

An Examination of the Ruins of Qasr Burqu'

by

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1. Through the Kindness of the Director-General of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, I had the opportunity to visit Qasr Burqu' and restudy the remains of the qasr. I was accompanied by two friends, M. Jean-Paul Pascual and Jelal Saad. The fourth member of our party was the inspector of the Department of Antiquities, Mr. Abed el-Jalil Amr, whose friendship we all equally esteemed.

Burqu' was visited first by the Field Museum Arabian Desert Expedition in 1928. In this connection an architectural report on the site was published by Eric Schroeder.¹ Schroeder's short report and sketch-plan of the ruin do not answer the question of the chronological sequence of the different parts of the building. The present purpose is to elucidate this question and to determine those parts of the structure which might be connected with the well-known inscription of al-Walid² (Pl. XXXI, 1). This inscription informs us that in the year 81 of the Hijra (700 A.D.) the "*Amīr al-Walīd, son of the Commander of the Faithful*", was responsible for construction-work on the site. The extent of this work, however, has not been clearly defined, although some theories concerning the Umayyad work have been published.³

Qasr Burqu' is situated about 25 kms NW of the pumping — station H 4, now a small village on the road from Mafraq

(1) Field, H. *North Arabian desert archeological Survey 1925-50*, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1960) (Peabody Museums Papers XLV, 2.) p. 94-99.

(2) Rocea, Nr. 12: additions: field. H. *op. cit.* 154-8.

to Baghdad. A harra-plain of about 650 m altitude surrounds the ruin which lies on the NE-bank of the Wadi Miqat. About 2 kms NW of Burqu', the wadi is blocked by a low dam forming a small lake which at the time of our visit (May 4th to May 7th 1974) reached the foundations of the SW-wall of the qasr. The exact alignment of the foundations of the western part of the enclosure with the limits of the water in the dammed-up wadi suggest that there existed a similar dam in the wadi at the time this part of the enclosure was first constructed.

The remains consist of a plain enclosure-wall at the NE-side and the SW-side and ranges of rooms at the SE- and NE-side enclosing a courtyard within which is a rectangular tower. Access to the courtyard is given by a door in the NW-enclosure-wall. The building was constructed on a slope. Thus the foundation stones of the S- and W-corner of the enclosure lay 3.27 m lower than the E-corner of the building (Pl. XXXI, 2).

2. Only the SW-part of the original doorway, which gives access to the courtyard (ca. 30 m x 30 m), is preserved (Pl. XXXII, 1). Most of the SW-part of the enclosure is crudely repaired. Only a stretch ca. 4.5 m to the SW of the doorway would appear to belong to an earlier stage of the construction. From the NE-half of the NW-enclosure, a wall which projects to the SE formed the SW-wall of a room (1) of

(3) Sauvaget, J. *Remarques sur les monuments Omeyyades*. In: *Journal Asiatique* CCXXI (1939) p. 23-24.

which some traces of a SE-wall are preserved. From this room a narrow and low door led to a small room (2). SE of room (2) lies room (3) which was connected with room (4) by an arch (now fallen (Pls. XXXII, 2, XXXIII, 1). In the NE-wall of room (4) is a small niche. Both rooms were connected with the courtyard by a door in the middle of the SW-wall of room (3). Adjacent but unconnected with these rooms was a complex formed by a rectangular room (5) and an apsidal room (6) with niches (Pls. XXXIII, 2, XXXIV, 1). This complex was entered from the courtyard (Pl. XXXIV, 2). The next room (7) is the longest room of the whole complex. It is entered from the courtyard by a door in its SW-wall. The lintel of this door bears the Walid-inscription, but this inscription is at present not in its original architectural context (Pl. XXXI, 1). This is proved by two holes in the NW-end of the stone. The more NW of the two was supposed to hold the door-post of the Walid-structure, the second to the SE of it took the door-post of the present day building (Pl. XXXV, 1). Within the SE-enclosure-wall we find a range of rooms (8) — (11) (Pl. XXXIV, 3). SW of room (11) there is an open space and in the S-angle of the enclosure is room (12). Room (8) is almost square. It is accessible by a door from the rectangular room (9) (Pl. XXXV, 2). This room is connected with the courtyard by a door in the SW-half of its NW-Wall. Room (10) SW of room (9) is bounded on the SW by an irregular, oval, towerlike structure (room 11). There are interior pilasters engaged in the SW and NE which carried the floor of an upper storey (Pl. XXXVI, 1). Entrance was given to the tower from the courtyard by a door the lintel of which is engraved carrying a cross and some Greek letters (Pl. XXXVI, 2). Room (12)

occupies the S-angle of the building (Pl. XXXVII, 2). The lower courses of the SW-enclosure belong to an early stage of the structure (Pl. XXXVII, 1). The unusual straightness of this wall merits notice.

3. The enclosure and the rooms to be found inside its NE and SE half show traces of repeated repairs, plan alterations and reconstruction. The masonry of the structure is of poor Hauranean style (i.e. an outer and an inner face formed of pyramidal basalt-stones set with their bases to the outside and the spaces between them filled with small stones and clay, with courses of bonding-stones running through the walls at different heights). This makes the task of determining the different stages of construction very difficult. However, a thorough examination of the bondings, construction-methods and irregularities in the plan permits the isolation of four stages of building activity, exclusive of the rectangular tower (B) in the western part of the complex:

Stage 1: Room (11)

Stage 2: Enclosure, room (2), (3), (5), (7), (9), (10) and (6) ?

Stage 3: Room (4) and (6) ?

Stage 4: Room (1), (8) and (12).

In addition to this, but not clearly to be connected with any of these stages of construction, repairs were undertaken on the enclosure walls and the courtyard wall of the range of rooms in the NE.

3. 1. The tower-room (11) is not bonded with the walls of the adjacent parts of the building. Its masonry differs from the masonry of the rest of the structure. The shape of the room makes no sense in the context of the whole building. The fact that the enclosure walls converge onto it together

with the other previously mentioned observations suggest that room (11) existed before any other of the present existing parts of the complex were erected.

3. 2. Next, the enclosure wall and the rooms inside its NE half were built. This building period is characterized by a homogeneous type of masonry with two courses of bonding-stones (fourth and tenth course). Several sections of the walls of this period were later repaired, namely the walls of room (2), the NW-half of the SW-wall of room (3), the NW-half of the SW-wall of room (5), the SE-half of the SW-wall of room (7), the SW-parts of the walls of room (10), the NE-half of the NW-enclosure, and the upper courses of the SW-enclosure.

3. 3. Room (4) was added in a subsequent period. This is shown both by the strange plan which the construction of the room produces and also by a distinct type of masonry with bonding-stones in the sixth course. This connects its construction with the SE-half of the SW-wall of room (3) and the partition-wall between room (3) and room (5). The apsidal annex to room (5) is probably earlier than room (4). It has no bondings with room (5) and shows a distinct style of masonry which has no parallels in the whole complex. However, this might be due to the peculiar shape of room (6), which does not permit the use of bonding-courses.

3. 4. The rooms (1), (8) and (12) are distinguished from the rest of the building by a more simple door construction and the use of lower and longer stones.

4. Some parts of the building possessed a ground-floor and an upper

floor. Distinct traces of an upper floor are preserved in the rooms (2), (8), (11) and (12), showing that in stage 4 the three corner-rooms in the N, E and S of the complex had an upper floor. The walls of the upper floor of room (8) rose above adjacent walls. Thus, at the highest point of the terrain on which the *qasr* is built, an upper floor room overtowered the rest of the structure. Next to room (8) the S-wall of room (9) rises five courses above the corbels which carried the roof. Since this part of the building did not have an upper floor (which is suggested by the dressing of the stones of the SW-side of the upper floor of room 3), it is hardly imaginable that any of the other long rooms (i.e. room 3, 4, 5, 7, 10) possessed an upper floor. As a consequence, a staircase on the courtyard facade between the doors leading to the rooms (3) and (5) (another staircase must have been on the courtyard-side of the rooms 9 or 10) can have led only to a roof-terrace. This terrace was surrounded by walls about 1 m high. The seemingly uneconomic a height of these walls had constructive reasons. The weight of the upper part of the walls had to counterbalance the pressure the stone roof exercised on the corbels which carried it.

5. The rectangular tower (B) in the SW-half of the complex must be treated separately (Pl. XXXVIII, 1). Its architectural conception, its technique of masonry and its quality of construction separate it from the other buildings to be found at *Burqu'*.

Its relation with the above described sections of the site is only a geographical and a functional one. The masonry of this structure is similar to that of the earlier buildings of

Umm el-Jimal⁴ (to name the largest southern site with distinct Hauranean style of architecture). Its plan is similar to that of many structures which can be seen all over the eastern parts of Syria (i.e. in the Hauran, the Lejah, the eastern slopes of the Jebel el-'Arab, the 'Ala-region and the Jebel-Hass). In the north-western massif similar structures can be found.⁵

The ground floor of the tower is divided into three rectangular rooms of similar shape. It possessed originally a ground floor and two upper floors. The masonry is characterized by regular courses of well-dressed stones. The regular courses of bonding-stones (which are to be seen in the sixth, eleventh, sixteenth, twenty-first, twenty-sixth, thirty-first, and thirty-sixth course) and their intervals remind one of similar structures which can be found all over Syria.⁶ The fourth bonding course projects on the exterior to form a string course. This string course is a very common feature on similar structures in the Hauran and adjacent regions (e.g. Umm el-Jimal, Melah, Busan, Burd 'Orman).⁷ It can be seen in the Lejah (e.g. Haiyat),⁸ and also in the 'Ala-region (e.g. tower of Temek).⁹

The walls of the tower are preserved up to a height of almost 9 m. Its SE-corner overtowers the rest of the remaining walls. It is more than 12 m high. The central part of the E-wall has collapsed and was crudely repaired.

Entrance to the tower was given by a very narrow and low (window-

like) door at its W-side. This door was the only opening of the whole building. Thus the defensive character of the structure is obvious. The door gave access to a long room. On the right (-south-) side this room was connected by an arch with a similar room. A door led to a third room north of the central room. The upper floors of the tower had only two rooms. Rooms which were almost square filled the southern two-thirds of the building. Rectangular rooms, similar to the room in the ground floor, were in the northern third. The ceiling of the upper floors must have been made of wood (at least in the southern part of the building). This is suggested by the lack of any remains in the southern part of the tower which could have carried stone-ceilings.

This tower was originally designed to stand isolated. With its small door (which was easy to block) it could resist any enemy who was to be expected in this region. The function of the building can not be the subject of any discussion. It was one among many Roman-Byzantine watch-towers to be found along the pre-Islamic roads of Bilad ash-Sham.

6. A relative chronology of the rooms (1) - (12) and the enclosure-walls was established above (cf. p. 94). The rectangular tower (B) is doubtless the earliest part of the whole complex. Thus five stages of building-activity can be isolated at Qasr Burqu'. The question is now, whether it is possible to connect some (or all) of them with con-

(4) Butler, H.C. *Ancient architecture in Syria. Section A.B.* Leyden (1907-1920) (Syria. Publications of the Princeton University archaeological expedition to Syria. Div. 2.) II, A: 150 ff.

(5) Tchalenko, G. *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord.* I-III, Paris (1953-1958) (Bibliothèque archéologique et historique tome L.), I, 30,

161, 173, 433, II. pl. CLXXXVII, 4 and CLXXVIII, 2.

(6) Gaube, H. *Ein arabischer Palast in Südsyrien Hirbet el Baida.* Beirut (1974) (Beiruter Texte und Studien 16.) p. 63-65.

(7) Butler, H.C. *op. cit.* II, A, 150 ff. (Umm el-Jimal).

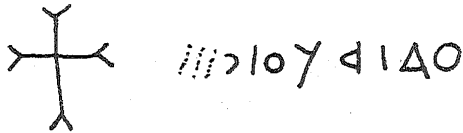
(8) Butler, H.C. *op. cit.* II, A, p. 362 f.

(9) Butler, H.C. *op. cit.* II, B, 1:12.

crete dates. Some dates are provided by the epigraphical material found at Burqu'. This consists of two Greek and three Arabic inscriptions.

6. 1. A Greek inscription, which was already the subject of several studies, comes from the tomb of a man whose name was probably Hani. It was dated by Dow¹⁰ on palaeographic grounds to the III century A.D. This inscription is not *in situ* anymore but kept in the Chicago Natural History Museum (acq. no. 219461).

6. 2. A Greek inscription on the lintel of the door leading from the courtyard to room (11) was first published by Field as "the Safaitic letters and the cross"¹¹. It fills the right half of the mentioned lintel which carries in its center an incised cross:



That this inscription is not Safaitic at all does not need to be discussed. It could possibly be read:

[KYP]10Y A1Δ0[Y]

'Respect the Lord!' The 'Safaitic' letters seen by Field below the lintel on the jambs of the door are nothing but wusum. Wusum are tribal marks which are used by the nomads to mark their cattle. They became some kind of heraldic sign and are engraved on stones in the desert, on ruins (e.g. Bel-temple of Palmyra) and on rocks.

6. 3. The Arabic inscription of al-Walid, the no. 12 of the RCEA, is now used as lintel of the door that

(10) Field, H. *op. cit.* p. 161 ff.

(11) Field, H. *op. cit.* p. 156 f.

leads from the courtyard to room (7). This, however, is not its original place (cf. above p. 94). The text published in the RCEA is not complete. The missing words were published by Field¹² who was advised by Sir Hamilton Gibb. Gibb suggests that the two last letters of the second line read HW and the first eight letters of third line read LAALBYWT. This is, in fact, the only possible transliteration here.

The inscription is to be read thus:

- 1 — اللهم بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم هذا ما
- 2 — بنا الامير الوليد بن أمير المؤمنين هو
- 3 — لاء البيوت سنة وحدة وثمانين

The translation would be (1) "O God! Bismillah. This is what (2) the Amir al-Walid, son of the Commander of the Faithful, built: (3) these rooms. In the year 81." This is the reading of Field/Gibb.

6. 4. Two other Arabic inscriptions are preserved above the Walid-inscription (Pl. XXXVI, 2).

- A. 1 — قرأ هذا الخط بالكوفي
- 2 — هارون ابن شماعة
- 3 — الزبيدي ولقاه [في سنة]
- 4 — سبع مائة واثني وثمانين

(1) It read this Kufi-script (2) Harun Ibn Šammā'a (3) az-Zubaidi. He saw it (4) [in the year] 782 (= A.D. 1380).

- B. 1 — سنة كتبي سنة ثاني عشر
- 2 — وثمان مائة

(12) Field, H. *op. cit.* p. 154 f.

(1) [The] year [this] was written [is the] year (2) 812 (= A.D. 1409).

The first of the two inscriptions gives a terminus ante quem for the restoration-work on the courtyard walls of the rooms (2), (3), (5) and (7). In the course of this work, the Walid-inscription most probably was transferred to the door of room (7).

7. The epigraphical material gives, therefore, four periods which are of relevance for the dating of the individual stages of construction or reconstruction at Qasr Burqu'.

7. 1. With the tomb-inscription (6.1.) which seems to be pre-Byzantine (that means III/beginning of the IV century A.D.) the watch-tower (B) is contemporary. Structures of this kind were built at the end of the Roman- and the beginning of the Byzantine period.¹³ The birkeh S of the tower can well be of the same date. It certainly did not suffice to provide the men in the watch-tower with water.

Therefore the bigger birkeh N of the NW-enclosure must already have existed in this period. Observations on the SW-enclosure (cf. p. 94) suggest that the dam in the wadi was existing when this wall was built. It can well be contemporary with the watch-tower.

7. 2. The lintel of room (11) suggests a pre-Islamic date for this structure. This, however, is not as certain as the pre-Islamic dating of the rectangular tower. The surface dressing of this lintel with the cross and the Greek inscription as well as the holes for the door-posts give the impression that the lintel is *in situ*. Thus the

Greek inscription indicates a pre-Walid date (i.e. before A.H. 81/700 A.D.) for the door of room (11). Only the Greek inscription, the above mentioned observations on the masonry (cf. p. 94) and the bondings can be used as positive argument for a pre-Walid dating of room (11). The cross could be much later.

7. 3. The Walid-inscription is not *in situ*. The stone on which it is incised is not broken. It is most probable that the stone was used as a lintel of one of the doors leading from the courtyard to the rooms (3), (5), (7) or (10). The most likely place for the inscription would have been above the door of room (5). Intensive reconstruction-work was done in this room later (cf. p. 95), and in the course of this work the inscription could have been removed.

Since the size of the lintel with the inscription of Walid does not permit the supposition that it was used as a lintel of the main-entrance to the qasr in the NW-enclosure, one of Thus it can be supposed that the inscription was used as lintel of one of the doors leading from the courtyard to one of the rooms at its NE- or SE-side.

It must refer to the range of rooms along the east and south-side of the courtyard, except the rooms (1), (4), (6) ? and (11). The Walid-structure thus would have comprised all sections of the building with bonding-stones in the fourth and tenth course. If this conclusion is correct, it shows that in the time before Walid became caliph, considerable building-work was executed in his name at Burqu'. Burqu' is situated in the same harra-region

(13) Poidebard, A.: *La Trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie*. Paris (1934) (Bibliothèque

archéologique et historique, tome XVIII.) p. 52056.

which another building of Walid own: the palace at Jebel Seis. 14 palace is situated a two days ey to the N of Burqu'.

s already mentioned above (cf.), it is hard to determine whether (6) belongs to stage 3 (i.e. the l-structure), or is later. There are ondings between the east-wall of (5) and the walls of room (6). suggests a later date for room But why was there built an ap- annex to room (5) in the time Walid ? In Walid's time this al room would not have been un- ion. We know buildings from the of Walid with apsidal rooms. ng them are smaller structures as 'Amra. 15 Some of the larger es possess apsidal rooms in their 16 These rooms are generally red to as "throne"-rooms. A more ppropriate word would be madafa (re- on-room). Room (5) together with (6) could well have been a re- on-room in whose apsidal part the e was seated.

4. The post-Walid stages of the ing cannot be precisely dated. n (4) which was added to the buil- in the course of extensive res- ion work is older than the ear- of the two Arabic inscriptions e the Walid- inscription (i.e. in- tion 6.4 A). This means it was before 1380 A.D. The different ique of construction and the dif- it size of stones used for the s (2), (8) and (12) suggest that e rooms were added after room

(4) (whether before or after 1380 A.D. is not determinable).

8. In the course of its centuries- long use Qasr Burqu' served different purposes. The nucleus of the site, the rectangular tower (B) was a Roman- Byzantine watch-tower. It was built along one of the main caravan-roads from Arabia to Syria. In the old days the traveller knew that he could find water at Burqu'. The installations to secure the water supply at the place date partly (if not entirely) back to the III/IV centuries A.D. when the watch-tower was built. They consist (A) of the small birkeh next to the rec- tangular tower (it never was covered as Schroeder supposed,¹⁷ (B) a large birkeh north of Qasr Burqu', about 100 m x 150 m wide, and (C) the artificial lake on the west-side of Burqu' which was formed by a dam in the Wadi Miqat. The present dam is of recent date. But our above (p. 98) mentioned observations led to the con- clusion that there already existed a dam at the time the enclosure-wall was built (700 A.D.).

In the V and VI centuries, as many of the advanced posts were evacuated by the Byzantines, Burqu' probably was transformed into a monastic settlement. This was a common process in late- Byzantine Syria.¹⁸ The Arab phylarchs controlled the eastern regions of Syria and monks (Arabs or Syrians) moved into the old military installations. The lintel of the tower-like structure (11) with the cross and the Greek letters suggests that Burqu' became a monas- tic settlement. The extent of such a

Brisch, K.: *Das Omayyadische Schloss in . Vorläufiger Bericht über die mit in der DFG unternommenen Grabungen. itteilungen des Deutschen Archaeologischen utes. Abteilung Kairo 19 (1963), p. 141-*

(15) Creswell, K. A. C.: *Early Muslim archi- tecture. Umayyades. A.D. 622-750. Oxford (1969) p. 390-449.*

(16) e.g. Jebel Seis, Minyeh

(17) Field, H. *op. cit.* p. 98.

(18) cf. Rubin, B.: *Das Zeitalter Iustinians. I. Berlin (1960) p. 274 f.*

cultural exploitation of the harrat around Burqu' would have been rather troublesome. There are some spots not far to the W of Burqu' where non-irrigation agriculture is practised today. They would have been more appropriate for an agricultural exploitation than the terrain around Burqu'. The *raison d'être* of the Walid-structure is the water in the wadi. It is not only provided man and animal with drinking water, but attracted wild animals who were easily to be hunted there. Thus Qasr Burqu' could well have been a 'badiya'¹⁹ - a place where the Umayyad prince spent some weeks of the year to reaffirm his personal links with the tribes of the region, enjoy the fresh air of the desert and go hunting. The rather simple feature of the building, however, does not support this interpretation strongly. It does not contradict it, either, since we have to bear in mind that Burqu' was built when al-Walid was not yet caliph. The apsidal room gives weight to this interpretation. Room (6) is most probably part of the Walid-building. Its existence is explainable only if a residential character is attributed to the building. In such a context, the rooms (5) and (6) would have served as a reception-room.

If room (6) is later than room (5), the building could have been built as a han. Then, of course, the explanation of the function of room (6) becomes a rather troublesome task. The only possible conclusion would be to

(19) cf. Gaube, H. *op.cit.* p. cit. p. 119-128.

(20) Butler, H. C.: *Early Churches in Syria*. Amsterdam (1969) p. 51, 76 f. 137, 188.

(21) Gaube, H., *op. cit.*, pl. II, p. 3 and 4.

(22) Brisch, K., *op. cit.*, map.

(23) Rocea, Nrs. 3320, 3465, 3563, 3593, 3745,

the two rooms together reminds one of the plan of simple village-churches in Syria²⁰. Convincing historical arguments for this interpretation can not be provided yet. This, however, is not due to the fact that historical material is lacking. The reason is that too little attention has been given to the Christian 'province' of Islamic Syria (i.e. the regional history of the eastern and the mountainous regions of Bilad ash-Sham in 'Abbasid and post-'Abbasid times). That Christian communities lived in the eastern desert parts of Greater Syria in post-Umayyad times is beyond any question. Next to Khirbet el-Baida we found crosses incised into the walls of post-Umayyad buildings.²¹ The church at Jebel Seis²² seems to be part of the post-Umayyad settlement there.

In medieval times (before and after 1380 A.D., a date provided by inscription 6.4. A) Burqu' was used as a han. From this period we have clear indications of 'colonization' activities in the eastern parts of Syria. Here it must suffice to refer to the statistical evidence the inscriptions of Salhad produce.²³

Burqu' seems not to have lost its han-function earlier than the beginning of the age of the truck. This is suggested by present-day maps which show that desert roads coming from the south converge to Burqu' and diverge from Burqu' to the north.

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3831, 3844, 3877, 4038, 4049, 4050, 4051, 4112, 4207, 4306, 4307, 4348, 4349, 4403, 4611. Additions: Gaube, H. *Arabische Inschriftenaus Syrien*. Beirut (1975) (Beiruter Texte und Studien 17.) Nrs. 162-168.