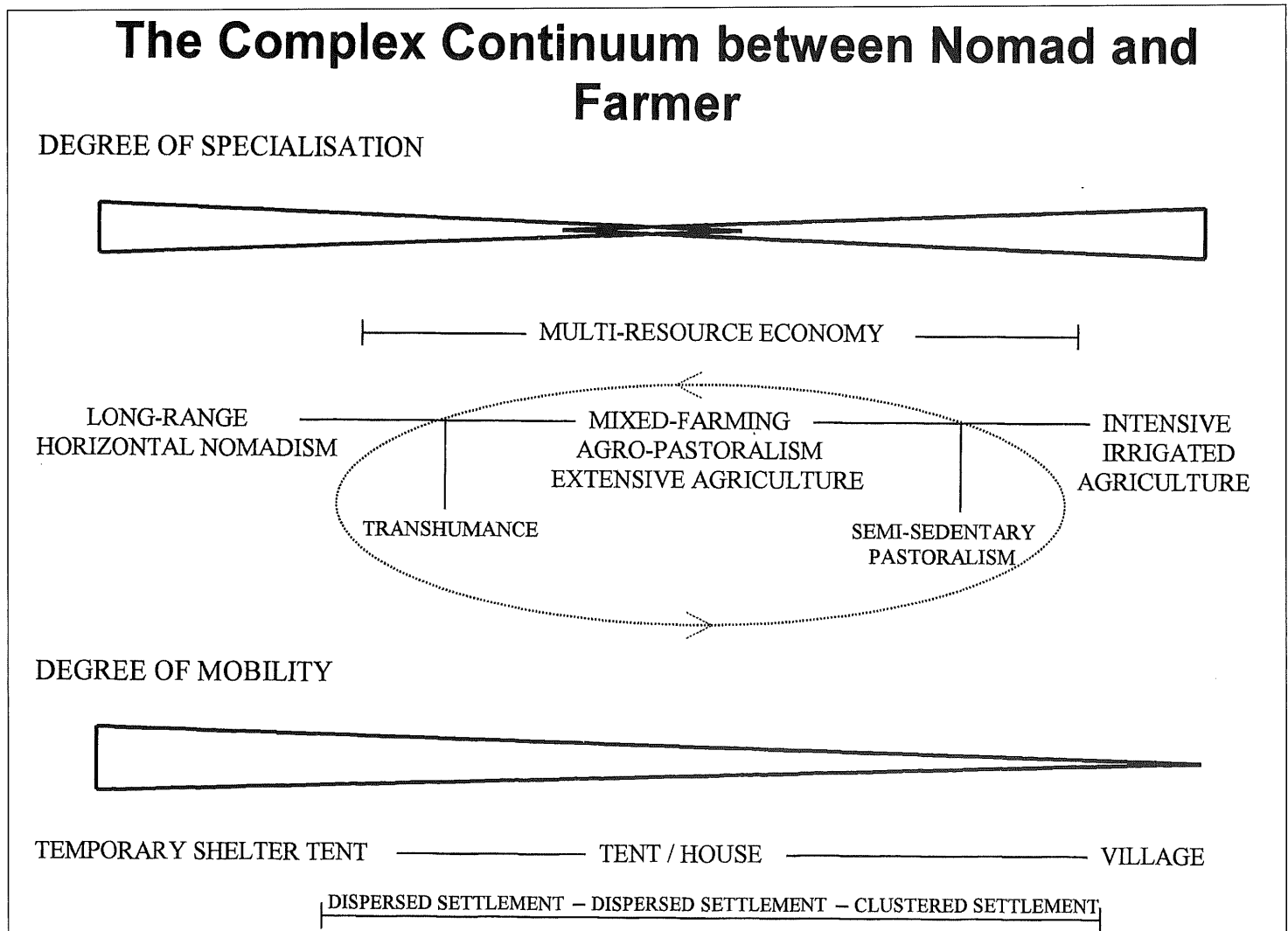


Rural Settlement on the Karak Plateau: Khirbat Fāris¹

Khirbat Fāris is located on the Northern Karak Plateau (FIG. 1). Like much of Jordan this is an area where the strategies employed to exploit the economic potential of the land have varied both tem-

porally and geographically. The Karak Plateau is not so much a marginal zone but a transitional zone shifting from the arid steppe environment of the east, through the more fertile rain-fed agricultural



1. Location of Khirbat Fāris.

¹ The Khirbat Fāris Project is directed by the author (Research Associate, Centre for Tourism and Culture Change, Sheffield Hallam University) and Dr. J. Johns (Director, Khalili Research Centre, Oxford University) and sponsored by the Council for British Re-

search in the Levant and the Oriental Institute, Oxford University. Figures for this article were prepared by H. Barnes (Figures 2 and 4). For interim reports see: Johns *et al.* 1989; McQuitty and Falkner 1993.

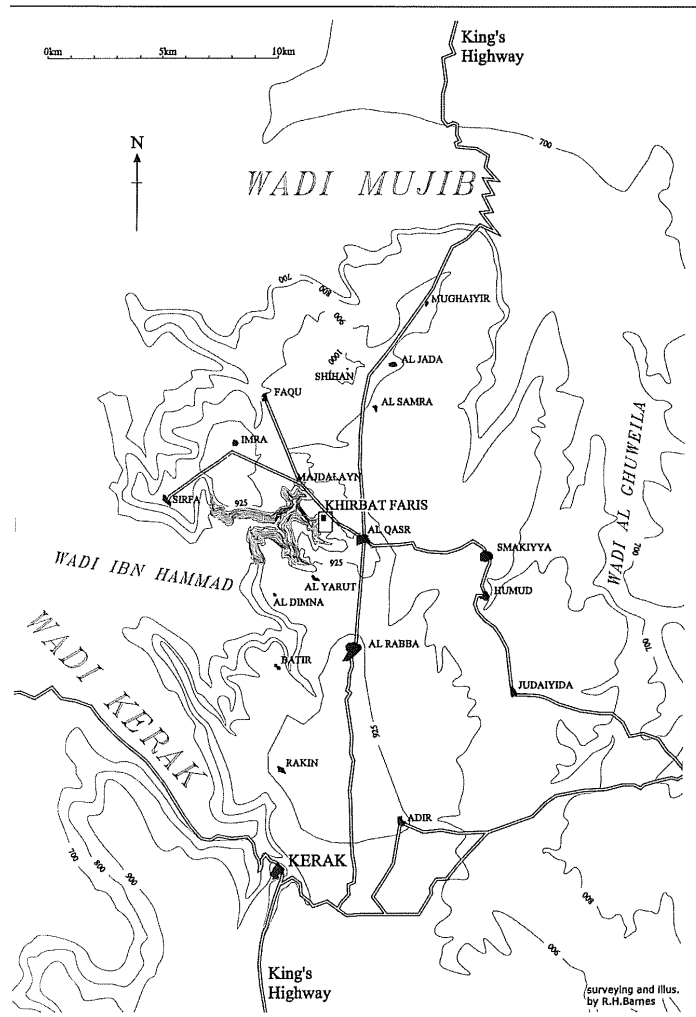
lands of the plateau itself to the wadis, often supporting irrigated agriculture, down to the oasis-like settlements of the Jordan Valley. The variation in exploitation strategies is shown graphically in Figure 2. Often the archaeological story of rural Jordan is portrayed as an opposition between the nomad and the farmer. Of course the reality is much more complex and nuanced. At one extreme stands the nomad practising specialised pastoralism. At the other end of the continuum sits intensive irrigated agriculture. In between lie the various options of a less-specialised - subsistence even - multi-resource economy. To add to the complexity, several groups practising different but complementary exploitation strategies can utilise the same geographical area. The history of the settlement at Khirbat Fāris and the life-style of its inhabitants seem to have occupied the middle zone of Figure 2.

For the archaeologist, the challenge is to identify the material traces of the community that would have occupied this middle-zone. It is much easier to identify the campsites of specialist pastoralists

or the villages of truly sedentary farmers than the settlement types of communities that move seasonally or live in both houses and tents. Drawing on ethnographic as well as archaeological parallels, the interpretation of the Khirbat Fāris excavations has included detailed consideration of the types of domestic architecture represented that span a period of almost 2000 years. The interpretation endeavours to define the architectural ‘signatures’ of the different types of economic strategy within the pastoral/agricultural continuum.

Khirbat Fāris is a multi-period site with the earliest excavated occupation dating from the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550BC). No historical records mention Khirbat Fāris — its background and the landscape history within which it fits are known but the details of its settlement history can only be retrieved from archaeology. Four basic types of stone structures dating from the Nabataean period to the early 20th century AD are represented. The structures survive astonishingly well, often to roof-height, and have been subject to many centuries of re-modelling.

Figure 3 shows the post-first century BC /AD ‘*Khān*’ (a local name) that is still being used. It is a fine barrel-vaulted structure within which 2m of floor levels have accumulated. These floor-levels suggest a domestic use although some of the most compelling parallels for this type of structure suggest an original use in a funerary context, e.g. the Roman mausoleum at Khirbat ‘Ayn near Jarash (Kennedy and Bewley 2004: 167 Fig. 9.9C). If the original purpose of such structures was funerary this type of architecture can not be clearly linked with an economic strategy. However, at many times, including as originally constructed, it was part of a larger complex that was not revealed in total by excavation. Hirschfeld has identified a series of towered structures along the eastern edge of the al-



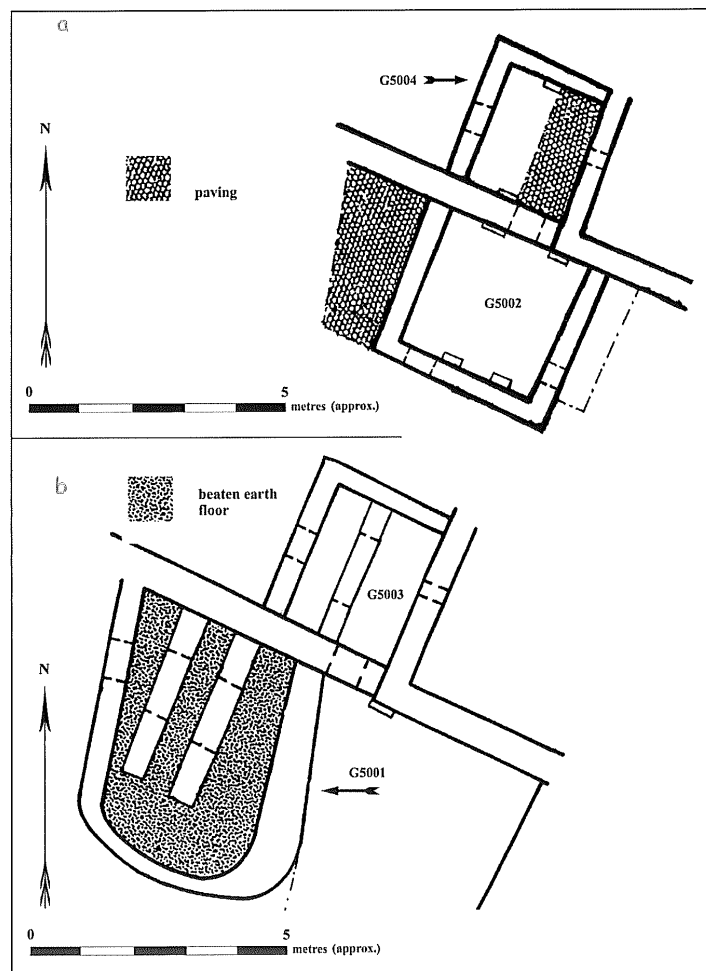
2. The complex continuum between nomad and farmer.



3. The ‘Khān’.

Khalil hills as part of Byzantine farmsteads (1997: 50-59). These towers are part of more extensive complexes including annexes, sheep-folds and other agricultural features. The 'Khān' may originally have been part of a towered farmhouse rather than a mausoleum as first thought. At the current state of research it is impossible to conclude the extent to which it is an unusual or a common architectural type on the Karak Plateau. The precise nature of economic strategy practised in tandem with this architecture is impossible to assess. However the existence of terraced fields nearby that are interpreted as being of similar date suggests that cultivation of fruit-trees and/or irrigated crops may have formed part of the agricultural cycle (Mike Charles pers. comm.). None of the other structures excavated at Khirbat Fāris are of such an early date.

Figure 4a shows the plan of an arched and flat-roofed single unit room that was originally constructed in the late Roman/early Byzantine centuries. It was used throughout the Early Islamic period. The techniques used in the construction of the house have a long history and exceptionally



4a. The 'Late Antique House'.

4b. The 'Transverse-Arch House'.

wide distribution in the Eastern Mediterranean in rural, urban, ecclesiastical and military contexts. Such houses at Khirbat Fāris were identified as "the Late Antique House". The construction relies on arches springing from house walls at a high level or from arches resting on pilasters buttressed by the house wall. In either case the arches support a flat roof of stone rafters or beams. The width of the room reflects the arch-span possible: an average of 5.00 metres. The arches are spaced according to the length of the stone rafters or beams available and occur in any number. At Khirbat Fāris, the entrance to these houses was set perpendicular to, and between, the arches. From the evidence of surveys and excavations throughout Jordan, it is suggested that such architecture was associated with fairly intensive agriculture where the majority of the rural population lived in villages.

One of the two examples of 'the Late Antique house' was remodelled in the Middle Islamic period (12th century AD) to become a 'Transverse Arch house'. The example shown in Figure 4b was built *de novo* but within the walls of the earlier 'late Antique house'. In total three 'Transverse Arch houses' were excavated. The main architectural difference between the two types lies in the arrangement of the arches. The arches no longer spring from the house wall or immediately adjacent to it but rather from an arch wall projecting perpendicular to the house wall. This increases the possible roofed area: the span of the arch is added to the length of the arch walls. The space between the arches was used to construct storage bins or *rawiyat* in which the annual harvest could be stored. In addition, without exception, the door position was no longer between the arches but in the wall parallel to the arches. The examples at Khirbat Fāris date from the Middle Islamic I period but they are also the most common architectural type found in 19th/early 20th century villages throughout Jordan. These later villages are characterised by a mixed-farming economy involving both agricultural and pastoral components. When excavations at Khirbat Fāris began in the late 80s, a family came to the site every spring and autumn with their flocks. They lived in a tent or *bayt al-sha'ar* but returned every winter and summer to their 'Transverse arch house' in a nearby village. Based on ethnographic evidence, this type of architecture on the Karak Plateau is associated with an extensive type of agriculture and with semi-sedentary communities.

Although the construction technique is the same the 'Arch-and-Grain-Bin house' as shown in Figure 5, has been identified as a separate type at Khirbat Fāris. The scale is dramatically different with a roofed area of 135-225m² contrasting with the 54-100m² of the 'Transverse Arch house'. Two 19th century examples are still standing at the site and were used by the semi-nomadic owners of the land and as barns for storing their annual harvest and agricultural equipment. The "Arch-and-Grain-Bin" houses were used as a complement to the tents, pitched nearby, in which the household's dwelling and socialising took place. The distribution of such houses' is largely confined to areas historically producing grain on a large scale. Such architecture is to be linked with the transhumance/nomadic end of the continuum on the Figure 2 diagram.

The houses of Figure 6 date from the later Middle Islamic-Late Islamic period (14th-late 16th centuries AD) and appear to be a totally new type of architecture. They are small barrel-vaulted struc-



Figure 5. The 'Arch-and-Grain-Bin' House.



Figure 6. The 'Barrel-vaulted' House.

tures with average internal dimensions of 3.00 x 4.00m, a height of ca. 2.00m and massively thick side walls that supported the vault. These houses are clustered around alleyways and courtyards and a similar pattern is seen at Ḥisbān dating to the Mamluk period (LaBianca 1990: 220-221). Such houses were a common sight in the courtyards of 20th century villages where they were used as animal stables or oven houses (Khammash 1986: 43). However, at Khirbat Fāris they are interpreted as dwelling-houses in their own right — there are separate oven-houses built within the courtyards. The barrel-vaulted houses give the impression of being part of a nucleated sedentary farming community, a village, rather than a semi-nomadic community.

This interpretation is based on the assumption that the variation in the types of economic strategy practised is reflected in the type of architecture used. It offers a chance to move beyond statements regarding presence/absence of particular occupation periods to more sophisticated conclusions of 'how' the landscape was used. Settlement patterns derived from survey data alone that do not take into account the variation of architecture used in individual settlements will never provide a nuanced picture of landscape use. More excavation of rural settlements along with more detailed planning of sites and their structures found during survey is needed before we have a clearer impression of rural settlement in Jordan during the Islamic periods.

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