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The Shobak Project: A Programme to Support the Socio-Economic Recovery in the Protected Area of Ash SHawbak Castle

Abstract

The programme to support socio-economic recovery in the protected area of Ash SHawbak Castle represents a collaborative effort between Jordanian and Italian institutions originally aimed at mitigating the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and fostering local development through cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism. This article provides an overview of the initiative's objectives, components, and implementation strategies, highlighting the partnership between the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the University of Florence, and AICS—the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. Key areas of focus include site interpretation, safety and accessibility measures at the archaeological site of Ash SHawbak Castle, capacity building for local professionals, and the creation of tourist paths and a permanent site-exhibition.

Enhancing Cultural Heritage Preservation and Socio-Economic Development: The Shobak Project

The Ash SHawbak Castle initiative, launched in April 2021, is a testament to the longstanding collaboration between Jordan and Italy in the field of cultural heritage preservation. This article explores the genesis of the project, its objectives, and the collaborative efforts of Jordanian and Italian stakeholders in its implementation. The 1 million euro grant was made available by AICS, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, covering 44 months of activities, and it commenced in April 2021 (Grant No. AICS Project GIORDANIA AID 12253/01/1). Following the establishment and initiation of the local office, structural technical assessments, as well as evaluations of the museum and tourist paths, were conducted. The final structural and architectural projects were realized by Eng. Mario Lucio Puppio

and Arch. Eng. Fabio Candido, under the supervision of the Project Single Manager, Prof. Eng. Mauro Sassu from the University of Cagliari. The local office was coordinated by Dr. Raffaele Ranieri and included Dr. Elena Casalini and Arch. Maria Elena Ronza, who served as the Director of Works. The Project General Focal Point for the Department of Antiquities was Mr. Aktham Oweidi, while the Project Coordinator and Director for the University of Florence was Prof. Michele Nucciotti (FIG. 1).

Ash SHawbak Castle: A Hub of World Cultural Heritage in Jordan

(Michele Nucciotti)

The archaeological site of Ash SHawbak Castle, also spelled “Shobak” in other publications, stands as a testament to Jordan’s rich historical and cultural heritage. Since 2002, the University of Florence’s SAGAS Department has conducted extensive research on the site through the Medieval Petra—Shobak Project, in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and with support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Vannini 2007; Vannini and Nucciotti 2009; Vannini 2011; Nucciotti 2019).

Due to its history and the relevance of the site in the medieval period, the significance of Ash SHawbak Castle transcends national boundaries, offering insights into Euro-Mediterranean and world history, especially for the 12th–16th centuries. Its archaeological layers reveal a complex tapestry of settlement dynamics and cultural influences spanning from ancient Roman times to the 20th century. As a result, Ash SHawbak Castle serves as a valuable resource for both academic scholars and the general public, providing a unique window into

the region’s history and its medium- and long-range connections.

From the Crusader era in the 12th century to the late Ottoman period and the formation of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Ash SHawbak Castle encapsulates a deep and entangled history, where an array of state and imperial elites interacted with locally based settled and pastoral communities. Recent research conducted by the University of Florence has further underscored the site’s global significance, particularly in the context of medieval Eurasia. In this last respect it is useful to consider the preliminary network analysis of international imports in Ash SHawbak for the 13th and 14th centuries (FIG. 2), carried out on the basis of excavated archaeological materials by the University of Florence between 2002 and 2021. Without delving into details beyond the scope of this contribution, it is clear how the site played a highly specific role in the Jordanian landscape of that era. During the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods, local settlement intensification phenomena and undeniable activities of imperial elites are observed, not only in the area of the ancient 12th-century Crusader castle of Montreal but also in the lower medina. In this latter site, it is worth noting the exceptional discovery of the Jaya palace (Vannini 2020), with architectural decorations in mosaic attributed to the schools active in Cairo in the circle of Sultan Qalawun, but for which the possibility of an earlier phase already dating back to the Ayyubid period is hypothesized—an absolute uniqueness in Jordan (FIG. 3). Moreover, in a more general sense, the panorama of ceramic imports sees Ash SHawbak connected to the consumption of luxury artifacts produced in China, Iran, and India (see FIG. 2), in addition to the circulation

of ceramic and glass artifacts at medium-range produced in Syria and Egypt (see FIG. 2).

The comparison with neighbouring contemporary contexts from the Petra area (Nucciotti and Ranieri 2024), in which the ceramic picture appears for the same periods still firmly anchored to locally handmade productions, with faint elements of commercial connectivity towards neighbouring countries (Egypt and Syria), further emphasizes the cultural, economic, and political centrality of Ash SHawbak for the 13th–14th centuries.

If we comparatively evaluate the asymmetry of global connectivity attestations present in Ash SHawbak and absent in the Petra area, in light of global theories of economic interaction at the Afro-Eurasian level, the coherence of what is observed in Ash SHawbak, with the theoretical framework of the medieval World System proposed by Abu-Lughod (1989), appears particularly evident. In this sense, Ash SHawbak, during the Ayyubid-Mamluk period, coinciding globally with the development of the great Mongol empire (a synthesis in Rossabi 2012), appears fully inserted into the “archipelagos of world-cities” that served as the backbone (and productive engine) of the global systems of circulation, distribution, and consumption of Afro-Eurasian wealth. There was a system of world-cities that was part of a global network from which territories, sometimes even nearby ones, were mostly excluded, as evidenced by the contemporary settlement and socio-economic evolution of Al Wu‘ayrah, just 25km south of our site.

The prominence of Ash SHawbak as a witness to Jordan’s role in medieval world histories is therefore emphasized by the investigations of archaeological deposits, as a counterpart to what is

already known from the investigations of light archaeology (Nucciotti and Vannini 2009) conducted by the University of Florence on the preserved monumental complexes (Nucciotti 2007; Nucciotti Pruno 2016; Nucciotti and Fragai 2019).

Expressing Ash SHawbak Cultural Tourism Potential: Structural Valorisation and Rehabilitation

(Aktham Oweidi and Elena Casalini)

Ash SHawbak, despite its ruined state, boasts impressive architectural complexes from the Crusader, Ayyubid, and Mamluk periods. This presents an unparalleled opportunity for tourism development. From an operational point of view the strategy of AICS-funded project seeks to revitalize the Ash SHawbak area through targeted interventions and strategic partnerships, harnessing its cultural heritage to drive socio-economic growth and foster a deeper appreciation for Jordan’s rich history. The initiative comprises two main components: the valorisation and rehabilitation of Ash SHawbak Castle’s archaeological site and interventions aimed at enhancing local economic development through sustainable tourism. Each component is implemented in partnership with relevant Jordanian authorities and international organizations. We will focus in this article on the first component, providing a breakdown of the steps under implementation.

Valorisation and Rehabilitation of Ash SHawbak Castle

This section focuses on the efforts undertaken by the University of Florence and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan to ensure the safety, accessibility, and preservation of Ash SHawbak Castle’s historic structures. The key activities under this component include

the implementation of safety measures at the archaeological site, capacity building for local professionals, and the design of tourist paths and a permanent site exhibition. These activities aim to block the state of physical decay with selective structural safety measures, provide historical interpretation through tourist paths and a permanent exhibition, and consolidate the inclusion of Ash SHawbak in a tourist system integrated with Petra and its valley.

Structural Safety Measures Pipeline

In 2021, background research was carried out, and in July 2022, an overall safety intervention technical assessment was finalized to prioritize activities and start planning. The final intervention plan was released in December 2022, followed by the final risk assessment plan, realized in strict cooperation between the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and University of Florence, which was released in May 2023 (Nucciotti *et al.* 2024). A selection of monumental emergencies has been primarily targeted, including:

1. The Mamluk Soap Factory (and former Crusader church).
2. The Crusader Church of Saint Mary.
3. The Undercroft of the Church of Saint Mary, where a permanent exhibition for the lithic archaeological materials (including inscriptions and architectural decorations) will be hosted.

Structural Assessment Process and Output

(Aktham Oweidi)

The work on the Castle highlights several critical safety issues. The site has been divided into two macro-zones: the

area that has been excavated and studied and the area to be excavated in the future. This last area will need to be compartmentalized in case of unstable walls or underground cavities. Other points requiring attention include rugged paths, dangerous areas, stability of historical walls, degradation of masonry, and rain-fall-water management. A map of the risk for the archaeological site shows areas with limited access in relation to a first study plan of the visit pathways. Monitoring the most relevant cracking paths involved installing 21 sacrificial mortar plasters as mechanical fuses to reveal the presence of additional movements. The planned interventions have been designed according to the vulnerability points highlighted. The outcome of this phase can be synthesized in the concise list of interventions needed to secure the site, integrated in the final intervention plan, and including:

- Pathway paving
- Rainwater runoff management
- Partitioning of pathways (delimiting dangerous zones)
- Stabilization of unsafe masonry elements
- Protection from rockfall
- Protection from runoff of historic vaults and walls
- Retrofit of the Medieval Soap Factory and the Saint Mary Church (FIG. 4)

Site Museum and Tourist Paths

(Elena Casalini)

A similar schedule was implemented for the realization of tourist paths and the permanent site exhibition. Background research was carried out in 2021, with an overall assessment in 2022, as a preliminary stage to site-musealisation, with the final plan released in December 2022.

Museum Design

(Elena Casalini)

The creation of a site museum will occur in the three vaulted rooms of the undercroft of the Saint Mary Church. This will ensure safe accessibility, improve the visit experience, display archaeological finds based on scientific and museological criteria, and enhance intellectual accessibility (FIG. 5).

In order to achieve such goals, museum design principles have been developed around:

- Strong continuity between the museum experience and the tourist paths of the Castle
- Physical connection of the Church of Saint Mary with its undercroft (museum area)
- Connection of currently detached visit paths
- Creation of adequate exhibition spaces
- Creation of safe spaces for archaeological finds storage and preservation

The implementation strategies emphasize a low-tech design approach to minimize maintenance work, ensuring a sustainable and manageable infrastructure. They also prioritize respecting the materiality and architectural qualities of the site, utilizing both natural and artificial light to enhance the visitor experience, and focusing on architectural restoration to preserve the historical integrity of the structures (FIG. 6).

Capacity Building

(Raffaele Ranieri)

This component highlights the training of local archaeologists and architects to enhance management and conservation practices. Training courses were real-

ized between May 2023 and November 2024, covering a range of archaeological and museological skills and foreseeing outputs to be integrated in the activities of project implementation. The training courses are designed to enhance the skills of local archaeologists and architects in managing and conserving archaeological sites. The courses include a Training Risk Assessment Workshop scheduled for May 2023 with 25 trainees, a 3D Modelling and GIS for Archaeology course in November–December 2023 for 3 trainees, and a Site Presentation and Museum Design: Cultural Heritage and Social Media course in April–May 2024 for 5 trainees. Additionally, at the time of writing, there is to be a course on Managing, Sharing, and Disseminating Archaeological and Architectural Heritage with Computer Sciences in June 2024 for 4 trainees and an Archaeological Documentation for Jordanian Sites course in October–November 2024 for 4 trainees. The training course, conducted by qualified trainers from the University of Florence, Italy, included frontal lessons, workshops/practicum, and personal projects/assignments, with sessions held in Wādī Mūsā, Ash SHawbak, and/or online. It was open to BA and MA candidates in relevant fields, DoA members, professionals, and trainees in related areas, requiring proficiency in English and mandatory attendance. A sufficient number of grants were available for trainees, and participants had to independently reach venues and attend sessions. More information, including the training course description and syllabus, application procedures (managed via an online system and ranked in relation to criteria specified in the call), and trainees selection results, was available at shobak.unifi.it. For technical support, an email contact was also provided on the website (FIG. 7).

Conclusion and Future Outlook

The Ash SHawbak Castle initiative represents a milestone in Jordanian-Italian cooperation, combining efforts to preserve cultural heritage with initiatives to stimulate local development. The presented activities constitute a first step in a multi-year project, for which the involved parties have submitted further grant requests to complete the works outlined in the final intervention plan of December 2022. The goal is to provide the people of Jordan and tourists with a safe and well-interpreted site, enhancing their visit experience and fostering inter-cultural and intra-cultural mutual understanding as a legacy and an effort towards world peace.

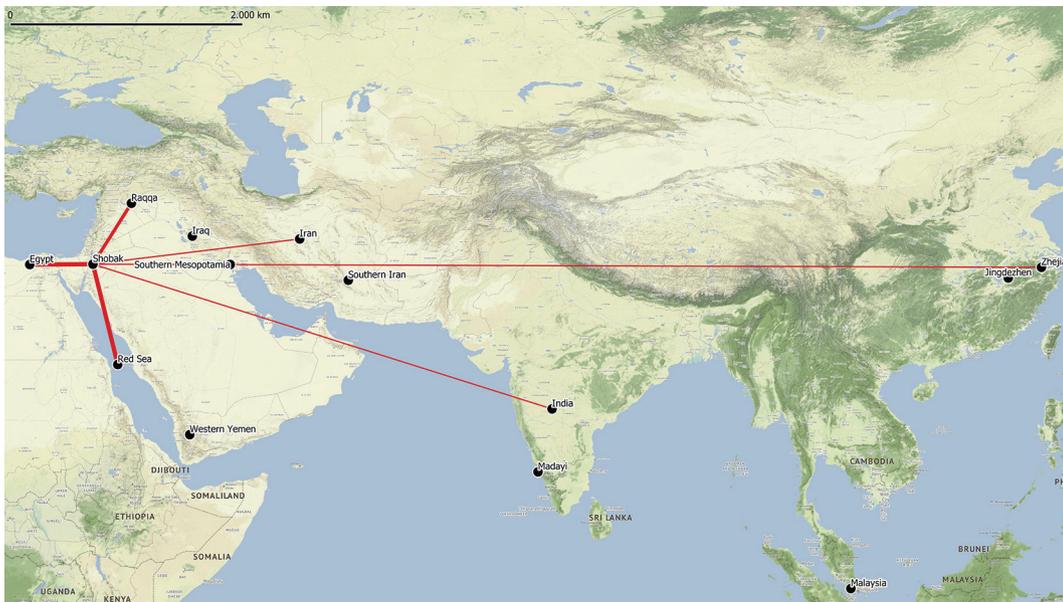
Acknowledgements

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1. Overview of Ash SHawbak Castle (photo from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).

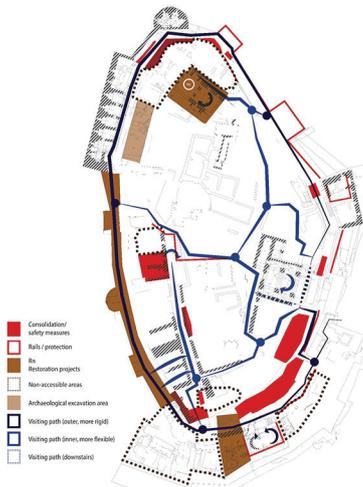


2. Ash SHawbak and its network during the medieval period (image from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).



3. Courtyard of the so-called Jaya palace, with the slab floor including opus-sectile decorations (photo from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).

Critical areas identification and analysis:



Safety problems

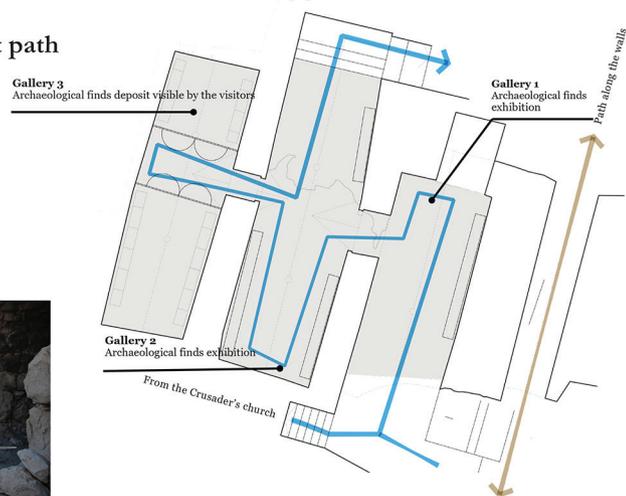
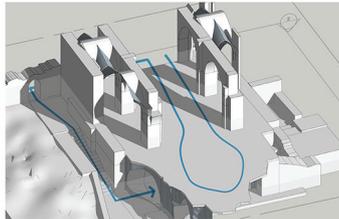


Monitoring of cracking paths



4. Critical areas identifications and safety measures planning (image and photos from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).

Site museum main areas and Visit path



5. Site museum areas and visitor paths (images and photo from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).



6. Some of the archaeological finds to be exhibited in the site museum (photos from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).



7. Training courses in ‘Ammān and Wādī Mūsā (photos from the University of Florence Medieval Petra—Shobak Project Archive).

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