

The Archaeological Site of Abila: Between Local Community and Public Awareness

Jordan is among the many countries in the Middle East with rich cultural heritage. Culture is a dynamic concept, the continuity and change of which depend on geographic, political, social, and economic factors during certain periods. Jordan has gone through several phases of cultural evolution from prehistoric times through the various periods and up to the present.

The Jordanian historical and cultural resources dating back to the different eras in Jordanian history are now receiving increasing attention and are also becoming a focus of concern. Since tourism is becoming an increasingly global phenomenon with political, social, cultural, and economic dimensions, Jordan with its rich ancient and modern history has become a point of attraction for tourists of many nationalities. For the last three decades, the development of the Jordanian tourism sector with all necessary products and services has been of great concern for the local government and numerous institutions, nationally and internationally, such as the universities, the Royal Jordanian Geographic Center, the Royal Scientific Society, the Department of Antiquities, and the foreign institutions and missions dealing with archaeology and restoration in Jordan (Shunnaq and Reid 2000).

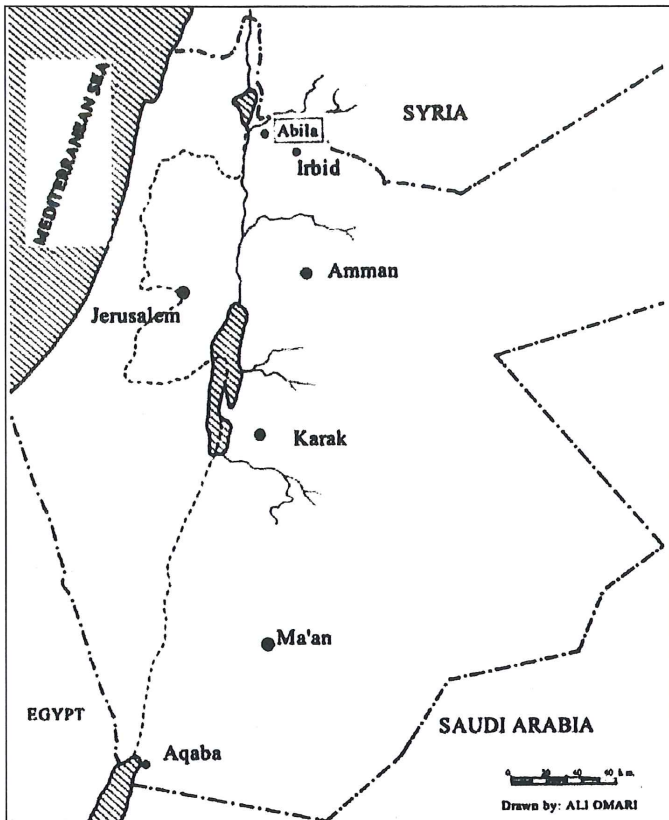
Heritage tourism has many economic and social benefits for Jordan. The rapid loss of a substantial part of the Jordanian heritage due to senseless demolition, random vandalism, misuse, and neglect has alerted governmental officials and concerned institutions. There have been increasing efforts to research and document cultural heritage in Jordan and increase public awareness to protect this valuable heritage from further deterioration.

The task to conserve cultural heritage has been my primary concern in Ḥarta, a small community in the northern part of Jordan. There, I studied the local tourism market in relation to the local community. While doing my fieldwork, I realized that Quwayliba/Abila, an archaeological site in the same area, is facing random destruction by treasure hunters and looters. This sparked my interest in Abila and I decided to study the relationship between the

archaeological site of Abila and the surrounding community. I found that the city needs to be interpreted properly and presented adequately for tourism. Abila's history, buildings and monuments are of great importance for the local community and its potential tourism market, and also to the country's national heritage which needs to be protected. In this paper I aim at studying how to prevent the destruction of the site by treasure hunters and acts of vandalism. I also suggest how to rehabilitate vandals and thieves through spreading awareness and involving them in the process of legal excavation. The main reason behind choosing this subject is the absence of specialized studies in this area.

Abila

Abila lies 15km to the north of Irbid and about 4km south of the Yarmūk River (FIG. 1). It is part of a small community called "Ḥarta". Ḥarta and two other small communities, Yarmūk Qarqūsh and Barashta, are since 1995 under the administration of what was named Ḥarta municipality (Mare 1994: 359). All three of these communities are located within the district of Banī Kinānah, a district of the Irbid Governorate. The area of Abila is approximately 1.5km north-south by 1km east-west, and its altitude is around 440m above sea level. Abila consists of three regions: Umm al-'Amad Hill, Abila Hill and Abila Valley (Mare 1994: 367). Abila is one of the richest archaeological sites in Jordan, which was also one of the Decapolis. The rich history of Abila can still be seen in extant buildings, which include theaters, churches, mosques, streets, as well as an acropolis. This site is a significant part of the history of Jordan due to its wealth of rare finds in addition to its geographic location and natural beauty. The general neglect and lack of proper protection of this significant site, aside from the lack of awareness within the local community, has led to the destruction of several important archaeological areas such as the Roman-Byzantine cemetery (Mare 1991: 206). Random digging for archaeological finds has left this ancient



1. Location map of Abila.

cemetery as witness and victim of the disturbing impact of ignorance. In spite of the historical and cultural importance of this site, the available information about it is still limited.

In order to approach this problem properly, I collected information about the destruction of this archaeological site and the degree of public awareness about this serious problem. Key informants were ten persons who have been involved in illegal excavations in the area. A questionnaire was distributed containing questions about the time they got involved in such practices, how many treasure hunters there were, tools used, and where finds would end up: in personal collections or whether they were being sold and to whom; and many other questions.

Based on the feedback on this questionnaire I could see that 90% of plunderers live in the area and close to the archaeological site. In order to deal with this problem effectively we need to encourage the formation of a positive relationship between the local community and this rare site in order to preserve it for future generations and prepare it for a potential tourism market.

General awareness plays an important role in maintaining the archaeological site, and recognizing the significance of archaeological finds and tourist values. Lack of awareness, on the other hand, can lead to the demoli-

tion of such sites of cultural and historical value. Hence focusing on the creation of general awareness is an essential necessity, because it eventually leads to an awareness and understanding of the importance of such a site for the local economy and tourism market.

Concerning the historical and archaeological importance of Abila:

Abila has been in a favorable position since Antiquity. Well-watered and surrounded by fertile agricultural land, Abila was occupied at various times from the Neolithic up to the Umayyad period and later. Abila was first mentioned as a Decapolis city by the second century geographer Ptolemy; it flourished in Roman and Byzantine times and declined after the Umayyad period, perhaps as a result of a severe earthquake in the region in the eighth century AD (Mare 1992: 57).

Abila passed through several different civilizations. It was established as a city in the Hellenistic period and then became part of what was later called the Decapolis confederacy during the Roman period (Mare 1992: 58), when the whole region flourished. Jordan was probably the most affected by vast developments in different areas because of the strategic location of the Decapolis cities and the highly developed communication network. Such developments can be noticed easily by the appearance of huge buildings such as temples, theaters, streets, and public monuments, in addition to magnificent ornamentation and decorations (Mare 1992: 60-61).

After Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Abila and the rest of the Decapolis also converted to Christianity. Four huge basilical churches were discovered in Abila (Mare 1994: 369). The Byzantine control on Abila continued until it came under Muslim control during the time of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb in the year AD 636. Structural foundations from the Umayyad period were found in the northern area of Umm al-'Amad. An earthquake in AD 749 destroyed the whole city; consequently, its citizens probably immigrated to another area, and it remained unpopulated until the Fatimid period when it was inhabited again until the Ottoman period (Mare 1996: 264).

The Main Archaeological Monuments

Similar other Roman cities, Abila was carefully planned with its streets, public courtyards, theaters, and temples. Due to the great earthquake in AD 749, the whole city was destroyed, but excavations from 1980-2000 revealed several of its great monuments. Some of these are:

- Four churches built according to the basilica style; the first one in Umm al-'Amad, the second in the Abila Valley region at the southeastern edge of Abila Hill. The excavation of the remaining two churches has not been completed yet, the ruins of the third church were discovered on Abila Hill, whereas the fourth one is lo-

cated in the Abila Valley to the south of the second church (Mare 1996: 264-265).

- The Nymphaeum, which was supplied with water from the Abila spring.
- The Umayyad Palace, located to the northeast of Umm al-'Amad Hill (Mare 1999: 457).
- Cemeteries dating to various periods. The most important ones come from the Roman period. Twenty-five Roman tombs were discovered containing frescoes.

Because of the historical and cultural importance of Abila, and the abundance of archaeological finds, as well as its rare beauty, it is a pity to see that such an important location is prone to gradual destruction due to neglect and ignorance. The absence of public awareness is one of the most important reasons which lead to the gradual destruction of the site through the illegal excavation for archaeological artifacts. Rather quickly, looting becomes a habit aimed at making a quick fortune, at the expense of the national cultural heritage. The ignorance and carelessness of guards at the location and their small number relative to the large area of the site contribute to the constant loss of artifacts. One means of preserving such a site from further damage is to draw the attention of local people to the value of the site for the local economy and tourism market and the importance of protecting it.

I found that in order to stop the demolition of this important site, the following suggestions should be taken into consideration:

- 1) Creating new job opportunities by providing employment for illegal excavators and rehabilitating them.
- 2) Increasing local individual income.
- 3) Getting people personally involved in the preservation of the site.
- 4) Creating educational programs with the help of specialized departments, especially the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and the Ministry of Information, to spread awareness about the importance of this site and involve the local community in these programs to create a successful tourism industry.
- 5) Preventing outsiders from looting.
- 6) Increasing security at the site and educating the guards.
- 7) Educating people about the laws governing archaeological finds in Jordan.
- 8) Enhancing the relationship between the site and the local community.
- 9) Educating people about the history of Abila.
- 10) Encouraging local schools to give more attention to the cultural assets and patrimony.
- 11) Cooperation with the local police force to curb the widespread vandalism of the site.
- 12) Encouraging the formation of "friends of tourism" societies.
- 13) Establishing a new antiquities office at Abila, in addition to a museum with the aim of strengthening the connection between the local community and the site. This would be a source of information about the site for the local community and would also help in the maintenance process.
- 14) Encouraging further archaeological excavations at the site.
- 15) Encouraging the cooperation between the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Ministry of Information for the creation of successful marketing programs that would present Abila as a desirable tourist attraction for national and international visitors.
- 16) Encouraging concerned ministries, institutions, and Jordan TV, to advertise the sites properly.
- 17) Involving the community in public and formal activities to market the location locally and internationally.
- 18) Encouraging the local community to cooperate with specialized departments in order to launch festivals and arrange events near the site. This could be achieved by inviting local, national, and international artists.
- 19) Training interested persons as tourist guides to be able to overcome any language and information barriers. These will then be able to promote the site properly to visitors.

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