

RESTORATION AND EXCAVATION AT AL-AZRAQ CASTLE DURING 2008

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Introduction

The restoration and excavation works conducted in 2008 complement those of 2006, which included restoration of Wall 20, excavation in Room 36 and redocumentation of all architectural features. The latter consisted of renumbering all rooms, entrances, walls, windows, arches and arrow slits, and describing these features in full detail. Each architectural feature was measured and photographed separately. During this documentation 46 rooms, 88 walls, 31 arches, 82 entrances, 27 windows and 63 arrow slits were identified, in addition to a bath house on the western side of the castle which was uncovered during excavations carried out by the Desert Castles Office in 2002.

Some of these features are original, whilst others are later appendages dating particularly to the period when the Druze used the castle. The Druze settled in al-Azraq castle following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution against French imperialism. They came to al-Azraq in 1925 with their families. They stayed in the castle, renovated its rooms and distributed them amongst themselves. We have documented the names of all these families and the rooms they occupied, and recorded the testimonies of some of the survivors of that period. One room, and ten windows, was added at that time.

In 2008, work focused on the following:

1. Reconstruction of Wall 22,
2. Excavation in Rooms 37 and 45, and completion of excavations in Room 36,
3. Excavation at the south-east corner of the castle courtyard.

Thanks are due to all involved in the project: archaeologists Ola al-A'war and Kefah Abu Assi, stone mason Jehad al-Shomari, Adib Abu Shmais and Jehad Haroun who identified

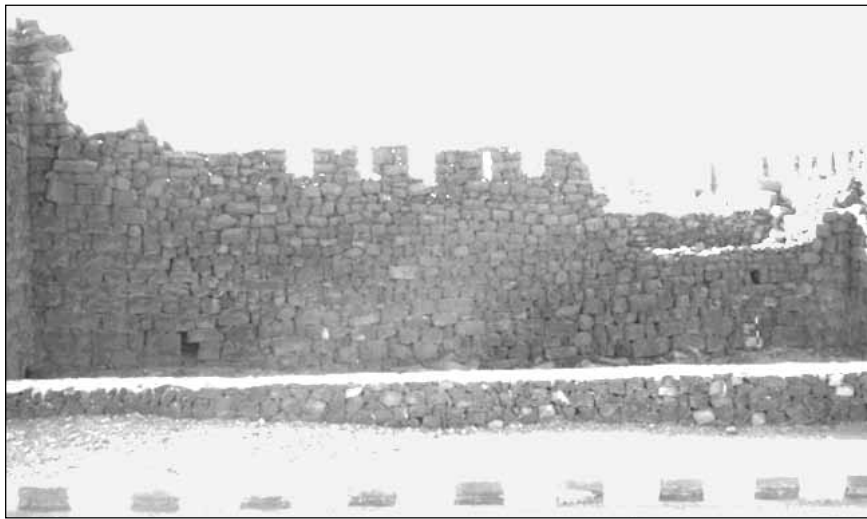
the pottery, Lisa Maher and Tobias Richter who identified the chipped stone, and draftsman Jamal Safi. Special thanks are due to the Directorate of the Department of Antiquities, which provided all possible and available assistance.

Reconstruction of Wall 22

Work began with reconstruction of Wall 22, which is 22.85m long and forms the south-western façade of the castle and the western wall of Rooms 12, 13, 14 and 15. It is not of even height, as some parts of it were subject to collapse and the ground upon which it is constructed slopes down from north to south. In this context, its height ranges from 6.15 to 4.40m, and its width from 1.17 to 1.40m. In the center of the wall, at the level of the arrow slits, its width is just 0.80m. There are three windows and two arrow slits in the centre of the wall, which were added at a later period, probably during the Druze occupation of the castle or in the late Ottoman period.

Perusal of the photographs and elevations included with this article immediately demonstrates the poor condition of Wall 22, especially in its middle portion where construction consists of largely random placements of relatively small stones. The wall was therefore in imminent danger of collapse (**Figs. 1, 2 and 3**).

It was therefore necessary to dismantle the central part of the wall, which was built at a later date, whilst maintaining the southern corner in its present condition and carrying out minor adjustments to the northern corner stones by pushing them slightly inwards, to align them with the remaining parts of the wall. Owing to its proximity to central Tower 4, which leans slightly outwards, the northern corner had adopted a slight slant to the west.



1. Wall 22 before reconstruction (looking to east).



2. Wall 22 before reconstruction (looking to north from the top).



3. Wall 22 before reconstruction (looking to north).

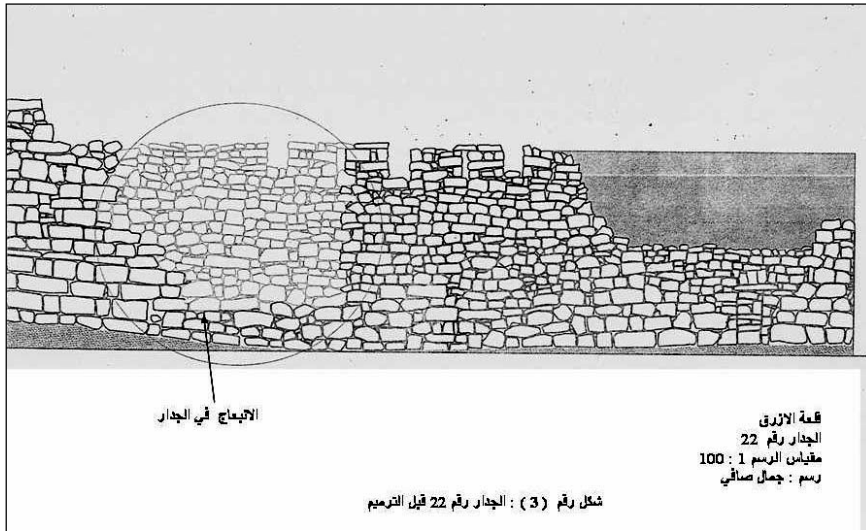
Before dismantling the wall, it was drawn and recorded (**Fig. 4**). Each stone was given a number and its dimensions recorded, so that it could be restored to its original location in the event that our work required it to be moved. Be-

fore work began we dug a test trench, 230cm long, 120cm wide and 211cm deep at the southern corner of the wall to establish the depth of the wall's foundations and relative position of the bedrock.

During excavation of this trench, a number of layers were revealed, some recent and some occupation deposits containing pottery of late Roman and Byzantine date. It is clear that we reached prehistoric strata, *viz.* layers 4, 5, and 6, where we found 31 chipped stone artefacts, some dating to the Middle Palaeolithic.

After dismantling the wall, we dug a 1m wide trench along the length of the wall foundations in order to assess whether or not the foundation stones could be reused. Five stones were replaced because of their poor condition. After photographing and documenting the foundation stones, we refilled the trench by placing white mortar in its base then, in order, an earth layer, a plastic layer, a gravel layer, a blend of white mortar with earth layer and finally an earth layer, (**Fig. 5**) so as to form a barrier against moisture and salts in order to protect the wall foundations.

The wall was reconstructed in the original manner, clearly visible where the stones had not been dismantled at the northern and southern corners, adjacent to corner Tower 3 and central Tower 4. Only earth available in the castle courtyard was used to bind the stones in place. Every course of stone was in turn covered with this earth; the central part of the wall was also packed with it.



4. Wall 22 plan before reconstruction.



5. Wall 22 after dismantling (foundation preservation process).



6. Wall 22 after reconstruction (looking to east).



7. Wall 22 after reconstruction (looking to north).

It is worth noting that there is a recent entrance, built by the Druze in the 1920s, at the southern side leading into Room 12. We did not rebuild it from the outside, because it conflicts with the nature of the wall, but kept it in place on the inside to signify the utilization of the room at that time (Figs. 6, 7 and 8).

After the completion of the wall rebuilding,

we applied clay to the ceiling of Roof 13 which was rebuilt during the 2006 season. We also plastered the internal walls of this room using white mortar, *Suwayliḥ* sand and earth. The floor was rendered in the same way. Electricity was put in and wooden doors made in the traditional Arabian style. The room will be used to display artefacts excavated in the al-Azraq area.



8. Wall 22 after reconstruction (looking north from the top).

Discussion

Excavation in selected parts of the castle was also amongst the objectives of the project. These were conducted in Room 45, Rooms 36 and 37, as well as in the south-eastern corner of the castle courtyard parallel to Room 45, in the form of a trench 13m long by 5m wide.

Excavations were carried out in these areas for two reasons. First, to complete the excavation of the architectural features expected in the eastern part of the castle. It seems that this area is covered with layers of fill, as the ground slopes down towards the east. Second, there were still significant gaps in our knowledge the castle's history. Much archaeological work was done in the vicinity of al-Azraq castle during the last century, by Bell, Musil, Lawrence, Crawford, Stein, Rees, Maitland, Field, Glueck, Harding, Parker and others. Mr. David Kennedy conducted an expanded study on al-Azraq Castle and the Latin and Greek inscriptions, which were found. These studies are among the most important studies on al-Azraq Castle. Mrs. Neveen Hashash obtained a Master Degree on al-Azraq Castle.

However, most of these studies focused on the Roman, Byzantine and Ayyubid periods. Consequently, questions about other periods remained unanswered, specifically concerning whether or not the castle was occupied during the Nabataean, Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman periods. It is well known that the al-Azraq area is referred to in many historical sources on account of its militarily and commercially significant location, as well as its position on the pilgrim route from Damascus to Mecca.

From historical evidence and archeological

indications, it is clear there was a trade route connecting the Arabian peninsula with the Levant via Wādī as-Sarḥān. Al-Azraq is located at the northern end of Wādī as-Sarḥān, from where the route headed up to Umm al-Quṭṭayn (via Rujum al-Madāwir, Tulūl al-Manāsif ash-Sharqī and Dayr al-Kahf) and on to Damascus via Busra. Other routes led south from al-Azraq to Bāyir, al-Jafir, Ma'ān and on to Ḥijaz through Tabouk, or to Sinai and Egypt through al-'Aqaba.

There was also a route that linked al-Azraq Oasis with western areas, such as 'Amman and al-Balqā', which passed through al-'Uwaynid, Quṣayr 'Amrah, al-Kharrānah, Mashāsh and al-Muwaqqar.

During the Umayyad period, al-Azraq was not as important in military terms as it was during the Roman and Byzantine periods. It was mentioned by Ibn al-Atheer, who wrote that "al-Waleed went out with people of his court and supporters, and he mounted down at al-Azraq at a water place in Jordan". An indication that Al Waleed II Ibn Yazeed Al-Tabari also mentioned the same.

The strategic and military importance of Transjordan in general, and al-Azraq in particular, revived during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. The Ayyubids realized the strategic importance of al-Azraq during their operations against the Crusader occupation of Palestine and south Jordan, which posed a threat to communications between Egypt and Syria, and to the pilgrim road between Damascus and Mecca. In this respect, sultan al-Naser Dawood ordered the rebuilding of the Castle in 1236 AD / 634 AH. Izz Eddeen Aybak restored it, who was assumed the position of (Usta Dar)

The military importance of al-Azraq increased during the Mamluk period, when the Mongols began to make their way towards Iraq and Syria on their way to Egypt, in co-ordination with the Crusaders. This posed a real danger to the existence of the Mamluk state, as well as a threat to the holy cities of Mecca and Madina.

During the Ottoman period, al-Azraq was one of the stations on the pilgrim road into the Arabian peninsula. During the early twentieth century, al-Azraq Castle was used by Prince Ali bin al-Hussein and T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) as a base from which to launch the Great Arab Revolt towards Damascus. The last

utilization of the castle was by groups of Druze during the Syrian revolution against the French imperialism.

During the period of the Transjordan emirate, a force of border guards was formed at al-Azraq. This all demonstrates how the importance of al-Azraq fluctuated according to wider social and military conditions.

Excavation

The 2008 excavations yielded interesting results, as we exposed new architectural features such as Room 45, (Fig. 9) situated at the south-eastern corner of the castle, between south-east Tower 10 and Room 46. The area of this room is 43m² it consists of Wall 81A at the southern side, Wall 82A at the northern side, Wall 83 at the western side and Wall 79C at the eastern side.

It seems that the southern wall was pulled down and a new wall built adjacent to the original foundations; two new entrances also were built for this room. During excavation, 29 layers were revealed over the foundations. Further, the original foundations of Wall 81 were discovered. These extend east-west into this room, are 11.40m long, 1.40m wide, 1.80 to 2.25m high and consists of two rows of large stones. Five or six courses of the wall survive. A north-south wall was also discovered, which divides the room into two parts; it was designated Wall 89 and is 2.42m long, ca. 0.80m thick, between 1.75 and 2.15m high, and consists of seven to eight courses and two rows of stone. An entrance was discovered at the north-western corner of the room, which leads to the castle courtyard. This



9. Room 45 before excavation (looking to east).

was designated Entrance 83, and was 180cm high and 110cm wide. It consists of five courses constructed over the original floor of the Castle. This room was rebuilt by Mr Qasem al-Atrash during the Druze occupation of the castle in the 1920s. Late Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, early and late Ayyubid, and Ottoman pottery was discovered during these excavations. In Layer 4 we found part of a milestone with a four line Latin inscription; the diameter of this part of the stone was 18cm and its height is 27cm. Excavation was focused on the western part of this room, where we reached bedrock (Fig. 10).

Excavations were also conducted in the Castle courtyard, parallel to Rooms 45 and 46, by digging a 13 by 5m trench adjacent to Wall 82, which also forms the northern wall of Rooms 45 and 46. This area was covered by stones arranged in the shape of a square following maintenance carried out by the Department of Antiquities in 1975 (Fig. 11). The courtyard of the castle measures 63.38m internally from west to east, over which distance it slopes down by 2.27m. The idea we bore in our minds is that the courtyard could slope down by more than this amount, as it is covered with layers of natu-



10. Room 45 after excavation (looking to west).



11. courtyard before excavation (looking S.W.).

ral and occupational fills. The Druze apparently changed the architectural features of the courtyard more than any other part of the castle. In the excavated trench, we found 31 occupation layers dating to recent, Ottoman, Mamluk, early and late Ayyubid, Umayyad, Byzantine and late Roman periods. A few pieces of Pottery Neolithic chipped stone were found on bedrock.

Only two pieces of Nabataean pottery were found, which suggests that there was not a Nabataean settlement at the castle. We also found one piece of Fatimid pottery. In Layer 7, we found a nineteenth century handmade Ottoman jar. In Layer 20 (Fig. 12), we found a pottery bowl dating to the same period (Fig. 13). In addition, we exposed an entrance leading to Room 46. In the eastern part of the trench, we found a north-south wall, 5m long, 0.98m wide, with a height of 35 to 105cm; it was designated Wall 90 (Fig. 14).

Room 37 is situated in the eastern part of the castle between rooms 36 and 38. It is 5.60m long,



12. Ottoman pottery jar found in courtyard trench (layer 17).



13. Ottoman pottery bowl found in courtyard trench (layer 20).

3m wide, and consists of the following walls: Wall 68B in the west, Wall 65 in the north, Wall 70 in the east and Wall 69 in the south. It has two entrances, Entrance 60 in the west which overlooks the castle courtyard, and Entrance 59 in the north which leads to Room 36. There are also two arrow slits in the western wall, and a north-south arch. In this room, there have been many alterations of the architectural features, especially on the western side. The arch stones are not of the same size and shape, signifying that it was rebuilt during consecutive periods.

During excavation of this room, it was found that it contained many episodes of infilling and that many deposits were truncated in the northern part of the room. Ten layers were identified. Some of them were recent, others were mixed as a result of the abovementioned disturbance to the stratigraphy, and some contained small fragments of plaster. The most important layer was Layer 6, which is identical to Layers 12 and 16 in the courtyard trench, and Layers 14 and 16 in Room 45. It is a compact layer of earth in the form of a floor, with clear traces of fire. The earliest floor of the room is paved with stones, and is situated 90cm. below the current courtyard surface. This room was reused during the Druze settlement period at the castle by Mr Zaid Isaid.

Among the important discoveries in this room was a west-east channel, built of two rows of uncovered stones with a stone-paved base. It flows from the base of western Wall 68B down to the east towards Wall 70 and has the appearance of a drainage channel leading out of the



14. Courtyard trench after excavation (looking S.W.).

castle courtyard, passing through Room 37. This channel is 290cm long, *ca.* 40cm deep, and 40 to 50cm wide (**Fig. 15**). This channel may be related to a not yet fully exposed architectural feature in the castle courtyard.

To the north of Room 37, excavations were conducted in Room 36(1) which is adjacent to the water well in the eastern part of the castle. It consists of Wall 64 in the south, Wall 66 in the north, Wall 65 in the east and Wall 67A in the west. It also includes two arrow slits. It has a main entrance at the western wall which leads to the castle courtyard, Entrance 58. There is also an entrance connecting it with Room 37, Entrance 59. The arch foundations are 56 cm. above the modern floor level of the room. This



15. Room 37 after excavation (paved water canal).

arch consists of 25 stones of varied shape and size, which supports the hypothesis that it was rebuilt in later periods. The length of this room is 5.80m and its width 4.12m; the south-west corner was restored by the Department of Antiquities in 1975 and 1977.

As a result of natural factors that affected the castle in successive periods, especially earthquakes, as well as deliberate destruction, restoration and renovation, many of the archeological deposits in this room have been disturbed. There were many mixed layers and fills, especially in the eastern, northern and central parts of the room. During the excavation, we identified parts of ten occupation layers, many of which contained mixed pottery assemblages. This room was used during the Druze settlement period by Mr Thoqan al-Qadi.

As for the architectural features, western Wall 67A was built in two phases. It was originally built with large stones with an average size of 80 by 50cm, whereas the size of the stones in the upper part of the wall averaged 60 by 28cm. Additionally, as in Room 37 the remains of a stone-paved floor were discovered at the south-west corner of the room.

One of the important discoveries in this room was that of an earlier entrance, below the current entrance, on its western side which overlooks the courtyard of the castle. Most probably

it was the original entrance of the room before its reuse in subsequent periods. It is at the level of the original floor of the room, which we believe is the surface of the courtyard in the eastern part of the castle (Fig. 16). This entrance is 155cm high and 95cm wide; it is blocked from the west side by the fills which cover the castle courtyard. Here, the original floor is 175cm be-



16. Room 36 after excavation (modern and ancient entrances).

low the level of the current courtyard.

Conclusions

As a result of the 2008 excavations, it is clear that there are traces of limited Umayyad occupation in the castle. Moreover, there is both Ottoman and prehistoric occupation (middle Paleolithic (Fig. 17), as well occupation during the late Roman, Byzantine, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. On the other hand, there is no sign of significant Nabataean occupation. We also confirmed that the original level of the floors on the eastern side of the castle was lower than the current level of the floors (Fig. 18), because the hill on which the castle was built slopes down towards the east. Future work may reveal architectural features in areas which are still covered with layers of fill.



17. middle Paleolithic flints tools found in southern wall 22 corner trench.



18. Courtyard ancient and modern level.

A. Lash: Restoration and Excavation at Al-Azraq Castle

In order to obtain more information about al-Azraq castle, more excavation is required on the eastern side of the castle. This is because most of the western parts of the castle have no depth of deposit as they are close to bedrock. The sole exception appears to be Rooms 11 and 12, which were infilled when the Druze settled in the castle, thereby preserving the lower deposits of these rooms intact.

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