shops in the middle of the main street and not only along it, meant more shops than before, even if the monumental aspect of the city was neglected because it was no longer appreciated. The Islamic city in general was dominated by the merchants and their middle-class values, and no more a landed aristocracy of Roman times. This change, with its corrolaries in the legal frame and custom, is a clear result of the Conquest and of the new civilisation taking shape in the course of the first one hundred years or so of the new regime.

When the Jarash Project started, the commonly accepted paradigm for later pottery in Jordan was the 1973 study of Jim Sauer conceived for the dig at Ḥisbān. The great novelty of this schema was the affirmation that the latest assemblages found on major ancient sites all over Jordan should be assigned to the Umayyad period and were abandoned about the same time as this dynasty fell (Sauer 1982: 332). The obvious historical conclusion is to attribute this abandonment to the transfer of the Caliphal capital to Baghdad. In the field, the acceptance of Sauer’s scheme meant that some pottery first assigned to the Byzantine period could be reassessed as Umayyad (Gawlikowski 1992: 357).

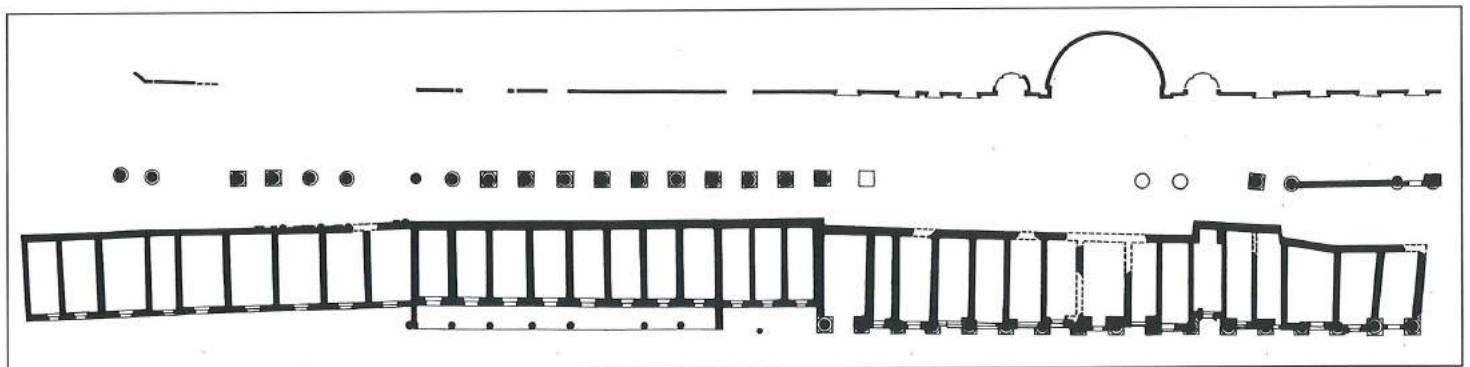
Other results from Jarash, but also from Pella, and more recently from al-‘Aqaba leave no doubt about the continuity of urban settlement up to the early 200s/800s at least. Consequently, pottery described as Umayyad should sometimes be considered Abbassid. A case in point is the site of Rujm al-Kursī, rich in artefacts dated elsewhere much later, but published as Umayyad (‘Amr 1986; 1990). Even the Fatimid period begins to be fairly well represented (Schick 1997). Life went on, wherever the seat of government might be. Moreover, there is no compelling reason to use dynastic names to describe pot-

tery, and neutral labels such as proposed by Whitcomb (1992) seem definitely better, especially if refined to match recent distinctions in the archaeological material, from Pella for instance (Walmsley 1995). Even bronze coins cannot in many cases be assigned to a dynasty, as no perceptible distinctions can be observed in those post-reform *filūs* that are undated (as most of them are) until the emissions cease some time during the third/ninth century.

It is not necessary to dwell more on the Jarash pottery, after the studies already published on the so-called Jarash bowls (Watson 1989, 1997), Jarash lamps (Scholl 1986; Gawlikowski 1995), and later pottery kilns (Falkner), even if much of the material from the Jarash Project remains unpublished. With the later specimens from al-‘Aqaba we should be able soon to extend the ceramic series from the early Islamic times up to the tenth century and beyond (Whitcomb).

The survival of Christian communities, as exemplified in Jarash by some of the inscribed lamps of the 130s/740s, was recently confirmed in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, most spectacularly by a mosaic dated to AD 756, possibly repaired as late as 785 (Piccirillo 1992; Gatier 1992). The abandonment of churches in the course of the eighth century, sometimes induced by earthquake damage, did not mark however the final days of the post-Byzantine civilisation in Jordan. As late as AD 889, al-Ya’qūbī noted that Jarash and Baysān, still considered as urban, had a mixed population. The demographic tide seems to have turned in favour of Islam about that time, possibly in connection with a Christian revolt in Ḥumṣ against al-Mutawakkil in AD 855. A century later, al-Muqaddasī speaks only of a rural district known as Jabal Jarash, depending on the city of Dar’a.

It seems that the perpetuation of ancient cities remained in those parts linked with the survival of the Byzantine tradition and that the city life died out there more or less in the same time as Christianity became marginal. A similar picture seems to result from my recent research in Palmyra. A quarter of the city situated in the ancient centre was inhabited without interruption until the early



1. The late use of the main thoroughfare of Palmyra (after As’ad and Stepniowski).



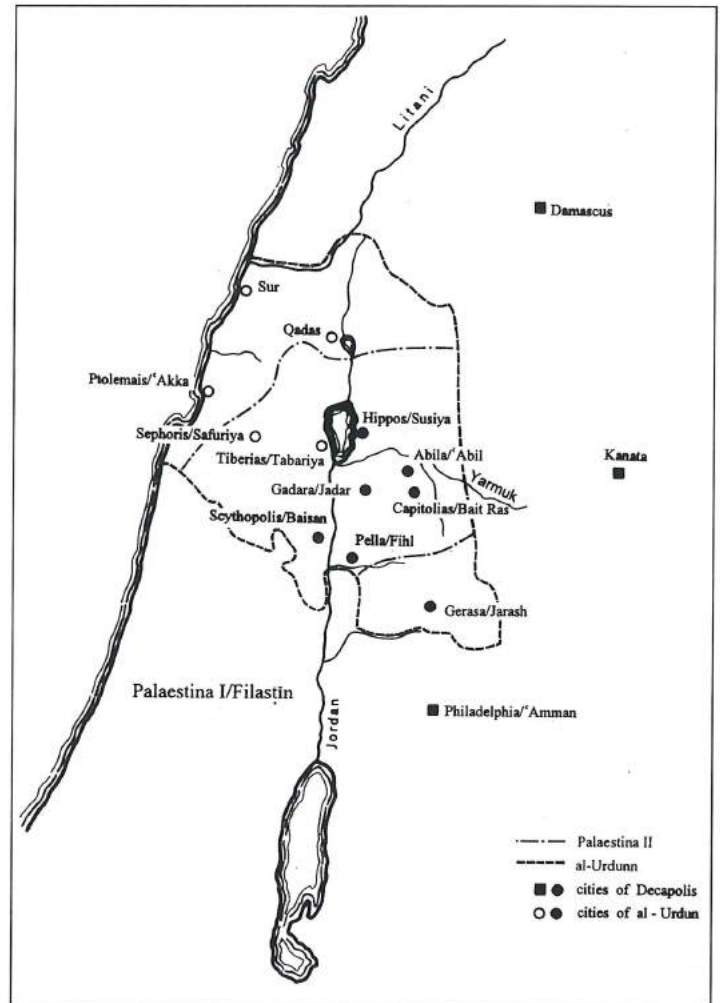
ninth century, when it was abandoned; three churches were known up to date in the area, very close to each other. The last known bishop of the place was ordained about AD 818.

Last autumn, we excavated yet another church in Palmyra (Gawlikowski 1998). It was built using a large amount of blocks scavenged from earlier buildings. Among them, one flagstone bears a Kufic inscription apparently of the later Umayyad period, which could hardly have been inscribed while already in the church. Allowing even a short time for the decay of the original structure, our church must be dated in the later eighth century, shortly before abandonment.

Needless to say, one should think twice before jumping to conclusions. Our evidence is fragmentary and scattered, and cannot be directly relevant to facts of political and religious history. It remains that whenever an ancient site surviving into the Islamic period was investigated, the occupation appears to cease, or to diminish greatly, in the early third/ninth century. It is so at Jarash, Ṭabaqat Faḥl/Pella, Bayt Rās, Umm al-Jimāl, Tadmur/Palmyra, Afāmia, and at Dāḥis in Northern Syria.

A resettlement of the population of these cities, either in a citadel on the site (Qal‘at al-Maḍīq at Afāmia, the converted Bel temple at Palmyra), or throughout the countryside, could have resulted from some economic reasons we cannot really grasp (Gawlikowski 1997). However it might be that there was no sudden decline of city life immediately following the Islamic takeover. Contrary to the “Pirenne thesis” (Hodges-Whitehouse 1983), some cities of Bilād ash-Shām developed dense *aswāq* on their ancient thoroughfares, reflecting a vitality of trade perhaps even greater than before. It is only to be expected that the prosperity was shared by the inhabitants of the entirely Muslim *amṣār*. However, there is not much evidence for the ninth century from these new sites, to say nothing of the great centres prospering to this day, such as Damascus, Ḥumṣ or Aleppo.

In fact, the perpetuation of the city life ran parallel with the maintenance of the Byzantine administrative frame. The *jund* of al-Urdunn, for instance, represents an extension of the Late Roman province of Palaestina Secunda (FIG. 2), adding to it Jarash, ‘Akka/Acco and Šūr/Tyre, but possibly covering more closely a hypothetical short-lived theme introduced by Heraclius (Shahid 1997). Of the thirteen cities quoted by Ibn Khurdadhbīh in 846/847 as belonging to al-Urdunn, five were already listed by Plinius the Elder eight centuries earlier as belonging to the Decapolis, and two more appear as being part of the Decapolis in the second century. Other cities of the Decapolis were beyond the limits of the *jund*, while other cities of al-Urdunn were already famous in Antiquity as well: Tyre, Acco, Tiberias, Sephoris. Even the obscure Qadas appears in Josephus as “Kadasa of the Tyrians”.



2. The relation of al-Urdunn to Palaestina Secunda.

In the first half of the third/ninth century, then, the urban frame of the northern Jordan remained the same as it used to be in Roman times. *Byzance après Byzance*, as Irfan Shahid (1997) has called the administrative organisation of Bilād ash-Shām in the first/seventh century, modelled according to him after a recent Byzantine innovation, seems to me to have been more flesh-and-blood. The Christian society of Late Antiquity continued to live on for two centuries, slowly shrinking and adapting, before it merged into the Islamic civilisation of later ages.

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