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LOCATING MIDDLE ISLAMIC DHIBAN ON THE MAMLUK IMPERIAL PERIPHERY

The Dhiban Excavation and Development Project, the DEDP hereafter, investigates how a Middle Islamic community managed the economic and political pressures of Mamluk imperial rule and expanding "global" trade in a resource scarce, semi-arid environment. Taif Dhiban is the largest settlement on the Dhiban Plateau, a narrow slice of west-central Jordan confined by the Wadi al-Walaa, the Wadi al-Mujib, the Jordan Valley and the Arabian Desert (Fig. 1). The site is positioned 64 km south of 'Amman on the so-called King's Highway, which connected the site with important Mamluk towns like Hisban, 'Amman, and Karak. Dhiban receives between 250 and 400 millimeters of annual precipitation, making sustainable rain-fed agricultural just possible. A topographic survey has determined that the entire site is just over 12 hectares in area and 41 meters high on the north side, and made up of at least three major terraces (Fig. 2). The extent of the Middle Islamic settlement, however, appears limited to the central portion of the site, running east-west in an elongated and irregular elliptic shape. At present Middle Islamic Dhiban is estimated to have been approximately 5 hectares in area on the tall promontory, with an additional "suburb" of some 1-2 hectares on the southern ridge next to the modern town.

From the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries CE Dhiban was a substantial village in the al-Balqa region of the Mamluk administrative district of Damascus (Mamlukat Damašq), but very near to the boundary (Wadi al-Mujib) with the district of al-Karak (Mamlakat al-Karak). Hence, Dhiban is likely to have been of some strategic importance, given the political competition and fluctuating administrative boundaries that characterized Mamluk rule in Jordan.

Archival work by Bethany Walker indicates that the lands of Dhiban constituted an iqtta' bestowed in 659 AH/1261 CE by Sultan Baybars on al-'Aziz, the son of al-Mughith, an Ayubid prince. Walker also notes that Dhiban had a mosque beside which was built a shrine, where two Mamluk amirs (Ibrahim ibn Manjik and his brother) were buried in the late fourteenth century CE. In other words, while not a major administrative center like Karak or Hisban, Dhiban was a prosperous town capable of providing both agricultural income and a desirable burial place for ranking individuals during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries CE.

The later Crusader ceramic assemblage at Jaffa dates from the early to mid-13th century. Of the regional types (still 70% of the assemblage), now 89% originate in southern Lebanon.

By the 13th century trade among the Crusader states, Byzantium, Egypt, and other parts of the Mediterranean world was well established, and the imported types reflect Jaffa's participation in local, regional, and long-distance trade. The proportion of imports is still 30%, but now includes types known from Syria, Cyprus (figure 5), Italy, France, Spain or North Africa, and Egypt, in addition to Aegaeon and Black Sea types. The Byzantine world is reflected in well-known types such as Zeuxippos ware and Port St. Simeon ware. Trade with the western Mediterranean is seen, for example, in Proto-Maiolica from Italy and Cobalt and Manganese ware from North Africa.

The transition from Frankish to Mamluk rule in Jaffa according to the archaeological evidence so far shows that the lower town was primarily used as a burial ground. Mamluk occupation may be expected closer to the center of the site, on top of the tell, or near the port. Depending on the nature of future excavations, the ceramic picture of early Mamluk Jaffa will most likely continue to show continuity in the regionally-made cooking wares, and a picture of Mediterranean trade that shows initial diminution but subsequent steady revival throughout the period.

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Short bibliography

Burke, Katherine Strange: In preparation-a

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Burke, Katherine Strange and Edna J. Stern: Forthcoming
Some indication of these higher-level connections may be seen in a large Middle Islamic building recently excavated on the northeast side of the tall by Jordan's Department of Antiquities (Fig. 3). Built in the "piecemeal" style of the citadel (qasr) of Hisban, this irregular structure reused old building stones, columns and column bases extensively. The size and layout of the building suggests a non-domestic use, although, as the finds are still under study, it is difficult to say what this function might have been.

The DEDP's excavations on Dhiban's summit has revealed a complex of interconnected rooms and courtyards that share many features with Middle Islamic vernacular architecture excavated in earlier campaigns at Dhiban as well as at Khirbat Faris on the Karak Plateau to the south and Hishban to the north. In particular, the core of this unit is made up of barrel-vaulted rooms with walls over one meter thick supporting the arches. These thick walls are actually constituted by two walls arching in opposite directions abutting each other for support with a rubble fill in-between. As at Khirbat Faris, the barrel vaulted rooms are trapezoid with the doorway on the widest end. However, at Dhiban excavated rooms are larger than the average given for Khirbat Faris (ca. 12 meters²) measuring ca. 20 meters². Attached to these barrel-vaulted rooms are several communicating rooms that were roofed by sprung arches, although they do not have all the features of a classic "transverse arch house," such as grain bins built in-between the springers. The stone masonry in the rooms with sprung arches is quite different from that in the barrel-vaulted rooms, and may represent a Middle Islamic reuse of earlier structures, as is the case elsewhere at Dhiban as well as at Khirbat Faris.

To simplify what is a very complex stratigraphic record, at least two post-construction phases that predate the final abandonment of beneath the Phase 2b surfaces has shown that at least one earlier Middle Islamic phase is to be found beneath Phase 2b.

Dating Phases 2a and 2b with precision is difficult, given current knowledge of artifact sequences in the Middle Islamic period. In 2005 a hoard of 30 copper coins was found in association with the foundation level of a Phase 2b cobble stone surface. These thirty copper coins have the fabric and size consistent with the copper coins (fals; pl. fals) minted in areas of Egypt and greater Syria in the Ayyubid (567-648 AH/1171-1250 CE) and Mamluk (648-923 AH/1250-1517 CE) periods. They are not well preserved and only four definitive identifications have been made; all of them Ayyubid (three from al-Malik al-Kamil Muhammad [615-635 AH/1218-1237 CE] and one from al-Malik al-`Aziz `Uthman [589-595 AH/1193-1198 CE]). Only one of these coins seems to be Mamluk, but has not yet been identified with a known Mamluk type. Because the material culture associated with this hoard is clearly late Middle Islamic in date (i.e. Mamluk), and the coins are very heavily worn, it is assumed that most of this hoard was in circulation for more than a century before its final curation.

The favourable shape of the calibration curve during the latter part of the Middle Islamic period means that radiocarbon dates have proven more useful than numismatic dates. At present the beginning of the final phase of building use, Phase 2a, is radiocarbon dated to the first half of the fifteenth century CE with a two-sigma range of 1409-1445 CE. The calibrated dates from Phase 2b are more dispersed, but clearly predate the fifteenth century CE. This evidence makes the Phase 2a "squatters" occupation contemporary with the well-known late fourteenth and early fifteenth century fiscal and political crises within the Mamluk Empire. Because piecemeal site abandonment was already underway in the first half of the fifteenth

Fig. 1. Tall Dhiban and contemporary Dhiban, looking south. (Photo Jamie Porter)
and in central and northern Syria (Fig. 4). Small quantities of so-called “sugar pots” have also been excavated. However, their limited abundance and secondary find contexts do not allow much to be said regarding Dhiban’s role in the sugar industry, which played such a large role in Jordan during Mamluk rule.

Overall, Dhiban fits the general pattern described by Bethany Walker of a “boom and bust” expansion of agricultural settlement in Jordan from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries CE. Walker links this expansion and contraction of settlement with Mamluk investment in the cash-cropping of sugar cane in the Jordan Valley, as well as the use of waqf endowments to provide “tax sheltered” agricultural investments in Jordan for Mamluk elites. This period of investment came to an end during the fiscal and political crises of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. As Walker notes, the local impact of these large-scale trends was quite variable, with areas that had been transformed into private waqf endowments often continuing to prosper through the transition to Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century. For many regions, however, the withdrawal of Mamluk state investment led to a marked decline in settlement. Dhiban would seem to fit into this later category. The town existed prior to the thirteenth century but expanded considerably under Mamluk administration. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries CE, Dhiban developed as a prosperous local centre with connections to regional and international trade networks, as well as imperial elites. Middle Islamic Dhiban also hosted some small-scale non-agricultural production. The evidence suggests that Dhiban was abandoned gradually after a period of marked decline in the first half of the fifteenth century.

Precisely how and why Middle Islamic Dhiban expanded and was abandoned are interesting questions that deserve further research. In contrast to Hisban, no evidence for earthquake damage at Dhiban has been identified, despite numerous quakes being documented in the wider region over the century between 1341 CE and 1458 CE. Dhiban’s lack of a perennial water source and its reliance on cisterns would have made it more susceptible than most towns to periods of drought. Such droughts are certainly offered as causes of agrarian decline in Mamluk documentary sources. The impact of more intensive agro-pastoral production on soil erosion and fertility are also likely to have been severe at Dhiban. However, the relevant proxy data to examine these issues are still being collected, it would be premature to credit the site’s abandonment to earthquakes, drought or soil degradation. The shifting of the regional capital of al-Balqa‘ from Hisban further north to ‘Amman in 757 AH / 1356 CE may have impacted Dhiban. However, as of yet, there is no evidence for dependency between the two sites. Similarly, although the withdrawal of Mamluk state investment from Jordan coincides closely with the abandonment of Dhiban, it is not yet possible to show specific evidence for such investment and divestment in the archaeological record. Regarding the initial expansion of the site there is little that can be said at this time, as the earliest Middle Islamic phases are only now coming to light. In other words, much remains to be done in terms of both excavation and analysis. The preliminary results suggest that such effort will be worthwhile and that Dhiban will soon prove a key site in understanding the historical dynamics of agrarian expansion and “collapse” during the Mamluk administration of the Levant.

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References: see www.dhiban.org for DEEP publications and updates.
Nous apprenons avec tristesse le décès, le 8 janvier 2011 à Princeton (New Jersey), du professeur Oleg Grabar. En 1985, le professeur Denis van Berchem, qui venait d’être nommé au Conseil de la Fondation, a insisté pour que cette dernière se dote d’un comité scientifique qui puisse la guider dans son action. Lors de deux séances en octobre 1985 (en présence des professeurs Nikolai Elisséeff, Ludvik Kalus, Michael Meinecke, Basil Robinson et Michel Terrasse) et en janvier 1986 (avec le professeur Oleg Grabar), Denis van Berchem, Charles Genequand et Alain Dufour ont déterminé la ligne des activités auxquelles la Fondation est toujours restée fidèle, dans la tradition de Max van Berchem : prospections, inventaires et publications de monuments ou de textes. Oleg Grabar a fait partie du Comité scientifique de notre Fondation jusqu’en 2000 : au cours de toutes ces années, il a très fidèlement fait le déploiement à Genève chaque année et il a marqué les débats de sa personnalité rayonnante, de son humour et de ses très vastes connaissances. Nous adressons nos condoléances émues à sa famille.

La région de prédilection de Max van Berchem était le Proche-Orient, et ce présent Bulletin y est consacré avec des articles d’Alexandre Asa Eger sur un fort de la province de Hatay (Turquie), de Katia Burke sur la céramique islamique de Jaffa (Israël) et de Benjamin Porter sur un site d’une zone désertique de Jordanie.

Costin van Berchem, Président

The Tüpras Field Archaeological Project began in 2006 after a substantial scatter of Early Islamic ceramics was detected from a walking survey around the Bronze, Iron Age, and Hellenistic port of Kinet Höyük in 2005. The site, known as the Tüpras Field, is a low mound site completely covered by cultivated fields located 800 meters north of Kinet. The site is in the province of Hatay in Turkey, in the northern part of the Bay of Iskenderun and at the foot of the western side of the tall Amamus Mountains near Antakya (classical Antioch). Geographically and topographically, the site is part of the Plain of Issos, the easternmost extent of the broad Cilician Plain. Located near the Syrian Gates, this narrow coastal plain was a corridor that connected Anatolia (via Cilicia) with Syria (via the Amuq Plain) and was known as a key area for the harvesting of timber from the mountains. Archaeological investigations at Tüpras Field in 2006, 2008, and 2010 revealed an eighth to twelfth century settlement dominated by a small fortified enclosure with surrounding buildings. The site is to be identified with the frontier settlement of Hisn al-Tināt, previously unlocated but known from the tenth century geographical sources of Ibn Hawqal and Muqaddas as a military garrison and depot and port for the gathering and redistribution of timber to Syria, Egypt and other parts of the frontier.

Very little is known about the Islamic-Byzantine frontier or al-abqārī in the Early Islamic period (mid-seventh to mid-tenth centuries) and even less is known from the subsequent period of Byzantine reconquest (c. 963 to the end of the eleventh century). What little is known comes from historical accounts from either Muslim or Christian sources that are imbued with a strong sense of religious and political propaganda. New archaeological work is filling in our understanding that the frontier was a settled region, well-connected with both Byzantine and Islamic central lands, with an economy comprised of local industry and long-distance trade. Early Islamic settlement on the coasts of the Byzantine-Islamic frontier, itself another frontier, has remained elusive. Yet, historical accounts of sea-borne Islamic invasions as far as Constantinople and archaeological evidence of both (eastern) Islamic material culture in the