

SURVEY AND RESCUE COLLECTIONS IN THE GHAWR AŞ-ŞĀFĪ

by

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Introduction and Objectives

In 1996 an urgent rescue project was mounted to save the antiquities of the Ghawr aş-Şāfi which were being ruthlessly pillaged inspite of the efforts of the Department of Antiquities to protect them and a public awareness campaign about the looting (Politis 1994: 12-15). The aim was to record as much information about the ancient sites and objects which came from them and to collect as many objects as possible.

Survey

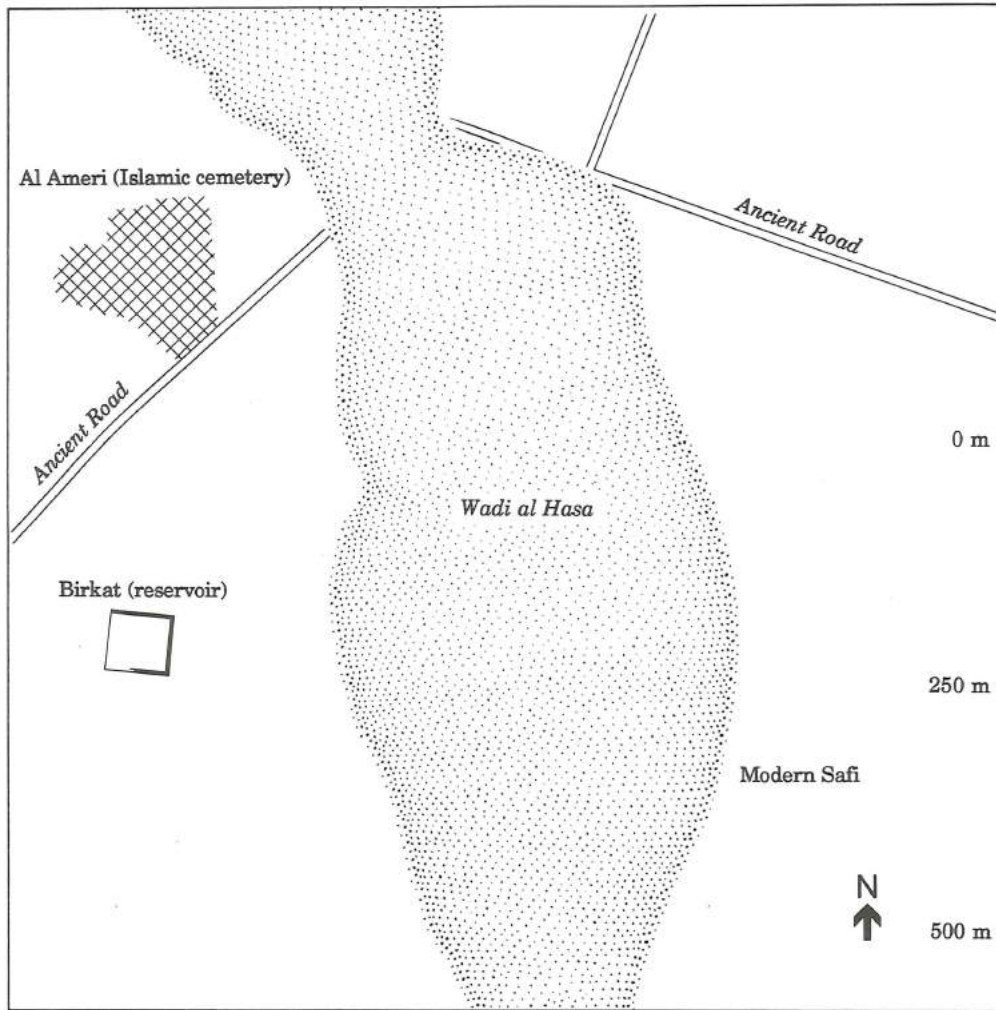
From 1992 and especially by 1994, it became apparent to a number of staff on the Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭā excavation project that illicit excavations in the Ghawr aş-Şāfi were reaching alarming proportions. The increase of arable land, thanks to improved water irrigation techniques, meant that more private land in the Ghawr aş-Şāfi was acquired for agriculture. This expansion encroached on to the archaeological grounds of the modern town, particularly in the neighbourhoods of Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa, an-Naqa', Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar and 'Unayz. Consequently, in the early 1970's the village of aş-Şāfi was relocated from these areas to its present location north of the Wādī al-Ḥasa. The Byzantine hermitage at the mouth of the Wādī al-Ḥasa and the Nabataean fortress at Umm aṭ-Ṭawābin which had been damaged by tomb robbers were less threatened.

Initially a number of informal ground surveys and interviews with the local inhabitants of aş-Şāfi were conducted in order to identify specific archaeological features and finds coming from them. It was established early in these investigations that a

great deal could be learned from the local people who had been finding ancient remains for decades during their routine agricultural activities. This source of information had not been tapped by scholars visiting the southern end of the Dead Sea before and we found it very useful in identifying areas of ancient occupation from different periods.

The area of 'Unayz is between the Wādī al-Ḥasa and the modern 'Aqaba-Dead Sea Highway. Today it primarily consists of relatively small agricultural plots which were allocated to Safites. Two areas of 'Unayz have been identified as belonging to the Medieval Islamic settlement: Al-Ameri and al-Birkah (Figs. 1 and 2).

Birkat is what its modern Arabic name implies: a water reservoir. It was constructed from local river stones and plastered with white lime mortar. A substantial part of the reservoir still exists today, though it is in the middle of an agricultural field (Fig. 3). Some of it was recently destroyed as is evidenced by a pile of stones just to the north. Al-Ameri has been recognised and partially claimed by the Department of Antiquities, but since there are Islamic burials on the site, the Ministry of Awqāf also has protective rights. Ayyubid-Mamluk pottery and glass can be found on the surface. A group of plain ceramic tiles were also found after recent tomb robbing which were apparently arranged in a star formation. These probably belonged to a tiled floor. After a closer examination of Al-Ameri using aerial photographs taken in 1992, the actual occupation area was observed to extend farther westward into private agricultural plots (Fig. 2). Traces of an-



1. Medieval Islamic settlement in the Ghawr as-Şāfi: Al- Ameri and al-Birkah at 'Un-ayz (map based on 1992 aerial photographs and 1996 investigations by J. M. Farrant).

cient roads are also visible which lead north-east to a ford at the narrowest point across the Wādi al-Ḥasa.

An-Naqa', or al-Mustanq', is the neighbourhood of as-Şāfi immediately south-east of Wādi al-Ḥasa (Fig. 4). It is here on the southern banks of the wadi that Early Bronze Age I and Byzantine period cemeteries have been found by tomb robbers. The Bronze Age tombs are in such close proximity that they often overlap at different levels. Recent rescue excavations by the Department of Antiquities and Mu'ta University revealed the wealth and density of these burials (Waheeb 1995: 553-555). Judging from this limited work and our survey, it can be estimated that there were tens of thousands of burials at an-Naq' representing one of the largest Early Bronze Age I cemeteries ever found in the Levant. Fur-

thermore, the type of grave goods found may indicate an Egyptian presence or influence. The settlement site for this period has yet to be located but may lie immediately to the west under alluvial deposits and modern agricultural fields. Byzantine tombs have been found further down the slope near and under the modern roads (Fig.5). Although far less numerous than the Bronze Age I ones, the burials belonged to one of the most interesting communities of the fourth to seventh centuries AD (see below).

Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar is a sugar factory dating from the 12th to 15th centuries AD which has been mentioned in a number of surveys (Albright 1924: 4; Frank 1934; Glueck 1935: 7; Rast and Schaub 1974; King 1985: 446; MacDonald 1992: 114-117) but has never been systematically studied or excavated. During our investigation



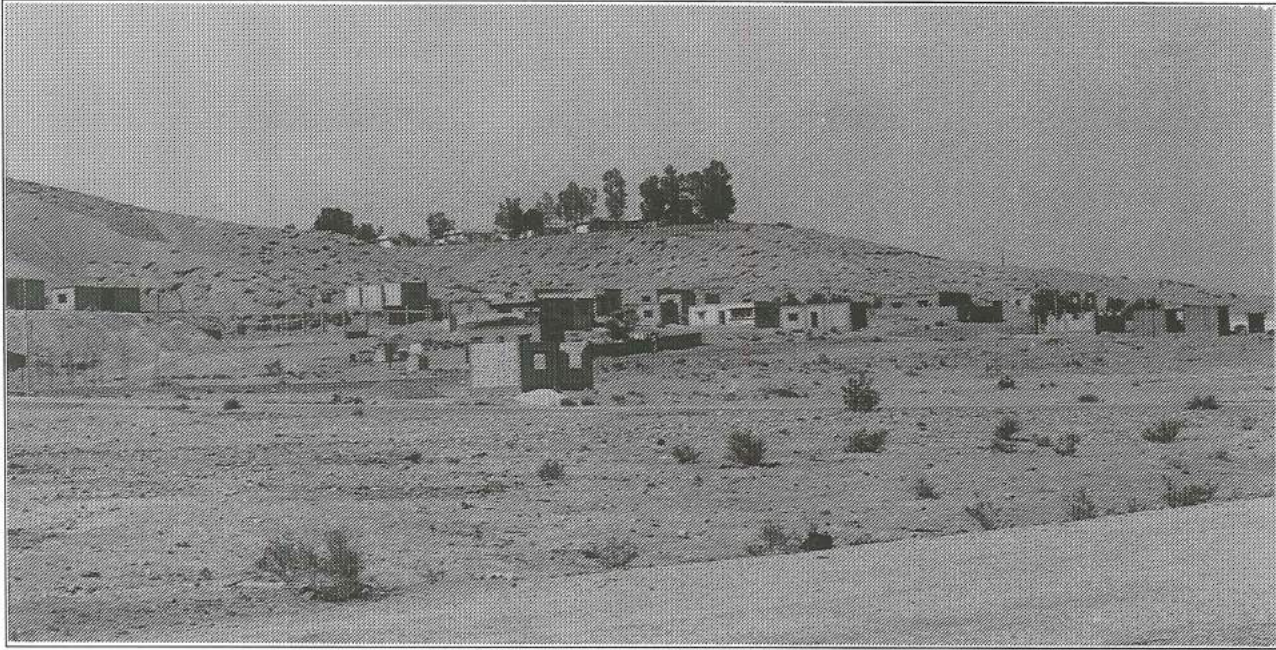
2. Aerial photograph of Wādi al-Ḥasa ford, al-Ameri and al-Birkah on 9-9-1992 (courtesy of Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre, 'Amman).



3. Al-Birkah, the reservoir, from the south (photo: T. Springett).

it was possible to distinguish a mill fed by two water channels and a refinery all enclosed by an adobe brick wall. In the process of robbing Byzantine and Bronze Age I tombs below the factory, intact underground tunnels and stone-paved surfaces were revealed. Although there are other similar sugar factories in the Jordan Valley this one in the Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi is the best pre-

served and it may also have been the largest one in the Valley. The sugar industry, which was very important during the Ay-yubid-Mamluk period, was based in the Jordan Valley, accounting for much of its wealth (Hamarnah 1977-78: 19). Medieval Zughar, which is known to have been a major commercial centre (Le Strange 1890: 286-292), may have been the centre for sug-



4. Unregistered cemetery area at an-Naq' from north-east (photo: T. Springett).

ar production and to have given its name to the product.

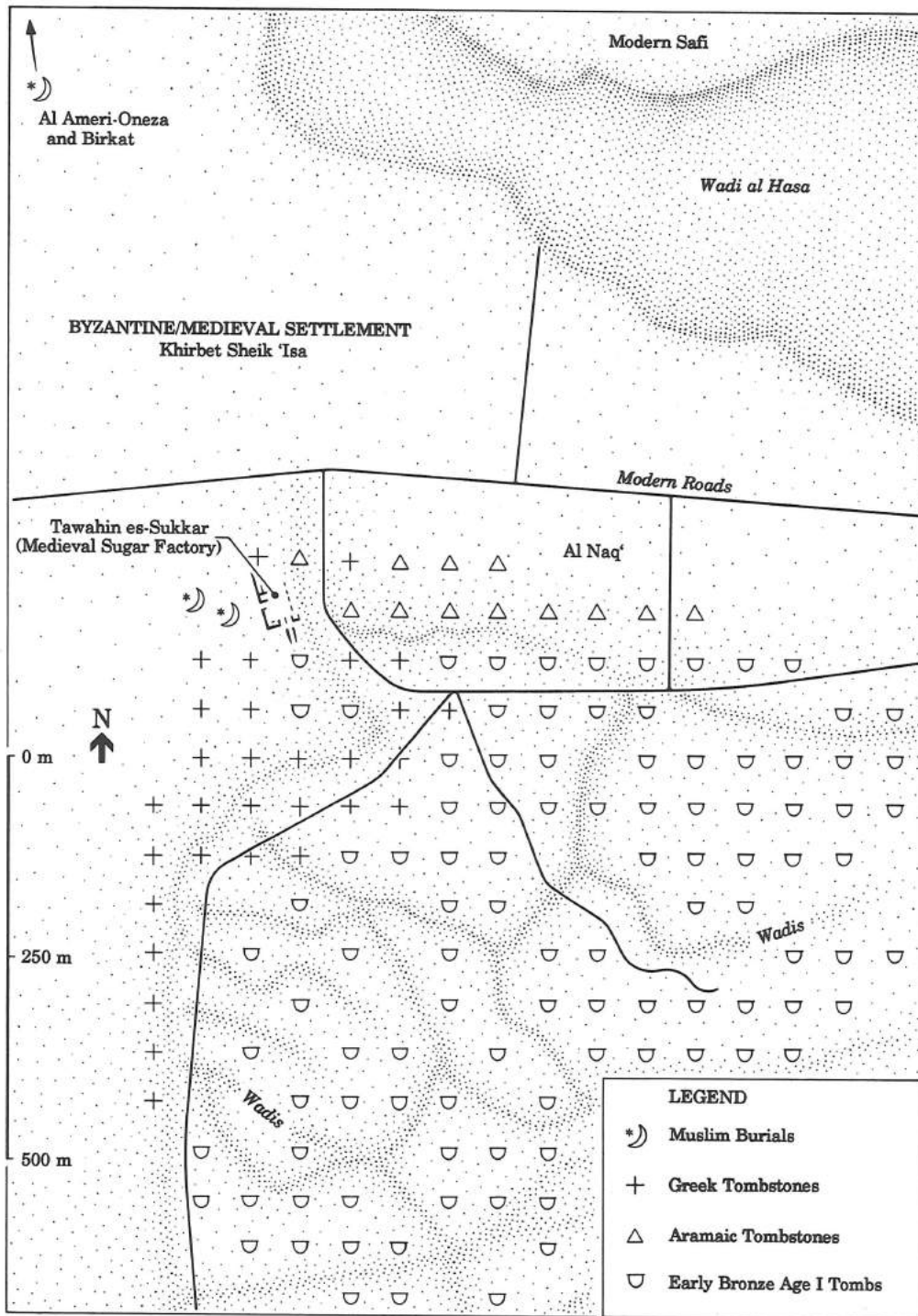
The agricultural field of Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa is located immediately northwest of Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar and together they constitute part of the same Medieval and Byzantine period site (Fig. 6). It has been referred to as the best possible candidate for the ancient city of Zughar/Zoara (Albright 1924: 4; Frank 1934: 204-205; Gleuck 1935: 8-9; Rast and Schaub 1974; King 1985: 448, 456; MacDonald 1992: 115; Politis 1998) Although no official archaeological excavations have been conducted at this site, numerous finely worked architectural stones on the surface indicate that a substantial settlement once existed there. Recent bulldozing has exposed what seems to be a portion of a city wall made of well-hewn ashlar blocks. During the early 1980s when underground irrigation pipes were being installed by the Italian Impresit Company and the Jordan Valley Authority, columns, capitals and even mosaic floors were uncovered several metres below the current road. One bulldozer driver cut through what may have been an *in situ* church entrance (Fig. 7).

Rescue Collections

The antiquities from the Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi, which have been made available by the depredations of the tomb robbers, span several thousand years and all materials. They include Early Bronze Age I pottery, ostrich eggs, alabaster vessels, beads and mace heads; Middle Bronze Age II pottery, metal work and beads; Byzantine funerary stelae, pottery, glass, coins, copper situlas, kohl sticks, amulettes, plaster mirror plaques, gold earrings and beads, and Islamic pottery. Sadly, even human bones were offered for sale.

Careful observations were made and when possible a selection of these objects were collected. Unfortunately, the rate at which tombs were being robbed and the sheer quantity of objects coming from them made it impossible to record and/or rescue all of them. The objective, therefore, became to focus on the most representative and unusual discoveries. Several hundreds of these objects have been registered with the Department of Antiquities to date.

The most important finds were undoubtedly the 300-plus funerary stelae dating from the to fourth to seventh centuries



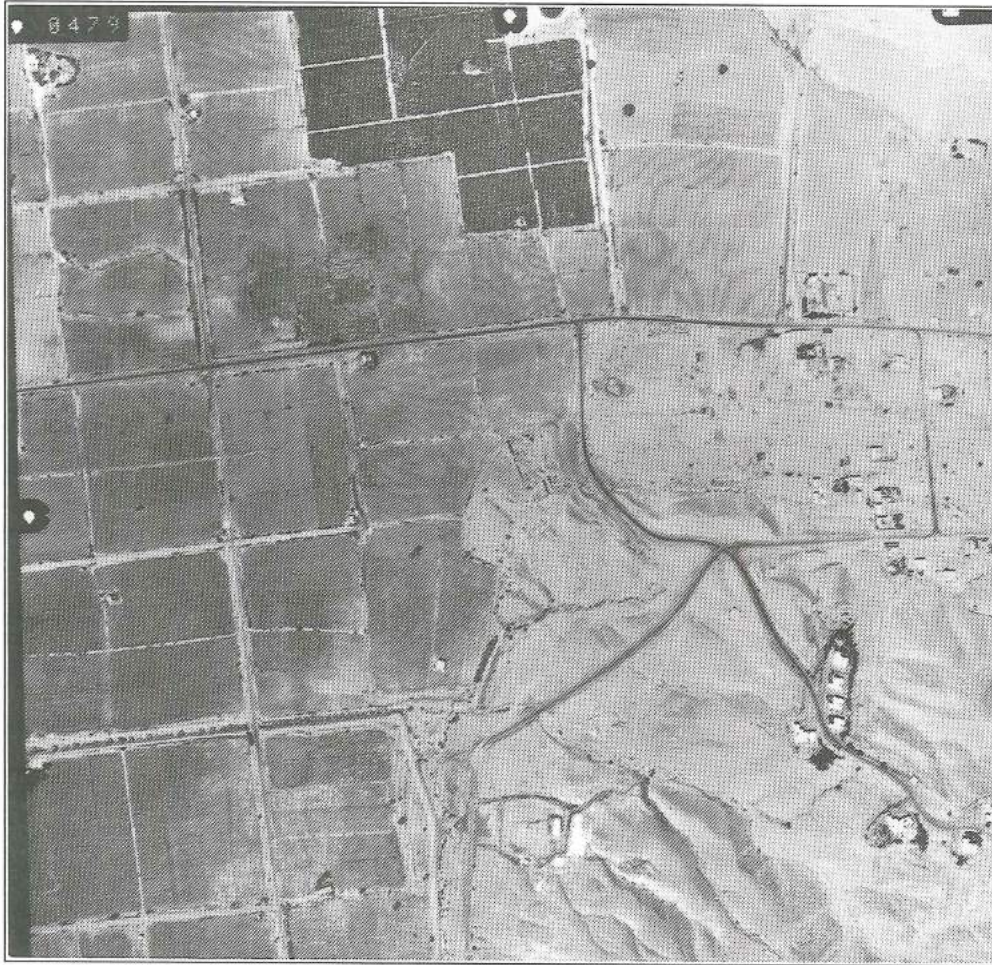
5. Byzantine and Medieval settlement and cemetery at Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa and an-Naqa' (map based on 1992 aerial photographs and 1996 investigations J. M. Farrant).

AD. Approximately 90% were inscribed in Greek, the remainder being in Aramaic. These are currently being studied and a catalogue will soon be published (Meimaris and Politis, forthcoming). From interviews with the local people, the areas where they were found could be identified at an-Naqa' and Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar (see Fig. 5). Unfortunately a large portion of an-Naqa' has

not been claimed as antiquity land and has consequently been allocated for new housing (see Fig. 4). Inevitably, the inhabitants have been discovering tombs while building foundations for their own homes.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The antiquities of the Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi represent some of the most important ar-



6. 2. Aerial photograph of Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa, Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar and an-Naqa' on 9-9-1992 (courtesy of Royal Jordanian Geographic Centre, 'Amman).

chaeological finds in Jordan and the southern Levant. Unfortunately very few of them have come from legal archaeological excavations. From the objects recorded so far it is apparent that the substantial wealth of these areas was founded on international trade during the Early Bronze Age I, Byzantine and Islamic periods.

Considering the significant discoveries that have been made from surveys and tomb robbing, a great deal of knowledge could be gained from extensive archaeological excavations. It is imperative that these investigations should be carried out so that the rescued objects now with the Department of Antiquities can be understood within their original contexts.

The Byzantine cemetery at an-Naqa' is most under threat and urgently needs to be fully registered as an antiquity site and excavated as soon as possible. More Early

Bronze Age I burials at an-Naqa' should also be excavated. The full extent of ancient Zughar/Zoara at Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa and Ṭawāḥin as-Sukkar needs to be further investigated even though they are registered sites and should be planned and excavated as a single integral site. The relatively well-preserved buildings, offer an excellent potential for their restoration for tourism purposes. Al-Birkah and Al-Ameri also need to be excavated to understand the extent of the Medieval Islamic occupation. The Wādī al-Ḥasa hermitage and the Umm at-Ṭawabīn fortress also need more documentation.

All the sites need to be fenced in and well-guarded.

A local museum encompassing the archaeology, environment and modern history of the Ghawr aṣ-Ṣāfi is being proposed which would contribute towards the awareness of the rich local heritage as well as



7. *In situ* capital of door from Byzantine church (?) discovered during placement of underground water channels at Khirbat ash-Shaykh 'Isa (photo: M. Piccerillo).

benefit the tourism industry.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Ghazi

Bisheh, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, for understanding the urgency of this project and for giving it his full support. Thanks are also due to the British Museum which supported most of the activities via the Dayr 'Ayn 'Abātā excavation project. W. Eddie Moth and Jim Farrant were responsible for making the maps of the sites and Trevor Springett for the photography. Khalil Hamdan, Inspector of Antiquities for the Southern al-Aghwār, served as a constant vigilante in this troubled area. Mario Dradi deserves special mention for sympathizing with the work and helping with the funding of the collections as well as the proposed local museum. Additional financial support also came from Anis and Samer Mouasher, Iannis Lewis and Hazem Malhas. Finally the author extends his great appreciation to the local people of the Ghawr aş-Sāfi who came forward to help protect the antiquities of their home town, in particular Yacoub Ahmed Turkey Aleshebat.

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