

THE “TEMPLE OF THE SERPENTS” A SANCTUARY IN THE EARLY BRONZE AGE 1 IN THE VILLAGE OF JABAL AL-MUṬAWWAQ (JORDAN)

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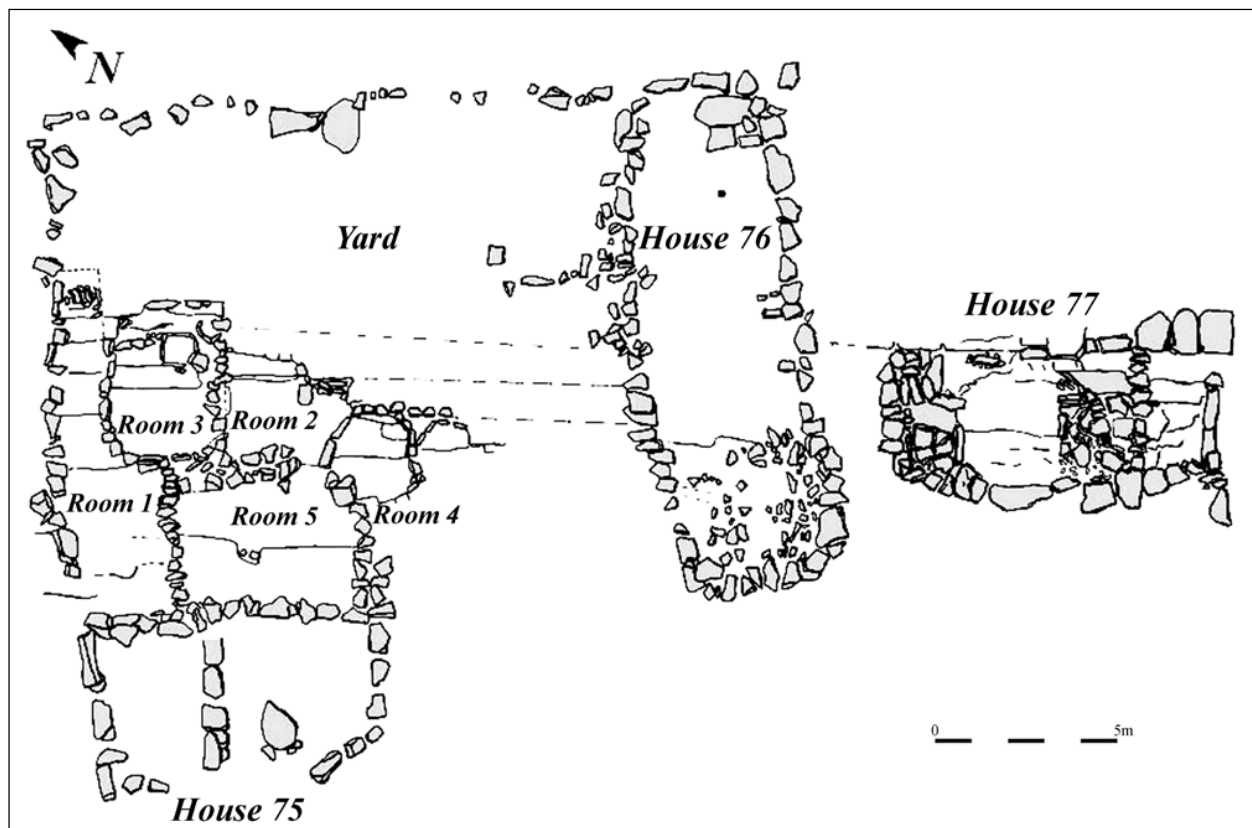
Introduction

In an earlier publication (Fernández-Tresguerres 2005) some aspects of the domestic architecture of Jabal al-Muṭawwaq were discussed, especially regarding its uniformity. The fact that the structures which are described in the following do not conform to this expectation would seem to indicate that it was not used as a family dwelling. The complex is made up of three dwellings (75, 76 and 77) and a large patio that has a series of rooms built within it. Given that pottery was found inside them which had

been decorated with serpents, it has been called the “Temple of the Serpents”. This site was excavated in the campaigns of 2003 to 2006 (Fig. 1)

The Main Building: Dwelling 76

Before excavation began only the top line of the bricks of the walls of the dwelling could be seen, it has the same features as all of the rooms that have been observed in the village: an oval longhouse, facing northeast-southeast, 12.67m long and 3.30m wide (reaching 3.85 at some



1. General plan of the “Temple of the Serpents”.

points). It goes against logic to build a room on a steep incline, and it would seem that this was done deliberately to preserve the two meters difference in surface level between the two ends of the upper house.

Construction

The building was constructed on the limestone itself. The walls were built out of large natural stones without using any type of mortar. The surviving walls show that it was built with blocks placed in irregular rows. In the rest of the building the walls have collapsed, falling both inside and outside of the structure, and only the base of the walls is still visible. The surviving elements and the size of the blocks appear to suggest that the wall would have been approximately two meters in height (**Fig. 2**).

The head of the building's apse, which faces east, is surprising as both the curved wall that closes it and the floor were cut out of the same limestone rock at some 0.54m in depth. This created an irregular platform and it forms a crudely vertical wall which defines the apse end of the house. In addition, blocks of stone were placed on it that define the perimeter of the building (**Fig. 3**).

With the exception of the aforementioned head, the builders did not attempt to do anything about the steep incline of the rock. Instead it was kept, as the irregular incline made it easier to move upwards along the house from the lower platform to the upper one. However, with regards to the high vertical steps of the patio, it would seem that they were levelled out inside the house to leave a crude inclined plane.



2. General view of the east of dwelling 76.



3. Dwelling 76, cavity and altar.

The fact that dwelling 76 has two doors is also unusual; there is one on each of its long sides, and they do not face each other. One of them opens onto a patio and the other onto a space that is related to dwelling 77. Neither of them were built according to the plans that are defined and documented in some of the dwellings of al-Muṭawwaq, as for example, in n° 20. In dwelling 76 the doors are simply an interruption in the wall, using a series of slabs, which are more or less flat, to form the threshold. The size of the doors is different from the information obtained in other buildings in al-Muṭawwaq (normally around 0.75m in width): one of them is 1.90m in width and the other is 1.25m in length. The eastern door is marked inside the dwelling by three blocks which are perpendicular to the wall. Various flint utensils were found together beside them (scrapers, sickles and a chopper), a bone awl and the remains of a goat or a sheep.

Structures Built on the Inside of the Dwelling

In the highest part, a strange structure was built on the artificially created platform and next to the wall cut out of the rock. It was formed by three large flat stones which rested on smaller ones (another one slid towards the inside of the well which is mentioned later). From its position and form it could be a small "altar". It is 1.40m in length, 0.55 in width and 0.50 in height. Between this structure and the wall there is a hole cut out of the same limestone (1.75m long by 0.55m wide and 0.50m deep) next to a shallow cavity in the rock. It was full of clayey sediments and it also contained some sherds, half

a mace-head and flint hammerstone, which had clear signs on one end that it had been used for hitting; they are possibly the same tools which were used to cut the rock and dig the well (**Fig. 3**).

Another small cavity, this time a natural one, which was perfectly circular (some 0.24m in diameter and 0.20m in depth), is found on the edge of this higher platform. It is possible that it was used to hold up a post as support for the roof that might have been there. There are no signs of fire in any part of the surface of the dwelling.

It is important to note the presence of a standing stone next to the wall of the head, lined up with others that faced a large cairn and a small enclosure positioned to the north (**Fig. 4**).

The positioning of the doors makes it seem that the head, which is perhaps the most important part of the building, is out of place. The visitor would have had to turn at a right angle to head towards the area where the platform



4. Standing stone in the head of dwelling 76.

and the possible altar were found. According to Kempinski (1992: 53-59), this is unusual in temples from this period, where visitors normally found themselves facing the sacred statue from the moment they entered the room through the only door found in the temples (in al-Muṭawwaq there is no evidence of the existence of an image)¹ In dwelling 76 the positioning of the doors in respect to the axis of the structure corresponds more, according to Kempinski's affirmations, with the end of the Early Bronze Age and it is due to an influence from Mesopotamia. This does not appear to be the case of the "Temple of the Serpents" with regards to chronology or influence.

The Patio

It is found to the west of the house and occupies a space which is roughly rectangular and is bordered by medium-sized stone blocks. It runs 16.80m from south to north and 16.15m east to west. It has a strong incline from east to west, from its door at the highest point to the wall for dwelling n° 75 at the lowest point; the difference in level is some 3.30m (**Fig. 5**). Towards the middle of the patio the step that suddenly breaks up the floor of the large room, which was mentioned earlier, continues. Therefore, the patio is formed by a succession of steps, of vertical walls, which are in part natural, but also regularized in parts through cutting. They reach 0.60m in height and were used as a means of transit. At some points these steps served as an enclosing wall for the structures built in the patio.

The main entrance to the patio is found on the long side to the northeast. Comparing it to that found in al-Muṭawwaq, it could be said that it is a monumental door. Two large standing stones serve as doorposts and they are aligned with the standing stone outside the head of the house. Both of the blocks that frame the door are nearly 1.50m in height, and the width of the entrance is slightly greater.

One of the doorframes has fallen onto the threshold which is formed by a step built out of a series of stone blocks which are smaller in

1. No fragments of either human or animal figures have been found among the remains found in al-Muṭawwaq (except those of a serpent). However, it is not uncommon to find these types of figures from the Neolithic of 'Ayn Ghazāl to the Chalcolithic of al-Ghassūl and Abū Ḥāmid, and they were

even found in the early Bronze of Jāwā. In the southern region of the Dead Sea we find human figures in the funeral art of Bāb adh-Dhrā'. In al-Muṭawwaq and in other places the presence of standing stones is relatively common.



5. Door to the patio and way down towards the rooms.

size. Under this threshold another hole had been excavated, next to another natural cavity in the rock, where the flint hammers used for the excavation were found. This hole measures 1.63m in length (counting the natural cavity of the rock, 2.30m) by 0.93m at its widest part and 0.60m in depth.

An interesting fact: adjoining the walls west of the patio and that of room 4, on the outside of the complex, a small semi-circular structure appeared where human bones had been accumulated. It is possible that they were there due to the sacred nature of the site.

Dwelling 75

Its floor is more or less rectangular; this irregularity with regards to the typical model of al-Muṭawwaq is due to its northeast wall, which it shares with the patio. It is in part formed by a step in the rock on which blocks of stone were placed; it has a height of 1.59m. The main part of the opposite wall has disappeared.

The house is divided into two separate rooms by a wall made of a row of medium sized stones. The northwest room (2.41m by 3.52m) is full of ash which came from a fireplace positioned in

its northern corner.

To the southeast of this room there is another room (3.55m by 3.87m) that has a large flagstone as its main feature, measuring 1.1m by 0.68m and 0.12m in thickness. Judging by the tools found nearby, it was used as a table for some type of work; it was resting on small blocks of stone (Fig. 6).

Rooms Built in the Patio

The earth that covered the rock hid the high steps making the four rooms invisible that were built between the upper step, which cut the patio from southeast to northeast, and the lower one, which served as a wall for dwelling 75. These rooms, which were connected to each other and faced northwest-southeast, are small in size and it is possible that they make up the interior of another smaller sanctuary.

Access is gained through the patio by descending from the main door. It is easy to move on this stairway, although at the lower end the soft incline of the ramp is interrupted suddenly by a step which is 0.60m high. Some slabs of long prismatic stone make it lower in height, and



6. "Table" in dwelling 75.

convert it into a stairway at the end of which a small landing is found which serves as an access hall to the rooms. These were built with medium sized blocks and they also use the walls of the other structures.

Room 5

It is the largest of the settlement (4.75m by 3.15m). Access is gained from the hall by a door (0.97m wide) facing northeast. The threshold is formed by a small step about 0.20m in height (**Fig. 7**). This door had been closed with stones, one of which — a fragment of basalt with a hole in the centre — possibly formed part of the doorjamb. What was possibly the lintel was supported by the same blocks as the wall.

The walls of this room are complex given that two of them, made out of large irregular blocks of stone, are shared with dwelling 75 and with the patio. The rest of the walls were built with smaller stones which were also irregular and were supported by the aforementioned walls. The floor is the same flat regular rock, divided in two by a natural step in the rock.

Room 4

Positioned southeast of the landing of the stairway which the door opens onto, it is more or less circular in plan. The entrance is formed by a prismatic block that serves as a jamb and, opposite this, the natural step of the rock. The height of the step has been increased by a block of rock being placed on it. The lintel had fallen on a block of flat rock that was used as a threshold.

The room measures 2.64m by 2.76m. The



7. Foreground – door to room 5. Background room 2 and the bench.

north wall (shared with the patio) is formed by the step of the rock, which is made higher with blocks of stone. The rest of the wall is curved and it was made with small blocks and the west side is joined to the wall of Room 5.

Room 2

Here we find a southeast facing door, made of a large prismatic block placed on a base rock which defines the east side of the door, and the west side is defined by the blocks of stone used in the wall. This door gives access to a room which is more or less circular in plan (2.92m by 1.96m). The eastern wall, which is made of small blocks of stone, measures 0.89m in height and 0.40m in width. The west wall adjoins room 5, forming a double wall (0.55m in height) built out of medium to large sized blocks.

On its north-eastern side two steps made of rock were used to serve as a bench, one of them as a seat (1.83m in length by 0.55m in width and 0.48m in height) and the other as the back. This is completed with blocks of stone that form a corner with the wall that closes the room to the east (0.61m in height). This wall defines the bench by dividing it from the stairway. The base rock, which is completely flat, serves as a floor. A crack full of earth opens to the southeast to northeast (**Fig. 8**).

On the north side of this room a new door opens which provides access to a more complex space.

Room 3

Access is gained by a door which has been



8. Room 2. Bench.

built perfectly in line with the model that is characteristic of the settlement: Two jambs and a threshold (three irregular blocks of stone placed directly on the rock floor). One of the jambs (which was partly resting on a light layer of earth, and sitting on another stone that was in direct contact with the rock) is 0.95m high by 0.51m wide and 0.24m thick. The other jamb, placed directly on the rock, is 0.82m high by 0.43m wide by 0.38m thick. The width of the door is approximately 0.93m. Between the two pillars there is a fallen prismatic block which may have been the lintel, as its dimensions suit the width of the door (**Fig. 9**).

The ground plan (2.56m wide by 3.47m long) is oval, and is defined by walls made of medium-sized irregular blocks; one of them stands independently of the wall of room 5 and it was built separately from it.

The distribution of the space is more complex than that of the rooms described before as they are divided into two parts with different heights, and with an axis marked by a natural step of 0.58m in height which is a continuation of the bench in room 2. In the lower section, the ground was covered by beaten earth around 0.25m thick, which covered the upper part of the stone blocks used to make the threshold.

In the upper part, on the bench, a cist was built, more or less trapezoidal in form (0.97m wide by 0.95m high), with ten prismatic flagstones which fitted together perfectly and were resting on smaller stones (**Fig. 10**). Its floor was covered with beaten earth, although the flagstones were placed directly on the base rock. At the bottom of the cist, on the same rock, a flat triangular rock had been placed. There is



9. Entrance to room 3.



10. Room 3. Cist.

an alignment of blocks that goes from the north wall of the structure to the cist.

From the north wall, which is partially rock, a standing stone, which is more or less triangular, (0.62m high by 0.64m wide and 0.24m thick) dominates the space over the cist.

Room 1

This is not really a room, but an access hall to the patio formed by a set of walls next to the north-eastern door (a simple interruption of the wall 1.55m wide). A stairway of four steps, some of them cut out of the rock and complemented by slabs of stone (in the two instances where it measures more than 0.55m high), leads up to the upper part of the patio, above the small sanctuary on room 3.

This small hall (4.10m long by 2.48m wide) is bordered by the north walls of the patio (of which only a row survives, with a maximum height of 0.90m), those of room 3 (1.17m high) and 5 and that of dwelling 75. The walls have small inconsistencies in construction due to the different sizes of the blocks of stone used, which are bigger in the larger walls (shared with room

3, with the patio and dwelling 75) and smaller for the wall shared with room 5.

The floor of the room is the same base rock and it is fairly irregular and cracked. It is covered with a layer of brownish red clayey earth of between 0.15m and 0.25m in thickness; it only contained a few sherds that came from the hillside. Some of the cracks in the rocks were filled with earth and angular limestone pebbles in order to solve the problem.

Dwelling 77

It is perhaps the most notable structure on the settlement of the sanctuary. Although on the outside, it is only 1.92m from the southeast door of dwelling 75. It measures 8.50m in length by 3.30 in width at the head, while in the centre it is 3.50m wide, and at the other end 3.20m wide.

The first surprising thing is its plan (**Fig. 11**). All of the dwellings of al-Muṭawwaq that have been discovered to date belong to the characteristic “longhouse” with the double apse typical of the early Bronze Age. However, dwelling 77 was built according to a scheme close to the plan of an apse, which is unusual for the tradition of curvilinear houses of the period. The head forms an irregular arch, while the opposite side is straight. Another outstanding feature of this house, unusual in al-Muṭawwaq, is that the inte-



11. General view of dwelling 77. Foreground rectangular room with stairs. Background: you can see the platforms.

rior is clearly divided into two rooms.

As usual the stratigraphy is very simple. After the settlement was abandoned and the walls fell down the dwellings were filled with the earth accumulated by erosion. Over this mixture of stone and earth another vegetable layer is formed which, in general, is very thin. Dwelling 77 is no exception and its stratigraphy repeats this pattern: a thin layer (8cm to 10cm in thickness) of dark grey soil with a large number of bulbs. Underneath there is a layer of brownish-red clay, of an irregular thickness, with a large number of stone blocks of different sizes, especially on the eastern side of the dwelling, where the rubble from the fallen wall accumulated.

A paved area is found under this layer (partially preserved and damaged by a wall that fell on it), it was found in part of the dwelling covered by a thin layer of brownish-red earth. Under this a horizontal rock floor can be seen, broken in blocks of prismatic stone, similar to those that were used to make the doors. The eastern wall is formed by a vertical rupture in the incline, upon which a wall of medium-sized blocks was built. The opposite wall, facing the valley of the Zarqā' River, was built with aligned medium-sized blocks (bigger and more irregular than those that close off the ends of the dwelling). Only a row of stones has survived.

There are two clearly defined spaces. The first, a room with a long, narrow rectangular floor plan (1.50m wide by 3m long), occupies the whole area opposite the head of the house. The southeast edge is defined by the remains of a wall, 0.34m in height, made of prismatic blocks, which were not smoothed down, aligned and placed directly on the rock. It is interrupted at its eastern end and there is an opening of 0.50m marked by a cone-shaped stone of 0.45m in height that indicates the access point to the room. Opposite this wall there is another that separates the main room from the building. It is 0.40m in height and two continuous rows of uncut stone have survived which run from one wall to the other.

The floor of this room is formed by the same base rock which is usually even in this area, but there parts where it is uneven. There is a lower platform (1.78m long and 1.40m wide) which the stairs down to; these were partially cut out of the rock to make them even. The door opens

on the top step.

Many fragments of pottery were found inside this room which could indicate that it was used as a storeroom.

The second room is larger (6.75m long by 3.50m wide), and it is the largest and most notable space in the building. The paved floor that rests on a light layer of coloured earth covering the natural rock floor has already been described. The closing wall to the northeast is curved, which indicates an apse type house (**Fig. 12**).

Its head was determined by a rocky ledge measuring 0.60m in height, positioned to the northeast of the central room, and included in the building of the dwelling. The ledge is divided by a deep crack, which may have been due to natural causes — such as an earthquake. The southern face seems to have been cut. The hollow between the two fragments of the rock was covered by three long, flat flagstones, which form a platform that dominates the room; its height is partly disguised by the construction on the west side of a second platform that was built on at a lower level (0.34m in height). It is built on a small wall made of two rows of small stones, placed on a loose layer of earth; the inside was filled with aligned medium-sized blocks of stone that serve to support a set of seven flagstone that have been wedged down well, and that form the floor of the second platform. This raised piece represents an element that stands out so much that it again suggests that it was not meant to be used as a family dwelling.

The remains found inside the open hollow in the rock are not easy to interpret: A fragment of a storage jar with a horizontal handle which



12. Dwelling 77. Wall of head and platforms.

curves downwards and decorated with fingerprint impressions, a small bowl with a small lug on the edge, and two regular pebbles, one of limestone and the other of a hard green stone. On the lower platform only the structures described earlier were found.

An access door to the central room was not found, but it is possible, however, that the entrance was made by the stairs that serve as a wall, and by a place that was very close to the southeastern door of dwelling 75 and the platforms. The inconvenience of having to jump 0.60m in order to get to the room was avoided by placing a step of 0.20m on top of the natural lower step, made by a slab of flat, long stone (0.80m) on top of another of 0.70m in length and wedged with stones, and so making a rudimentary stairway.

Pottery

Pottery fragments are abundant in all of the rooms of the sanctuary. Their typological structure and the original decoration are different from the normal forms found in the dwellings of al-Muṭawwaq, which, together with the architectural anomalies, raise the suspicion that the meaning and functions of this settlement are different.

Despite the fact that they appear scattered around the different areas of the dwellings, their distribution is possibly determined by their original position (many of the jar fragments were found next to the walls in dwelling 76, and in the area nearest to the “altar”); but without doubt many fragments were shifted later on. The pottery is mediocre to bad in terms of quality: unrefined clay, the temper is thick limestone, made by hand and it has been poorly fired.

The most common type is the large storage jars, with horizontal handles curved downwards, and with frequent basketwork designs on the base. The holemouth jars which were used for food, and are common in al-Muṭawwaq dwellings, are scarce in the sanctuary rooms, although they were more frequently found in dwelling 77. In dwelling 76 only five or six fragments were found. However, their decoration is more elaborate and the quality of the clay and the firing is better than that which is usually found in this type of vessel. The abundance of bowls with burnt rims would suggest that they were the characteristic lamps used in this period.

The decorative motifs usually found in vessels in the rooms of the settlement (finger impressions or alignment of cut points) are present, but it is surprising to find two new images in the sanctuary: the tree and the serpent. The quality, originality and the complexity of this decoration are better and very notable in terms of symbolism.²

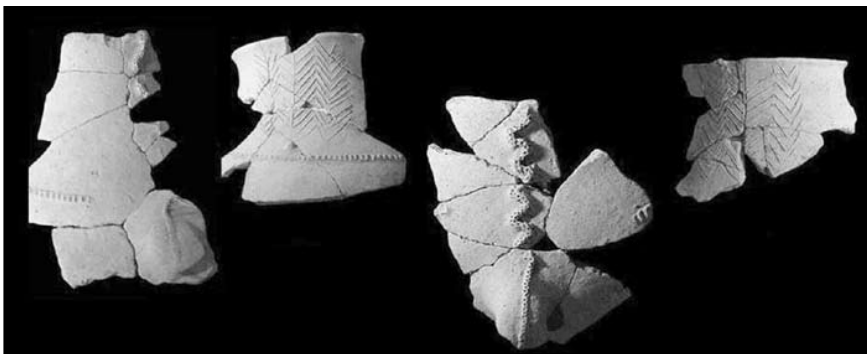
There are at least four different models of the tree. They are painted in red on the vessel, the trunk comes up from a horizontal band of finger-print impressions and the branches sprout from a central axis. In another case, three lines stem from small horizontal bifid handles and incised points are grouped around. The motif appears to be complex as the entire body of the vessel is surrounded by groups of points forming bands and circles obtained with the same technique. A new variation on this motif appears to be developed in vertical wavy lines incised around a double axis that stems from a small slightly raised handle; two oblique lines arise from two curved strokes that come out of a large spike. Also in dwelling 76, the motif becomes more complex when the two images are combined on the surface of the same vessel: two trees that interweave with two serpents, the trees are large and cover the area between the two handles, coming from large incised zigzag lines that stem from both sides of a deep vertical incision that represents the trunk. In this instance the trees grow from small protuberances positioned on the rope which is horizontal and has finger-print impressions. The serpents snake towards the neck from the horizontal handles, rising up towards the inside of the vessel, and with their mouths open as if they were about to bite; this one is undoubtedly the most complex and mean-

ingful as it combines both motifs, alternated, on the same jar (**Fig. 13**).

In this instance, and in that of the rest of the serpents, the technique is more regular; although there are some differences in the representations. There are always wavy bands, moulded and stuck to the walls of the jar, although the characteristic markings on the skin are done differently: incised lines and incised markings, and there is only one case where these markings do not appear. This motif appears in dwelling 76, in room 2 and in dwelling 77. In the latter the serpent's body is inserted in the horizontal design around the base of the neck of the vessel, and another, which is similar, uses the upper part of the body. However there is a difference in the decoration between this motif that uses incised lines with the vertical wavy body of the snake between both, which has incised markings.

Another interesting case in terms of decoration is a jar with a short neck, wide oval body and flat base, with small flattened vertical handles, which was found in room n° 5 of the patio: the entire body is marked by 73 very simple oval seal impressions (a central vertical line cut by other horizontal ones) (**Fig. 14**). Its design is similar to the impressions found in a dwelling in the same settlement of al-Muṭawwaq, and repeated in seals found in places in Jordan such as Tall Umm Ḥammād and Katarat as-Samrā and the Black Desert (Jāwā), and the model reaches regions as far as the Euphrates and the south of Anatolia (Tarso) (Betts 1991).

Finally, a complete jar with a long globular body and a high neck and a vertical handle found in room 1, is decorated on its bottom half with a reticulated motif done in red paint: a sequence of fine vertical lines interweaved with



13. Dwelling 76. Jar with serpent and tree decoration.

2. In Fact, to date, only a small fragment of potter decorated with

a serpent has been found in one of the dwellings.



14. Room 5 jar with seals impressions.

other horizontal zigzagged ones, that are developed around another set of simple vertical lines; this motif seems to connect to the representations of trees which were seen earlier in the jar with serpents. The motif is not unusual, in either the Chalcolithic or the Early Bronze Age 1, (for example Jāwā).

Flint Industry

Although it is not particularly abundant — nor is it in the remainder of the rooms in the settlement — pieces which had been worked to perfection were found in Dwellings 76 and 75 and in room 1, and these are undoubtedly of interest.

Near one of the doors in Dwelling 76, a set of flint tools was found with a bone awl and some goat or sheep remains. The finding was made up of four scrapers worked in tubular flint (three of them were fanned), two sheets of flint with the characteristic lustre which defines them as sickle blades (one of them serrated) and a chopper with indications that it had been used.

The set in dwelling 75, found in the north room along with an alignment of blocks that marked out the division between the two rooms, is made up of four large fan scrapers, all of them well worked in tubular flint (**Fig. 15**). In the adjoining room, next to the large horizontal stone that forms a type of table, a set was found made up of two endscrapers of the same characteristics, but smaller.

In room 1, along with the jar with the painted decoration, a fan scraper made of tubular flint, similar to those found in Dwelling 75 was discovered. All of these types of scrapers, that are



15. Set of scrapers in dwelling 75.

similar to the Chalcolithic fanned pieces, are uncommon among lithic material found among domestic items in al-Muṭawwaq, which in general were shorter and were not as well made.

In the cist in room 3 a sickle blade was found along with a fragment of a round scraper.

Finally, as has already been mentioned, in the holes dug out beside the “altar” of Dwelling 76 and in the opening under the door of the patio, flint hammers, which looked like they had been used, appeared with some flint cores, half of a mace-head and some fragments from basalt grinding tools.

Bone Utensils

Only one utensil was found in dwelling 76: an awl made out of a long goat’s or sheep’s bone. This type of utensil is very rare in the settlement of al-Muṭawwaq.

Animal and Olive Remains

Animal remains in the dwellings of al-Muṭawwaq are never abundant, and this settlement is no exception. Sheep’s or goat’s bones were found, jaw fragments and some molars.

Burnt olive stones were found in nearly all of the structures of the settlement.

Chronology

The dating of the olive stones found in dwelling 76 gives two sets of C14 dating, which give coherent results. One of the samples gave the date of 5290-5040 BP (Beta-194526); the other 5270-5170 BP (Beta-194527). However, taking into account that it is difficult to mark the endpoint of the Chalcolithic age, on the one hand, and the dates of Abū Ḥāmid and al-Ghassūl, the discrepancy does not appear to be very big between the final moments of the Ghassulian culture and the occupation of al-Muṭawwaq. Further, if it is confirmed that a settlement found on the side of the mountain at 450m altitude is older, the occupation of the Bronze Age in this place could have occurred before the moment that the settlement was created.

Conclusions

On finishing the excavations on this settlement, and taking into account the considerations that have been outlined, it appears that the hypothesis that the space was set aside for a religious end is a reasonable one.

This idea is further supported by the presence of representations like the tree and the snake, which are contrasting symbols of life and fertility or death and resurrection, of the powers of the earth or the air. These icons with their dark meaning — which will be explained more explicitly in later texts — are far from being new in the time that life in al-Muṭawwaq was evolving.

Neither of them were abundant in the Early Bronze Age Ia, and they do not exist in the eastern area of Jordan where the mountain of Jāwā is found. Vegetable motifs are very common in the decoration found on pottery or in scenes throughout history prior to the Early Bronze Age across the Near East, and to some extent present in earlier times. The serpent, which is represented in diverse forms, from a simple wavy line to an accentuated naturalism, opened the way for the symbolic universe in the Near East when it first appeared — along with other

symbols — on two slabs engraved in the Pre-ceramic Neolithic Age of Jafr al-Aḥmar: in one it is associated with a design of a vulture and a four-legged animal, and in the other, various serpents associated with other signs (one of which could represent some type of vegetation) (Stordeur 2000).³ At the same time we find it again, carved in limestone, and adorning a human head found in the southeast of Anatolia, in Nevalla Cori.

In the Chalcolithic of al-Ghassul, a representation that is very similar to those of al-Muṭawwaq decorates some pottery.⁴ But it is from the middle to late Bronze Age onward that trees and serpents become more frequent in pottery. On occasion they are mixed together and are found on what could possibly be worship and funeral objects, both Palestinian and Mesopotamian. With relative frequency they appear in later periods in tombs or religious places, on occasion associated with other animals and beings that are possibly divine in a wide variety of narrative. An example of this is found in late Canaan altar of Taanach from the tenth century BC.

It is evident, as J. Cauvin has indicated on many occasions, that a new mentality, full of new signs and symbols, opens the way in the societies that emerge from the Neolithic age. The appearance of sanctuaries from the VII millennia is a clear expression of the profound transformation that took place in the society, without necessarily implying the existence of a stratified urban society. The sanctuary is, or could be, simply a tie that strengthens social cohesion and allowed, on different levels - from subsistence to the configuration of the group - the continuance of a society in a time and space. In al-Muṭawwaq the presence of religious spaces is not unusual. There are other enclosures that appear to mark sacred places near the “Temple of the Serpents”.

It is more problematic to find parallels with this temple. If we ignore the rooms built in the patio, which may have come later, the plan of the “Temple of the Serpents” could have a distant connection with the plan for the sanctuary

3. The two slabs are represented in Figs. 10: 5 and 7 and one of them is photographed in Fig. 11.

4. A reproduction of a fragment of potter of al-Ghassul, with a

serpent representation can be seen in Levy, 1993. On the murals of al-Ghassul some serpents can be seen among a cluster of strange figures.

of En Guedi, although the model would have to be adapted to new architectural tendencies and forms.⁵ In the sanctuary near the Dead Sea a large room with a rectangular ground plan opens onto a patio that has another room with the same type of plan adjoined to it, and a clearly marked entrance. In al-Muṭawwaq only dwelling 76 had an oval plan, with another one which was nearly rectangular (dwelling 75) and nearby there is another with an apse ground plan. There is also a door which is nearly monumental, but — and it is nothing strange — the hydraulic installations found in En Guedi are not present. As was indicated earlier, the internal order of En Geudi — with the altar opposite the door and controlled from the patio — is not present. Neither are the cultural structures of the interior.

These similarities and differences can be explained both in terms of the cultural continuity as well as cultural interruption that occur between the Chalcolithic and the Early Bronze Age. al-Muṭawwaq does not offer any indication that this type of structure, which could be home to a statue of a divinity, had existed before.

On a hypothetical level we could say — cautiously — that the “Temple of the Serpents” was first formed by dwellings 76, 77 and 75 and by the patio. Perhaps the small buildings on the patio were added at a later point due to the destruction of the main buildings (an earthquake cannot be ruled out). The reasons that can be given for this are not enough to confirm this se-

quence of events. The difference in the size of the blocks used in the structures which are believed to be older (dwellings 76, 77 and 75, the walls and door of the patio) and the most recent (the interior structures of the patio itself). The way that some of the walls of these structures are supported by those of the earlier ones (this can be seen in the northeast wall of room 5 leaning against dwelling 75), would seem to indicate that they came later. However, it is impossible to say with absolute certainty while no differences are found between the fragments of pottery and the way that they are decorated. If it this were to be found, then it would be possible to consider that a sanctuary was substituted by another smaller one.

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5. A brief summary of these temples and periods can be found in

Kempinski and Reich 1992: 53-59.