

# A BRIEF GROUND SURVEY OF RUWĀTH (ROBATHA), SOUTH JORDAN, 28 OCTOBER – 16 NOVEMBER 2000

Alan Walmsley and Hugh Barnes

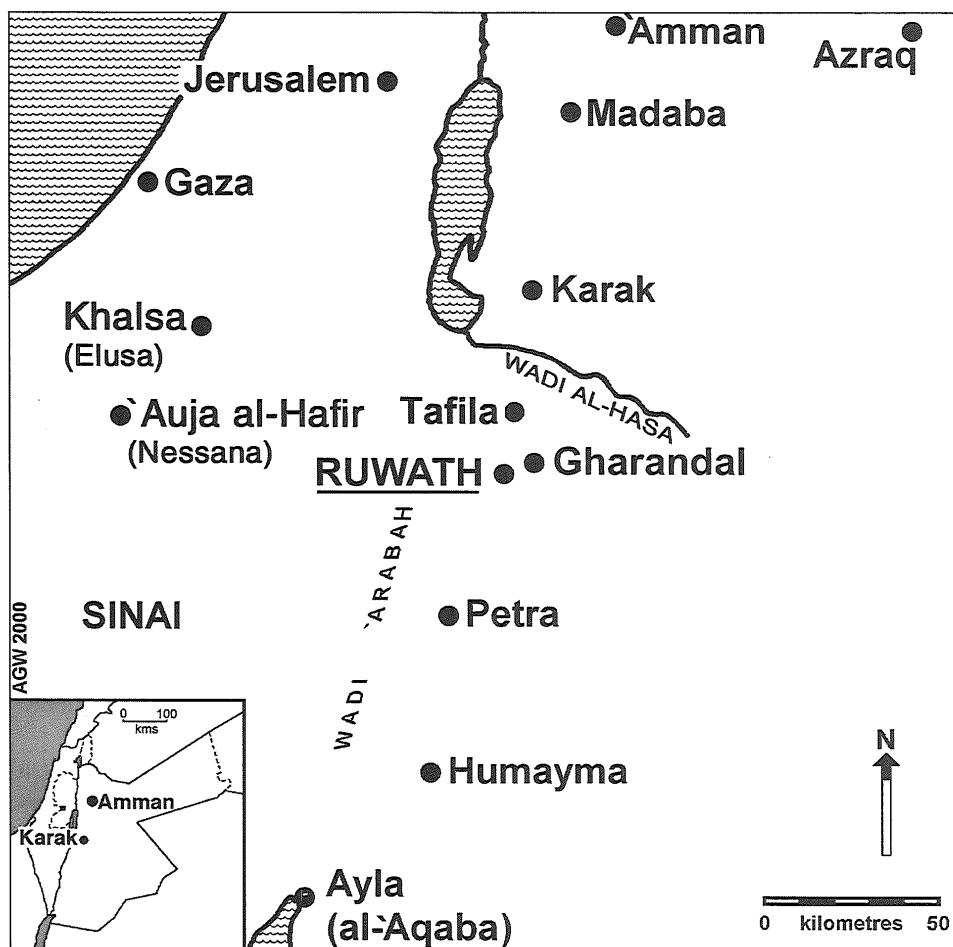
*In memoriam Jum'a Kareem*

## Background

In 1998, as part of the second season of archaeological investigations at Gharandal (غرندل) (Byzantine Arindela) in the aṭ-Ṭāfila District (الطفيلة), an attempt was made to survey and record the extensive surface remains belonging to the site of Ruwāth (رواث). These critically important ruins, almost certainly those of Roman Robatha, are positioned some 1.75km to the west of Gharandal and immediately east of the "Kings Highway" (Fig. 1). The site is privately owned, and the surveyor, Mr. Hugh Barnes, was regrettably prevented from doing any further recording by the landowners after only two days of preliminary reconnaissance during the 1998 season (Walmsley *et al.* 1999: 475).

In 2000, an attempt was made to return to the site in order to undertake a thorough ground survey of visible remains.

The historical significance of Ruwāth cannot in any way be doubted. The settlement and its inhabitants were active participants in the far-reaching political and social changes that swept over south Jordan during two millennia, beginning with the Edomite and Nabataean periods and continuing into the later Mamluk sultanate. An indication of this role is contained in the few literary sources that deal with this region. In the earliest relevant written works, Ruwāth appears under its Late Roman name of Robatha. According to the *Notitia Dignitatum* (ed. Seeck 1962 [1879]: Or. 37.27) of



1. Location of Ruwāth and Gharandal, aṭ-Ṭāfila District, Jordan.

around AD 400, Robatha functioned as the base for the *Equites Sagittarii Indigenae Robathae*, a small force of native mounted archers particularly suited to the rugged terrain of south Jordan because of their great mobility. Thereafter, no mention is made of Ruwāth in Byzantine or early Islamic sources, for during this time nearby Arindela (Gharandal) served as the administrative capital of the al-Jibāl district (الجبال) — a result, surely, of ethno-political considerations. In the tenth century AD (fourth H.), however, Ruwāth abruptly reappears in the historical works in place of Gharandal. The Arab geographers al-Iṣṭakhrī and Ibn Ḥawqal describe Ruwāth and its district of al-Jibāl as fertile yet inhabited by the 'Arab (by which is meant Bedouin groups) who had, they noted, gained (political) mastery over the district (Iṣṭakhrī, ed. De Goeje 1927: 58.7–10; Ibn Ḥawqal, ed. Kramers 1938: 173.12–14). It would seem, then, that by the tenth century Ruwāth had successfully displaced Gharandal as the main centre of al-Jibāl after centuries of circumvention; certainly the site is prominently depicted in the map of the region that accompanies Ibn Ḥawqal's text. Apparently, the sources are observing a significant transfer of political power in al-Jibāl. It would appear as though the traditional urban elites, based in the primary towns of Late Antiquity, had retained their position in the Early Islamic period until a generation or two after the fall of the Umayyad caliphate. Thereafter, in the ninth and especially tenth centuries, they were supplanted by new tribal leaders whose power base lay in other, but equally long established, settlements. For a parallel to this process in al-Jibāl we can compare the major shift in power from Areopolis (Ma'āb, ar-Rabbah الربة مآب) to al-Karak (الكرك) at about the same time (discussed in Walmsley 2001: 554–555).

Cognisant of Ruwāth's considerable historical importance and the extensive remains noted in the preliminary, but abruptly terminated, work of 1998, it was decided to make a second attempt at a detailed ground survey and photographic record of the site during the year 2000 survey season. With the dedicated and determined assistance of Mr. Jihad Darwish, then Inspector of the aṭ-Ṭāfila District, access to the site was approved after an initial few days of uncertainty, and I am extremely grateful to Mr. Jihad Darwish for pursuing this issue to its most satisfactory conclusion.

### The Season and the Team

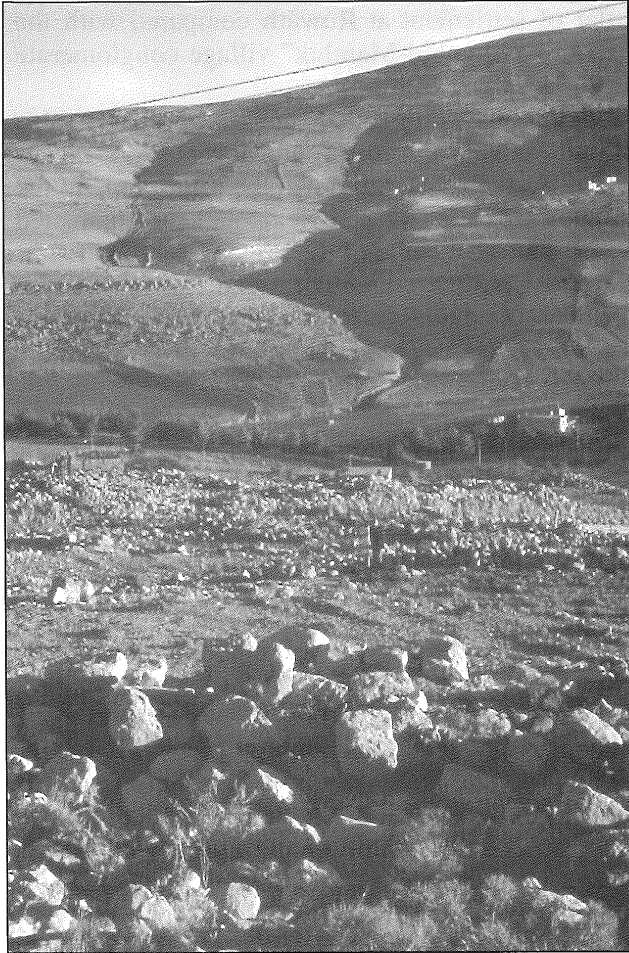
The Survey Season at Ruwāth lasted from 28 October to 16 November 2000 (DoA Excavation Permit No. 55 for 2000). Although a relatively

short three-week season, the weather was very pleasant and conducive to work in the field, and the team showed absolute dedication in reaching the season objectives of recording in the greatest detail possible the standing remains of Ruwāth. The team consisted of: Alan Walmsley (ARC Research Fellow and Project Director, University of Western Australia), Jihad Darwish (Representative, Department of Antiquities), Hugh Barnes (Surveyor, Berlin), Norman Ricklefs (Surveyor's Assistant, Macquarie University Sydney), Charlotte Schriwer (Field Assistant, CBRL 'Ammān), Tony Grey (Ceramicist, Museum of London), Judith Sellers (Illustrator, Canberra). In addition to the intensive survey work at Ruwāth, two of the team members (Grey and Sellers) concentrated on processing by cataloguing and drawing the many boxes of backlog pottery from the 1998 season of excavations at Gharandal. Emphasis was placed on the predominantly middle Islamic ceramics recovered in square B/11 during the course of excavations by Phillip Karsgaard.

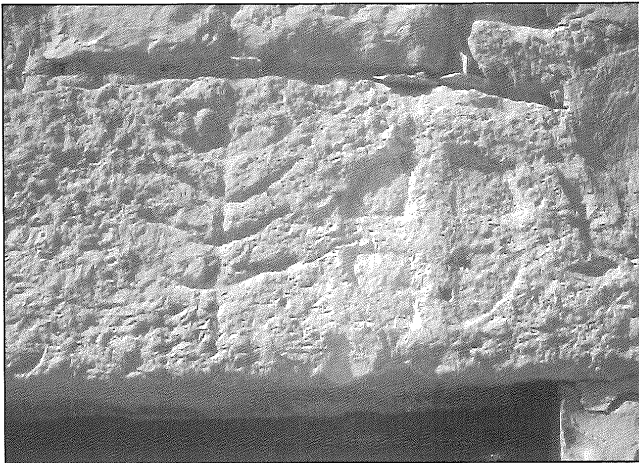
### The Survey of Ruwāth

Ruwāth is situated along a prominent spur on the south side of the Sayl Rī'ah (سيل ربيعة), the major down-cutting valley between Gharandal and Buṣayra (بصيرة) (Biblical Bozra) to the west (Fig. 2). Progressively deep secondary valleys delineate the west and the east sides of the spur. A small perennial spring is located at the higher northern end of the site, where the spur flattens out to a gently sloping plateau before gradually rising further towards ar-Rashādiya (الرشادية). The Wādī Ruwāth, to the west, is the natural drainage channel for the Ruwāth spring although early on, perhaps in the Roman period but certainly by Byzantine-Islamic times, the water was diverted by way of a channel to the wadi to the east. This broad wadi, having a more gradual gradient, would have been less denuded of soil and, with terracing, allowed a considerably larger area to be cultivated. A channel leading to terraced fields clearly appears in the aerial photograph of 1953 (courtesy of David Kennedy, University of Western Australia), at which time no permanent settlement existed at Ruwāth. Today the spring water is still conducted northwards via the channel (by way of modern black plastic piping) to the terraced fields east of the ancient site.

Modern settlement is represented initially by a stone-built compound of six rooms on three sides of a courtyard. The stone lintel of the doorway into the northwest room is reused, and carries its original decoration of a Maltese cross and palm leaf (Fig. 3). Well-built stone arches support flat roofs



2. General view over Ruwāth, looking northwards.



3. Lintel with Christian symbols reused in a recent stone-built house at Ruwāth.

of wood, reed and mud. This solidly built domestic unit cannot be very old for no housing is visible at Ruwāth in the aerial photograph of 1953. Like at Gharandal the stone house at Ruwāth represents the last of traditional stone construction before the widespread adoption of reinforced cement and breezeblocks.

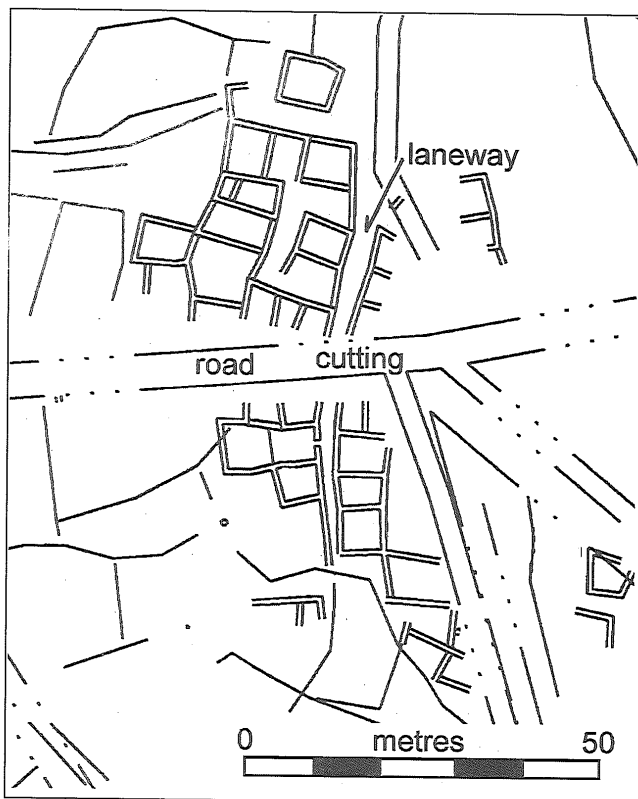
In recent years the stone built house has been abandoned in favour of more modern ones constructed from cement and breezeblock. This growing settlement has encroached seriously on the highest point of the site, including over a major structure identified by well-dressed masonry and thick walls, and continues to do so. In the months before the 2000 survey season, a school had been built next to the new houses, and a large area levelled for this purpose. Additionally a swath (ostensibly a road) was cut through the upper half of the site by a bulldozer, deeply in parts, exposing considerable masonry and occupational levels dating back as early as the Early Bronze Age.

The ground features of Ruwāth, at first appearance, presented an extensive spread of collapsed piles of stone, some identifiable as wall lines, and field terrace walls roughly constructed from the available surface stone. A closer look revealed a considerably more complicated and recognisable sequence of settlement at the site. From the site plan produced by the survey, the style of stone wall construction, and the amount of reused cut masonry, the extent of settlement during different periods can be discerned. Ruwāth consists of a Nabataean–Roman settlement on the top of the ridge and a subsequent and larger Byzantine and Islamic settlement stretching from the brow down the east slope towards — but not reaching — the tower. Quite different in construction techniques were several structures on the west slope of the site, constructed of very large, unbonded, fieldstone blocks. These were of a completely different style than the Nabataean–Roman and Islamic remains, and could be identified in areas that were untterraced by the later settlement. A closer look at the north and west slopes indicated the presence of a much earlier settlement at least on these slopes, which extended further under the later settlement as evidenced by finds recovered from the bulldozed section of the recently cut road (below).

#### *The Sūq (السوق)*

A major discovery during the survey was well-planned laneway running north–south down the ridge of the spur. Either side (east and west) of this centrally placed lane were adjoining rooms with common walls, sometimes built two deep (Figs. 4, 5). One unit has a clearly identifiable doorway, made up of two standing stones, opening onto the lane. The complex is bisected by the recent road cutting, termed the Lower Bulldozer Cut (of which the south section was cleaned back and planned), and in which the lane and flanking walls are very clear. The lane descends northwards along the

ridgeline before abruptly turning west. It would seem we have here the outline of an Islamic *sūq* (market) at Ruwāth, the date of which is anything but clear. However, it is not impossible that it dates as early as the tenth or eleventh century, but it may be later (Ayyubid, Mamluk) or possibly Crusader. Excavation is required to resolve this important issue in the Islamic occupation of south Jordan.



4. Plan of the Islamic-period Sūq at Ruwāth.

Whatever, it is apparent we have a very different order of settlement at Ruwāth compared with the standard "Ayyubid-Mamluk" village conglomerate in Jordan.

The remains of other houses, probably also Middle Islamic in date, are located on higher ground to the south and down the ridge slope to the east towards the terraced fields and the channeled water. The west slope of the ridge is devoid of similar later housing, which is fortunate as in this area considerable evidence for Early Bronze settlement was recovered, as noted above.

#### *The Tower*

A second major architectural feature at Ruwāth is the large stone tower-like construction at the northernmost (and lowest) point of the site (**Fig. 6**). Its precise position is:

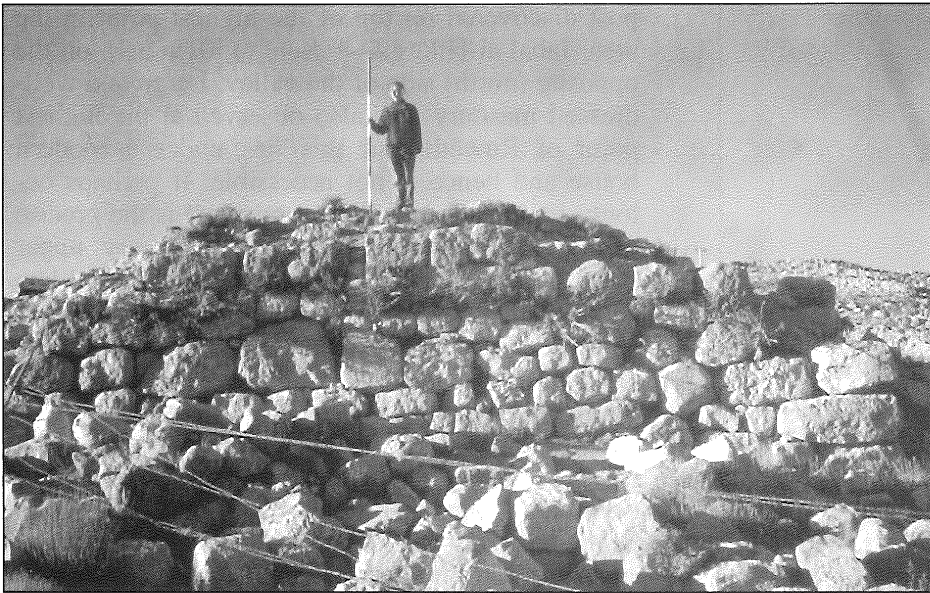
Location: 30 degrees 42.93 minutes N, 035 degrees 38.25 minutes E.

Elevation (highest point of standing structure): 1301m (Magellan hand held GPS reading).

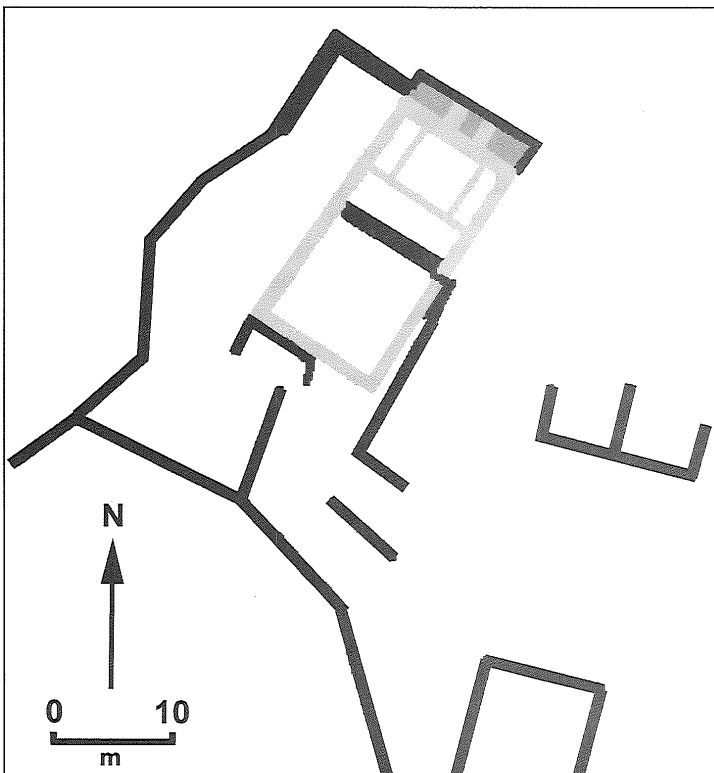
The tower is an 11 x 11m walled enclosure built around an open court and strengthened with a 2.5m wide sloping addition (*glacis*) built against its north wall (**Figs. 7, 8**). It has a mound of collapsed masonry against the inside of the north wall, which rises 1.5m above the surviving level of the sloping addition. While it is possible that the "*glacis*" against the northern wall is original to the building, completely different material was used in its construction. The "*glacis*" is made from large field boulders built into a sloping rubble core. This may have been built with internal buttresses against the



5. View northwards along the Islamic-period Sūq at Ruwāth.



6. View of the north façade of the Tower of Ruwāth.



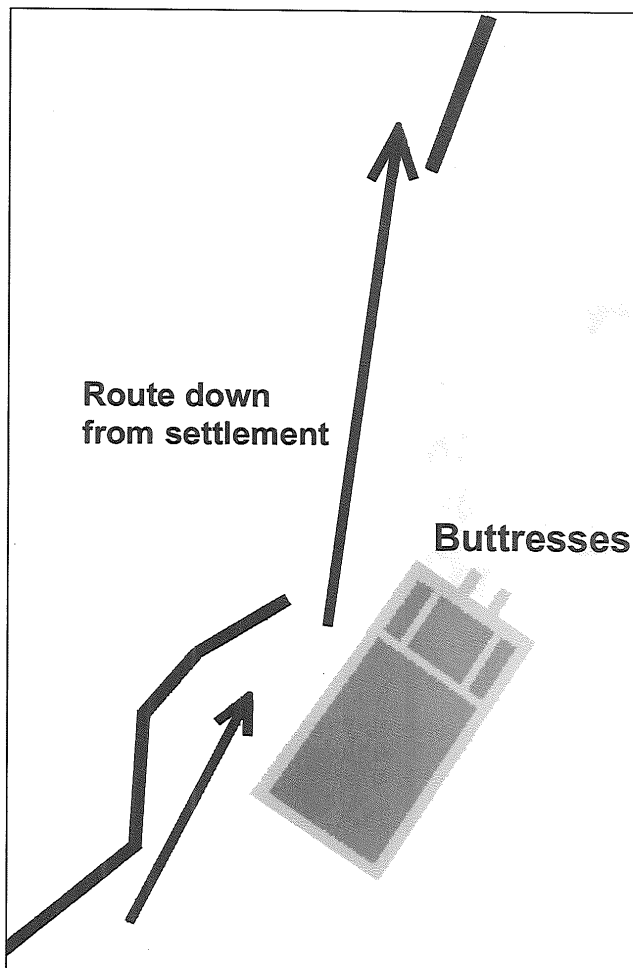
7. Plan of the Ruwāth Tower (grey lines = original structure).

north wall of the original structure, or it may just have been an addition to earlier buttresses on the outer face of the north wall. The latter suggestion has some credibility, as the buttresses are constructed of well-chosen fieldstones and reused blocks, neatly coursed, as is the north wall of the tower against which they rest.

The south half of the enclosure is relatively free of masonry. The west wall to the court appears to be partly original, being constructed of large, well-cut white limestone blocks. Three of these blocks are incorporated in the south wall but here appear

reused for they are associated with the more typical inner and outer fieldstone-faced construction with a rubble core and no mortar bonding. Accordingly, the south wall would seem to be a later addition to act as a delineating wall for the square to its north. The position of the well cut, reused blocks in the west wall and the presence of bedrock at exactly twice the length of the present remains in line with the western wall would suggest that there was an original structure with twice the size of the present enclosed space. Due to its solid construction at the northern end, this original structure, perhaps Naba-





8. Sketch showing probable original form of the Tower, showing adjacent path (not to scale).

taean or Roman, was suitable for later use as, or conversion to, a tower, perhaps in the Byzantine period.

An extensive area of architectural remains is present on lower ground to the east of the tower. There is, however, a great deal of spoil from bulldozer activity lying over these remains, making it difficult to assess the relationship between them and the tower. Nevertheless an entrance to the tower court from the southeast suggests that these structures relate to it in some way, perhaps as housing. In spite of the bulldozer activity, the structures to the east of the tower appear relatively intact except for on one side, which is cut by a track.

The location of the tower at the lowest point of the site may appear mysterious, but is almost certainly explained by the passage of the important connecting road between the *Via Nova Traiana* to the east and the "King's Highway" to the west. This route surely passed north of and immediately below the tower, along or close to the modern access road to Gharandal. Furthermore, the tower was within easy eyesight of a prominent observation

post discovered on top of the highest point in the area, Jabal al-Hikr (جبل الحكر) (1501m asl), on the opposite (north) side of the valley. Large and well-dressed masonry was also observed at the highest point of Ruwāth, but this lies under a modern house and hence is not accessible. It perhaps belongs to a small fort. Still unresolved is the precise date of the tower and the contemporary upper structure, with painted Nabataean, Roman and late antique (Byzantine–early Islamic) wares all being identified in both locations.

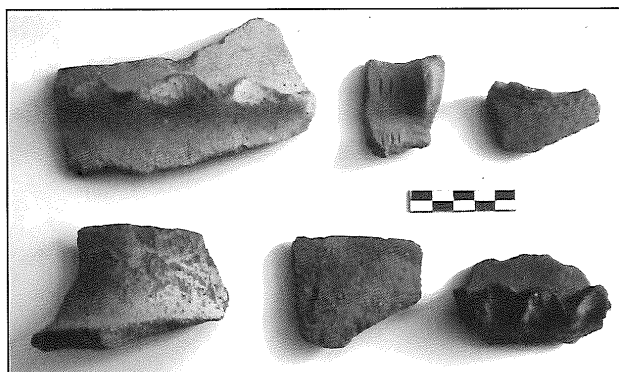
#### *An Early Bronze Settlement*

On ground above (south of) the Islamic *sūq*, the newly cut "road" had chopped through a mound of two metres, and this area was termed the Middle Bulldozer Cut. The south baulk of the cut was cleaned back, photographed and drawn. Three major phases were apparent. The upper phase consisted of rough walls and a deep ash bowl, and would seem to be Islamic (later, probably Mamluk) in date. Below this phase, three courses of a well-built wall were observed, linked by a thick, hard plaster surface to another, less well preserved, wall. The date of this middle phase architecture was not established, but early handmade wares (eleventh to twelfth centuries?) seem present. Below this level two stones — perhaps belonging to a rough wall — were identified and associated with two thickish ash layers. From the lower burnt red layer a complete dipper juglet and jar rim-spout sherd in Red Burnished ware of EBII date were recovered. Further inspection of the sloping ground to the north and northwest of the ridge identified an extensive spread of EB pottery, including wavy ledge handles, and possible associated architecture, consisting of very large fieldstones built into walls. It would seem Ruwāth is also a major Early Bronze Age site, in addition to the Nabataean-Roman, Byzantine and Islamic remains.

#### *Conclusion*

The survey of Ruwāth has clearly demonstrated the great historical and cultural importance of the site, identifying it as a multi-period settlement of unquestionably major significance. Surface artefacts include:

1. Neolithic flints on the upper part of site (closest to the spring);
2. EBII wares including Red Burnished (Figs. 9–11: selection of EB pottery);
3. Iron Age cookers (occasional rims);
4. Nabataean painted thin wares, especially near the tower;
5. Late Roman red glossy surface fine ware (imitation?);



9. EB surface pottery from the northern slopes of Ruwāth.



10. Red Burnished spouted jar.



11. EB dipper juglet.

6. "Byzantine Fine Ware" – cups, one with fine external rouletting below rim;
7. Late Antique–Early Islamic combed and plain wares with orange, red-orange and black surfaces (common everywhere);
8. Early Hand Made ware (tenth–eleventh centuries AD) in the Middle Bulldozer Cut;
9. Ayyubid-Mamluk painted (monochrome and polychrome) and plain Hand Made wares (ubiquitous around the village), including cookers (pig-ear handles).

The recent bulldozing of a totally unnecessary "road" through the core of the archaeological remains, completely bisecting the unusual Islamic

*sūq*, exposes the considerable dangers facing Ruwāth. The survey of 2000 clearly demonstrated the major archaeological importance of this site, if not its uniqueness, and when the historical significance of Ruwāth is also recalled — Roman and Islamic — it is greatly hoped that determined moves will be made to acquire and protect this essential part of Jordan's cultural heritage.

### Acknowledgments

The Year 2000 Survey Season of the Gharandal Archaeological Project was funded by a University of Western Australia ARC Small Research Grant and the Research Support Grant attached to Walmsley's ARC Fellowship. The success of the season is fully attributable to the active support of Dr. Fawwaz al-Khraysheh, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, and the (then) regional inspector of the at-Ṭāfila District, Mr. Jihad Darwish. To both go my fullest thanks. Many thanks are also due to the staff of the CBRL in 'Ammān for their assistance, especially Alex Wasse, Nadja Qaisi and Charlotte Schriwer. Greatly appreciated was the ongoing interest of Alison McQuitty and Rami Khouri in the project. Thanks to Rami for publishing a two-part report on the accomplishments of the GAP project in the English-language *Jordan Times*. Finally, my deepest thanks must go to the GAP team members who, once again, worked hard and diligently.

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