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Rethinking the Early Ottoman Period in Jordan: The Case of Tall Ḥisbān

Summary

This paper discusses the potential of an interdisciplinary approach toward the study of the early Ottoman period with reference to Ḥisbān, today a village subordinate to Mādabā Governorate. Based on features of an ongoing project on the transition period from Mamluk to Ottoman dynastic rule, the paper reflects on the perception of the unique countryside of the rural landscape in which Tall Ḥisbān and its vicinity are set. The aim is not to deliver final results but to turn scholarly attention (of both historians and archaeologists) to the study of the early Ottoman period from a transitional perspective¹.

Research on Jordan and its particular dynamics during the transition period may help us rethink conventional perceptions of the transition period from Mamluk to Ottoman rule (Conermann and Şen 2017: 13 – 32: en, 2018: 23-25). This approach, however, poses several challenges: historical Syria extends beyond the urban centers of Damascus and Aleppo to one of the least studied areas; sources for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are sparse;

although more sources and studies are available for the sixteenth century, many unanswered questions remain such as, particularly, what the landscape looked like and how we should picture the settlement types in the countryside, as discussed recently (Walker 2017: 361 – 362).

Geography Under Examination: Present-Day Jordan

The region of present-day Jordan – small but topographically highly varied – came under Ottoman rule after the conquest of the previous Mamluk Sultanate's (1250 – 1516) realm in historical Syria along with Egypt. The question of why one should study the Ottoman period in respect to the history of Jordan is easy to answer: This period is the longest among the Muslim empires and, characteristic of Ottoman administration, it has records, *i.e.* a plethora of archival documents of retroactive relevance for study of the Mamluk period. In his prominent monograph on the late Ottoman period in Jordan, Fischbach says: “Any understanding of state, society, and land in Jordan must thus

1. This paper was developed as part of my post-doctoral research project, “Transition Period in Bilād ash-Shām: Textual and Archaeological Research on the History of Early Ottoman Jordan,” during

my fellowship at the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg at University of Bonn from October 2015 to September 2016.

begin with the study of the Ottoman presence in Transjordan” (Fischbach 2000: 7). He states this in reference to the importance of land legislation in Jordan after 1851 for present-day Jordan. Even though one may argue that earlier periods may not be as significant, gaps in research remain and need to be covered. The conference also gives us an idea of the work that remains to be done because only a few papers among 200 were presented there made direct reference to the Ottoman period² While dynastic periodization helps us to understand and classify political history, it is less helpful in approaching complex issues such as continuity and much less helpful when it comes to a country’s social history. By focusing on the transition period, we may examine and better understand the diversity and complexity of the time between the Ottoman conquest and the *Tanzimat* reforms of the early nineteenth century. Material evidence from the Mamluk age is sometimes not readily distinguishable from that in early Ottoman sources. The late Ottoman period saw major changes throughout Bilād ash-Shām because it marked the beginning of the modern era there. The conquest of Arab lands in the early sixteenth century was of crucial significance for the Ottoman historical consciousness. From this point of view, Jordan generally and Ḥisbān specifically become part of a greater picture that involves the mental rather than geographical landscape within the Ottoman Empire.

A landscape-centered approach may offer a more comprehensive picture of the period than one focusing on a single site by asking questions relating to the use of landscape and change or continuity in rural activities as McQuitty proposes (McQuitty 2001: 544). For example, she lists fifteen excavated rural settlements in Transjordan: Irbid, Pella, ‘Ajlūn, Jarash, ‘Ammān, Ḥisbān, Mādabā, Dhībān, Khirbat Fāris, al-Karak, Khirbat adh-Dharīḥ, Gharandal, Petra and ‘Aqabā (2005:329, Fig.1). The Madaba Plain Project, surveying the hinterland within

5-kilometer radii of Tall al-‘Umayrī, Tall Jalūl, and Tall Ḥisbān since 1984, covers no Ottoman survey. The Middle Eastern Geodatabase for Antiquities (MEGA), a promising tool for future research on rural sites, identifies several archaeological sites as early Ottoman (indicated as “9057 Ottoman, early”); Ḥisbān, however, is not included (<http://megajordan.org>). The distribution of Mamluk sites and their outnumbering of Ottoman sites can be seen in two maps (Walker 2011: 222 – 223). Considering that the countryside was the space that accommodated most of the population of present-day Jordan in the sixteenth century – 50,940 souls (Hütteroth and Abdalfattah (1977:43) – the study of rural life and activities is all the more crucial. In one of the few studies on the rural landscape of Jordan, Hind Abu al-Sha‘ar (2010) notes the abundance of Ottoman written sources on Jordan and presents the development of a single village (aṣ-Ṣarīḥ) and its land ownership and debt on the basis of copious statistics based on the Ottoman cadastral survey registers of the sixteenth century. Ḥubrāṣ and Saḥam, Jordanian villages in the vicinity of Irbid in the north, were occupied between the Mamluk era and the early Ottoman period. The 2006 field season yielded a significant amount of archaeological evidence on village life at these rural sites during those times (Walker *et al.* 2007). In brief, the characteristics of life in the Transjordanian countryside were surely more complex – in terms of settlement structure (settlers and nomadic tribes), landscape (topographically and climatically), and rural sites (villages, hamlets, and others) – than we assume today.

The Significance of Tall Ḥisbān and its Vicinity

Tall Ḥisbān is a multi-period populated site nine kilometers north of Mādabā, 25km south of Amman and part of Ḥisbān village. It has been the subject of archeological studies since 1968, when the Heshbon expedition began as

2. For the program and abstracts, see the conference book, <http://>

ichaj.org/ichaj_book.pdf

a biblical archaeology project. The expedition, started by Andrews University, developed into one of the three excavation sites of the Madaba Plains Project (including the Tall al-‘Umayrī excavation in 1984 and that of Tall Jallūl in 1992) is still one of the major excavation projects in Jordan. After a long period of excavations focusing on the ancient and classical ages, the university extended the area designated for periodical research, starting with the 1996 season, to later periods of Muslim rule as the best preserved and longest (almost 700 years) political era (LaBianca 2011: 18-19). Islamic archaeology has been the major component of all post-1998 seasons, which feature the participation of Bethany J. Walker. Thus, the first two rounds of fieldwork were carried out initially on the basis of this agenda, using the food system approach as a central idea introduced in 1990 by LaBianca (1990, 1996, 2000). It was during these two seasons that the round work at the site took place (FIG. 1).

Although the Tall Ḥisbān is unique due to its

non-urban context, few studies consider this aspect. Yet Tall Ḥisbān is a rural site that promises to be a rich source for understanding rural life during the transition period. Two characteristics shape its contextual uniqueness. First, its location on a highland plateau, the Mādabā Plains, lends it a distinctive agricultural landscape with several natural springs, fertile soil, and sufficient rainfall (Walker/ LaBianca 2003: 444-445). Second, its location on a centuries-old caravan route made it strategically important. Thus, Ḥisbān was ruled in the First Iron Age by the kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom and later by the Kingdom of Nabatea. Thus it was almost permanently populated through the centuries, possibly impacting daily life and material culture. The investigation of material cultures such as ceramic assemblages, farmsteads, subterranean channel systems and caves, some of which have only been partly studied, combined with future results from archaeobotanical and zoological analysis, is a hitherto untried combination of approaches. The site has a complex



1. Tall Ḥisbān seen from the western slope (Photo by author 2016).

water usage system with several cisterns, caves, and rock-cut architecture. Its water sources are the Jordan River, Wādī Majār, and Wādī Ḥisbān (Walker 2003:259); the nearest primary source of water is known as ‘Ayn Ḥisbān (Abujaber/Cobbing 2005, 134, fig. 122).

The impact of political rule is visible in the material culture of Ḥisbān, as in its pottery (LaBianca 1994: 205 – 206). Thus, the village served for centuries as a regional market center (Walker 2003: 241 – 248) and a rural administrative center for Balqā’ district during the Mamluk Sultanate (Walker 2003). The Mamluk period was initially presented in the preliminary report for the 1998 and 2001 seasons (Walker / LaBianca 2003). Ḥisbān was politically and economically of interest to the Mamluks in the fourteenth century – an interest that faded in the fifteenth century amid larger changes and economical, social, and environmental decline throughout the Bilād ash-Shām (Walker 2003: 248; Ghawanmeh 1985 and 1992). The results of the earlier excavations had interpreted a sudden abandonment of the site in the late Mamluk period, when it was battered by the Black Death, other natural disasters, and Timurid attacks (Walker and LaBianca 2003: 468), whereas recent excavations have indicated continues occupation, albeit with sparse settlement (LaBianca 2011: 18; Walker 2014: 164). Topographically, Ḥisbān and its vicinity comprise four different areas that provide diversity in ecological structure and human livelihoods (LaBianca 1990: 28).

When it comes to the early Ottoman period, however – obviously the most difficult phase in the history of the *tall* and its vicinity – it seems hard to say anything conclusive due to several obstacles. Archaeological findings still fall short of those of previous periods and, insofar as they exist, their dating to this period is difficult. Below they are discussed in detail. The era at issue should be, however, considered a transition period, in which the entire sixteenth century is fused with the late Mamluk and early

Ottoman periods. This may shed more light on the history of Ḥisbān.

Current research conducted as part of the Phase III project (beginning with the 2013 season) of the Ḥisbān excavation focuses on the lower portions of the *tall*, where rural life, among other things, may be studied (Walker 2014: 166). The project is being carried out under the name of the Ḥisbān Cultural Heritage Project. Current research at the site combines methods of ethnoarchaeology and environmental studies.

The Ottoman Period at Tall Ḥisbān and its Vicinity

The study of Ottoman Ḥisbān masks in its simplicity a complex combination of topographical features, settlement patterns, ways of life, and people veering between nomadic and sedentary ways of life. Ḥisbān at this time projects the appearance of “low-density power” while the site in the Mamluk era generally presents high-density settlement (LaBianca 2007a: 5).

Although the Ottoman period was not a main focus of the first excavations at the site, it was possible at least to document the related materials and architectural ruins (Walker/LaBianca 2005), so that a typology and chronology of Ottoman pottery could be developed and the writing of a cultural or provincial history of the Ottoman period could begin gradually (LaBianca 2011: 18 – 19). For the Ottoman period, the last stage of the Islamic age for Ḥisbān and also the longest, we encounter two different stages of state power: the early Ottoman period (16th – 18th century) after the conquest of the former Mamluk lands in 1516 – 1517, and the late Ottoman period, after the *Tanzimat* reforms (1839 – 1876). Still, the sixteenth century also deserves attention of its own as a transitional period. Below I briefly present the latter period in Ḥisbān before I move to the main research question of this paper, which concerns the early Ottoman period.

Late Ottoman Һisbān

We have abundant information about the late Ottoman period, especially about tribal settlement, a powerful local family, and a cemetery: First, the area was settled by two tribes, *‘Ajarma* and *‘Udwan*, whereas the *Bani Mahdi* of the al-Balqā’ and the *Bani Sakhir* of the *Salṭ Nāhiyat* (subdistrict) were the most prominent tribal groups in the region (Walker 2003: 255 – 256). Second, the *Nabulsi* family was present in Һisbān, as evidenced in the Nabulsi farmhouse (*qaṣr*) on the west slope of the *tall*. The *qaṣr* complex dates to sometime before 1890, in a rare example of early modern architecture in Jordan (Walker/LaBianca 2003; Carroll/Fenner/LaBianca 2007), and is an example of how local families such as the Nabulsis were able to attain and legitimize their control over this area (Carroll/Fenner/LaBianca 2007: 140). Recently, a plan to use the Nabulsi *qaṣr* as an off-site visitors’ center has been formulated; however, neither a survey nor an excavation has been conducted in Phase III to date. Therefore, this imposing architecture and the family records still have unfulfilled potential for answering many research questions relating to the late Ottoman period. Third, a cemetery was discovered during the 1998 season in the excavation of a storeroom in the Mamluk citadel. The cemetery was dated to the late Ottoman period and the burial practices were identified as belonging to the *‘Udwan* tribe. It is plain that villagers reused the remains of this storeroom for burials in the nineteenth century which (Walker 2001). Additionally, the excavated farmhouses within the site yielded several findings, such as storage jars and tobacco pipes dated to their last stratum, that of the late Ottoman period (Walker 2009: 58; 2014: 175 – 177) Furthermore, nineteenth-century travelers provide detailed accounts, authentic photographs, and illustrations of Һisbān and its vicinity in the late Ottoman period (Abujaber/Cobbing 2005). The vast literature of travelogues from that century provides invaluable information on Tall Һisbān

and the vicinity. Most opuses in this genre are quite well-known and constitute one of the primary narratives for any area of research on Jordan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The description provided by Selah Merrill, American Consul to Jerusalem, draws a panorama of Һisbān: “The view from the ruins of Һisbān over the wide Balqā’ plain is very fine. The fields are rich, the groups of tents are numerous, and in the distance are the great encampments of the *Bani Sakhir*. The mountains of Nebo, the ruins of Mādabā, Mā‘īn, Zīzyā’, al-‘Āl, and other places, are in sight, and the size of the flocks and herds of sheep, goats, cattle, and camels is surprising” (Merrill 1881, 241). Merrill, like many others, depicts Һisbān as a lively place. These travel accounts are primarily used to glean knowledge of settlement pattern and urban developments but not of life in the countryside. The Ottoman provincial year books (*vilāyet salnāmesi*), first introduced for the Syrian province in 1869, are also valuable sources that should still be extensively scrutinized for the information they might provide about earlier centuries.

Early Ottoman Һisbān

On the early Ottoman period, in contrast, we have less information. Among the many unanswered questions that exist, we may start by asking how Һisbān and its region were designated in earlier Ottoman sources. Another perspective may be derived from the Ottoman cosmographical-geographical literature. The sixteenth-century traveler *Āṣıḳ Mehmed* (1555, Trabzon – 1598, Damascus) reports about Һisbān as part of the depiction of Amman in his *Menāẓır ül-‘avālim* (Views of the worlds), a work that relied heavily on previous Mamluk geographers. Remarking on Һisbān, he says: “[...] There are great monuments, the vicinity of Amman possesses agricultural fields, and the soil is pure and nice. It is mentioned in *Kitāb al-aṭvāl wa al-‘urūz* that the Prophet Lot, peace be upon him, made Amman prosperous. It is

mentioned in the *Lubāb*: Amman is a city of Balqa, which is one of the provinces of Sharak. [...]. The capital of Balqa is Ḥusbān. [The correct spelling of the name is as Āşık Mehmed notes: ‘Ḥusbān’.] Ḥusbān is a very small town that has valleys, mills, trees, and orchards. The distance between Balqa and Jericho is a march; Jericho is west of Balqa and the Dead Sea lies south of Jericho. [...]” (*Menāzır ül-‘avālim* fol. 220b, translation by the author). Relying on the previous sources, the Ottoman traveler transmits (since we do not know for sure whether he visited the region) important information about Ḥusbān: the presence of orchards there. This indicates that the location was populated and that its inhabitants planted orchards.

The administrative division of the Transjordan region changed several times after the Ottoman conquest of Greater Syria in 1516. The Balqa region, including Ḥusbān was not ruled directly by the Ottoman state; it was left in tribal hands. The *Bani Sakhir*, ‘*Ajarma*, and *Udwan* tribes came from the Arabian Peninsula to Jordanian territory directly after the fall of the Mamluk Sultanate (Peake 1958: 86). According to Peake, intertribal wars and raids (the Majali, Adwan, and Bani Sakhr tribes are mentioned) were the “basis of almost everything that happened in Jordan.” This means, especially, that agricultural activities could not be carried out (Peake 1958: 86). The Ottoman register for the district ‘Ajlūn for 1005/1596 mentions only the *Bani Mahdi* tribe, which paid taxes on its livestock (Walker 2003: 255 – 256, referring to Bakhit and Hmoud).

Within the system of Ottoman provincial administration, Ḥusbān was subordinated to ‘Ajlūn. In 1596, ‘Ajlūn comprised eight *nāḥiye* (sub-districts) with a combined population of over 34,000 (Bostan 1988, 327). The Law Code of Ajlun (*Ḳānunnāme-i livā-i ‘Aclūn*), dating to 955 H/1548 AD and preserved in the Cadastral Survey Register [*Tapū tahrīr defteri*, TTD], nr. 226 [525]), comprises thirteen articles. (The numbers in parentheses correspond to numbers

in the code.] The applied taxes were *ḳasm*, a tax collected in goods and not in cash (1); *dimos*, a lump-sum tax (2); *ḳasm* (3); *resm-i ḳışlaḳ* (8), a tax on winter grassland; and *resm-i camus* (10), a tax on water buffaloes. The taxed plants and livestock were olives (2); Old olive trees (*kāfirī zeytūn ağacı*) (4); wine stocks (*bağ çubuğu*) (5); the young olive trees (*eşcar-ı zeytūn ki İslāmī ola*), walnut trees (*koz ağacı*), and date palms (*hurma ağacı*) (6); goats, sheep, kids, and lambs (7); goats and sheep (8); beehives (9), and water buffaloes (10) (Sen 2018: 39-40).

Considered altogether, the thirteen articles relate to different type of taxes, taxed plants and livestock, and their fiscal value. The last-mentioned features indicate that here, as in other law codes, the value of taxed plants and livestock remained stable. The articles of the code shed light on the features of the arable land, its agricultural produce, and how the agricultural taxes were applied. Article 10 amends a previous Mamluk regulation: “Before, in the Arab Land the tax on water buffalo was collected as twelve aspers and was not collected in some places. This is submitted to the Imperial New Office, the rank of the high throne. [Since] the whole Arab Province is equal, 3 *para* [coin] is fixed for each milked buffalo” (*Ve sâbıkan diyâr-ı ‘Arabda resm-i camus on ikişer akçe alınub ve ba’zı yerlerde hiç alınmaz imiş. Hâliyə defter-i cedîd-i ḥâḳânî pâye-i serîr-i a’lâya ‘arz olunduḳda cemî’i vilâyet-i ‘Arab müsâvî olub her sağılur camusa üçer para ta’yîn olundi*) (TTD, nr. 266 (525): 1 – 3 in Akgündüz 1994: 42 – 43). Article 11 abolishes four pre-conquest taxes: *âdet-i devre*, *himāye*, *mübâşiriyye* and *resm-i hasād* (TTD, nr. 266 (525): 1 – 3 in Akgündüz 1994: 42 – 43).

In the New Detailed Tax Register (*Defter-i mufassâl cedîd*) from the year 1005/1596 – 7, Ḥusbān is listed under the Şalt *nāḥiye* (sub-district) of the ‘Ajlūn *livā* (district), along with seven other districts (‘Ajlūn, Banī ‘Ilwān, Kūra, Ghawr, al-Karak, Jibāl al-Karak, and ash-Shawbak). The holder of revenue was the sultan

(*pādiṣāh*), As a fiscal unit, Hısbân was a village (*karyā*) indicated as an empty or ruined village (*hālī* – a word that may also denote an “unsown” area, as opposite to a sown area, which indicates that life there was semi-nomadic – probably in temporary tents or caves). Total tax revenue is given as 2,600 asper (Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 169).

To study the early Ottoman period in Hısbân, pottery and landscape are two components that may provide illumination. While pottery as an object of investigation for the early Ottoman period attracts much attention for Bilād ash-Shām (Milwright 2000; 2009) and for Jordan generally (Walker 2009; McQuitty 2001), it has been recovered in the recent excavations at Tall Hısbân, as Walker announced in her report for the 2013 season (Walker 2014). One should take a look at the ceramic assemblages of HMGP (“Handmade Geometrically-Painted” Ware, a coarse tableware) and its rich potential to explain the transitional period from Mamluk to Ottoman rule in Transjordan, as emphasized by Walker (2017: 347 – 352). Here, there is a need for deeper and more systematic investigations of this main characteristic material of daily life in rural countryside households of Transjordan. McQuitty notes that the presentation of ceramics in publications includes dates but not contexts, sometimes making it impossible to recognize assemblages for what they are (McQuitty 2005: 328).

As for landscape, we can say the following: The site was only gradually abandoned over time in the late Mamluk period; seasonal occupation continued and perennial settlement cannot be excluded (Walker 2009: 58; LaBianca 2011: 18; Walker 2014: 186). This settlement pattern was identified especially on the downslopes in farmhouses that had common facilities and were plainly reused and rebuilt in the Ottoman period (Walker 2014: 186; 2017:360) concurrent with extensive re-use of additional buildings and caves (LaBianca 2011: 19). To clarify the early Ottoman context of the

site, further excavations are needed.

An important component of this landscape is the cave system at the site and caves on its slopes, since they played a significant role in the inhabitants’ daily lives. Article 8 of the aforementioned ‘Ajlun Code of Law mentions caves in the region: “And, in some places there are caves and stockyards where goat and sheep are wintered. As a tax on winter quarters [for livestock] for each hundred sheep one sheep or its value is to be collected” (*Ve ba’zı yerlerde mağāreler ve ağıllar olur ki, keçi ve koyun kışladurlar; resm-i kışlāk deyü her yüz koyuna bir koyun veya bahāsı alın*) (TTD, nr. 266[525]: 1 – 3 in Akgündüz 1994: 42 – 43). During the 2016 field season (May 16 – June 10), I conducted a survey of the Tall Hısbân hinterland to investigate the multifunctional use of caves as a type of rural site and the perception of a rural landscape. The cave survey was done in conjunction with the 2016 Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg-Mamluk Archaeology Field School and 2016 Hisban Cultural Heritage Project. This survey and its results will be presented in a separate article. Subsequent cave surveys will reveal the connection between the *tall* and the surrounding area.

Conclusion

This paper addressed itself to a historically and archaeologically difficult time span – the early Ottoman period, with its transitional character from Mamluk to Ottoman rule – via a case study on Tall Hısbân in central Jordan. At this point, there is much we still do not know about this specific period and the particular countryside. More research on narrative sources needs to be undertaken, as well as ensuing seasons’ excavations and surveys (such as the aforementioned cave survey), to answer our questions relating to the period under study. Some views on these matters may already be addressed. In terms of the material culture, however, there are still countless unstudied assemblages of ceramic, glass, metal, or lithic artifacts in differ-

ent archaeological units. All have the potential to offer valuable results. Especially, a systematic investigation of HMGP wares in various respects such as distribution and concentration has promise in shedding light on this component of the material culture.

It is necessary to amalgamate all available data and results from different disciplines. The publications of the Heshbon Expedition – pioneering contributions to the history of Ḥisbān – contain many scattered data on the period. Data scattered across published and unpublished field reports needs to be systematically investigated. The study of historical narratives needs to adopt a different analytic perspective, one that scrutinizes the rural administration and landscape; even sparse sources might tell us more.

Where written sources and archaeological evidence are not sufficient, an investigation of the landscape may fill the gaps. Therefore, an extended landscape survey in Ḥisbān and its vicinity on the basis of the earlier work of Andrew University is crucial. Such a survey, however, should not consider landscape as nothing but a topographical surface. A multidimensional perception of the landscape may yield valuable information.

Furthermore, digitalization is a growing and promising field. In addition to the JADIS (Jordan Antiquities Database and Information System), two initiatives – the MEGA Jordan project, a digital atlas specific to Jordan's archaeological sites (<http://www.megajordan.org/>), and the Digital Archaeological Atlas of the Holy Land (DAAHL) (<https://daahl.ucsd.edu/DAAHL/Home.php>) – may support the subject under study, although data on the early Ottoman period remain scanty.

To sum up, as a site populated across numerous and lengthy periods, Tall Ḥisbān has vast potential for the uncovering of multiple facets of a rural site. Focusing on the early Ottoman period opens a window onto a hitherto underexposed historical layer in which state power

is not prominently displayed even if palpably present. These findings may also abet a more nuanced understanding of more prominent remains of previous political regimes. In short, the transition period from Mamluk to Ottoman rule offers a new perspective on rural life in Jordan.

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