

## JERICHO MAFJAR PROJECT

Donald Whitcomb

In the course of the third season of excavation, our familiarity tends to replace the site name of Khirbat al-Mafjar with the common Palestinian designation of Qasr Hisham. As we removed the last of the backdirt from earlier excavations, some seventy truckloads, the Northern Area seemed a fresh field for research. What was a puzzle of walls, platforms, cisterns, and other features of several different periods has become a clear pattern of aspects of an agricultural estate. This was attached to the famed palatial complex of Qasr Hisham and clearly operated as its economic infrastructure.

The excavations at Qasr Hisham have developed, as was intended from the beginning in 2011, as a joint project of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago under the direction of Dr. Donald Whitcomb and Dr. Hamdan Taha. The project was assisted by Jihad Yasin as field supervisor with Awni Shawamra, Michael Jennings, Muhammad Ghayyada, and other staff members. Our team of Palestinian and foreign archaeologists was augmented by a group of Palestinian graduate students, bringing a new excitement to the excavations.

### Outside the Audience Hall and Bath

During the first two seasons we discovered a new gateway (Area 1) and monumental stairway (Area 2) (see *Oriental Institute Annual Reports* for 2010–2011 and 2011–2012). Muhammad Gayyada, our most experienced archaeologist of the Jericho region, continued these peripheral areas during the 2013 season. Area 1 moved beyond the gateway to the north end of the portico in front of the Audience Hall. This area had been cleared in the 1940s and promised to be little more than clearance of blocks and fill, but it had never been properly recorded (fig. 1). There were five column bases for a long portico. East of the northernmost base was a raised platform made of stone fragments similar to one next to the North Gate, suggesting the inner area along the enclosure wall may have had a series of shops.



Figure 1. John Whitcomb, the Jericho Mafjar Project photographer, helps move stones in Area 1

The portico was tied to a north–south wall with four walls of fine masonry. These formed four rooms, which may have been market areas separated by low partitions. The southern room had a low bench against the back (west) wall. The next room was axial to the entrance to the Audience Hall; some pavers suggest a formal entrance though this room. The wall between the first two rooms had been removed and a deep pool inserted in this area, carefully plastered with a set of stairs in the southeast

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corner. The pool was found full of refuse debris, a fine collection of glazed and molded wares of the Abbasid period, when this was part of the Abbasid town.

Area 2 held the double stairway discovered in 2011 and an underground doorway opening to the west, found the following year. This area was excavated by Hamdan Taha in 2006 as two deep trenches; this year the baulk between these trenches was removed. The stratigraphy showed an upper stone construction of the late Abbasid period with abundant Abbasid ceramics, including fine glazes and sgraffiato wares. Below this was a massive collapse of rubble debris and, beneath this, a double arch of fine masonry. This arch seems to have belonged to a large ceremonial hall attached to the Audience Hall, into which a bath was later inserted. Once again, Qasr Hisham reveals an unexpected monument, a mysterious Umayyad structure without apparent parallels.

### The Grape Press

Area 6, or the Grape Press, was the finest building in the northern area, indicating the importance of wine, dibs, and other products for which Jericho was famous in the Byzantine and Islamic periods. It is the largest and best-planned press discovered in the entire region.

One remaining element was the north wall and presumed entryway. Excavations revealed a rectangular space where edging suggested the mosaics ceased. Below floor level were large slabs of stone; this would have been the base for a lever press or perhaps a large basin for foot-washing. Our archaeological architect, Ignacio Arce, literally dove into the large vat on the eastern side; with infinite care he cleaned the fallen fragments of brick vaulting and the massive stone arch that had fallen into the vat. Ignacio's skill, and the quality of the Umayyad builders, have revealed the first evidence of roofing above such vats. As he delights



Figure 2. General photo of Northern Area looking east. The grape press is in the right foreground, mosque in left center, and stables behind it

in explaining, the entire building was covered by arches and vaulting, making this the most deluxe example of such presses, in this case for the Umayyad rulers.

## The Original Residence or Red Building

During the 2011 season, Michael Jennings and Enrico Cirelli planned and tested the Red Building as Area 3. This building was contemporary with the Grape Press and thus Umayyad in date. Clearance of backdirt from the 1960s excavations gave Tony Lauricella and Sufian ed-Dess an opportunity to study fine stone foundations set into the red, bricky clay that gives the Red Building its name. This was extraordinarily difficult as the finely cut stone had been removed in recent times, leaving only robber trenches where walls once stood. These robber trenches revealed the expected system of rooms: a long room (10 × 4 m) on the interior, east side, behind which was a suite of three rooms on the outer, west side. Two rooms had undisturbed floors with pits and two tabuns built on a packed earth floor, upon which was ash with many artifacts, notably, several complete painted “Abbasid fine ware” vessels, a sphero-conical “grenade,” and an anomalous glass bauble. There were also several cakes of charred seeds and extensive glass and metal fragments. The walls of the north edge of this Red Building need further excavation, but it seems that this may have been intended as a “palace” but later abandoned for the structure to the south.

## The Stables and Earlier Structures

The stables were a series of long rooms excavated in the 1960s; the function was assumed by the line of feeding troughs or mangers with bases made of a fine limestone called Nabi Musa stone preserved on two of the interior walls (fig. 3). The main passage was paved with cobbled stones, as one might expect in stables; the main entry was clearly on the eastern side, possibly opening onto the *hayr*, a large enclosure some 2 kilometers long. The straightforward delineation of features of stables devolved into what the excavator, Michael Jennings, describes as “perhaps the most complicated square we have opened during the three years of the Jericho Mafjar Project so far.”

South of the paved passage were two rooms with mangers and accumulations of ash and organic soil. The wall north of the paved passage held a surprise: this appears to have been a columned portico, later filled in with rubble walling. The columns were square monoliths and the bases were denticulate moldings, spolia taken from an earlier Umayyad or even Hellenistic building!



Figure 3. Muhammad Shalalda excavating in the stables building of Area 3

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Moreover, beneath this portico and the other interior walls were two massive walls running north–south. Jennings makes a case for an Umayyad date for this first phase and suggests that it aligns with and may be part of the original Red Building. True, it does not have the finely cut stones, but perhaps this might not be necessary for earlier stables. Architectural drawings and stratified materials from the old baulks will suggest areas for further digging to solve this conundrum.

### The Abbasid Mosque

The most important discovery of this season was a mosque belonging to the Abbasid town, excavated by Gregory Williams. The mosque had brick flooring and a deep plastered *mihrab* or prayer niche. An external structure on the western side was probably the foundation for a staircase minaret, an early Abbasid form. The northeast corner had not been excavated in the 1960s and revealed a set of fine bowls, small storage jars, and basins of the same early Abbasid period. Located near the center of the Northern Area, the mosque was not large, but was sufficient for the small community inside the walls.

In front of the mosque was a large yard and a deep, vaulted cistern with a plastered pool, possibly for ablutions before prayer. East of the mosque was a paved walk leading to an entryway (7200); the entry itself had two benches on either side and paving with fine Nabi Musa limestones. To the south of the entry was a small *hammam* or bath, a cooking area, and many other rooms excavated by Awni Shawamra; this part of Area 8 is not complete and must await further excavations.

### An Umayyad Estate and Abbasid Town

Though there is more excavation remaining to be done in the Northern Area, the 2013 season of excavations may present the following interpretations. This part of Khirbet al-Mafjar was established in the Umayyad period as a fine residence (the Red Building) associated with a Grape Press of superb architecture. Together these structures suggest the establishment of an agricultural estate, a *day'a*, as the economic foundation for the Umayyad palace complex to the south (fig. 5).

The removal of the Umayyad caliphate from this region seems to have encouraged an expansion of this settlement with a walled center in the northern area, with its own mosque and residence; housing eventually spread around the Audience Hall and within the palace. This enlarged settlement may be considered a town in its own right, which lasted into the tenth century. The result is an entirely new dimension in understanding the dynamic change



Figure 4. Abdullah Daraghmeh (digging), with Greg Williams (in blue shirt) and Don looking at the beginnings of the mosque



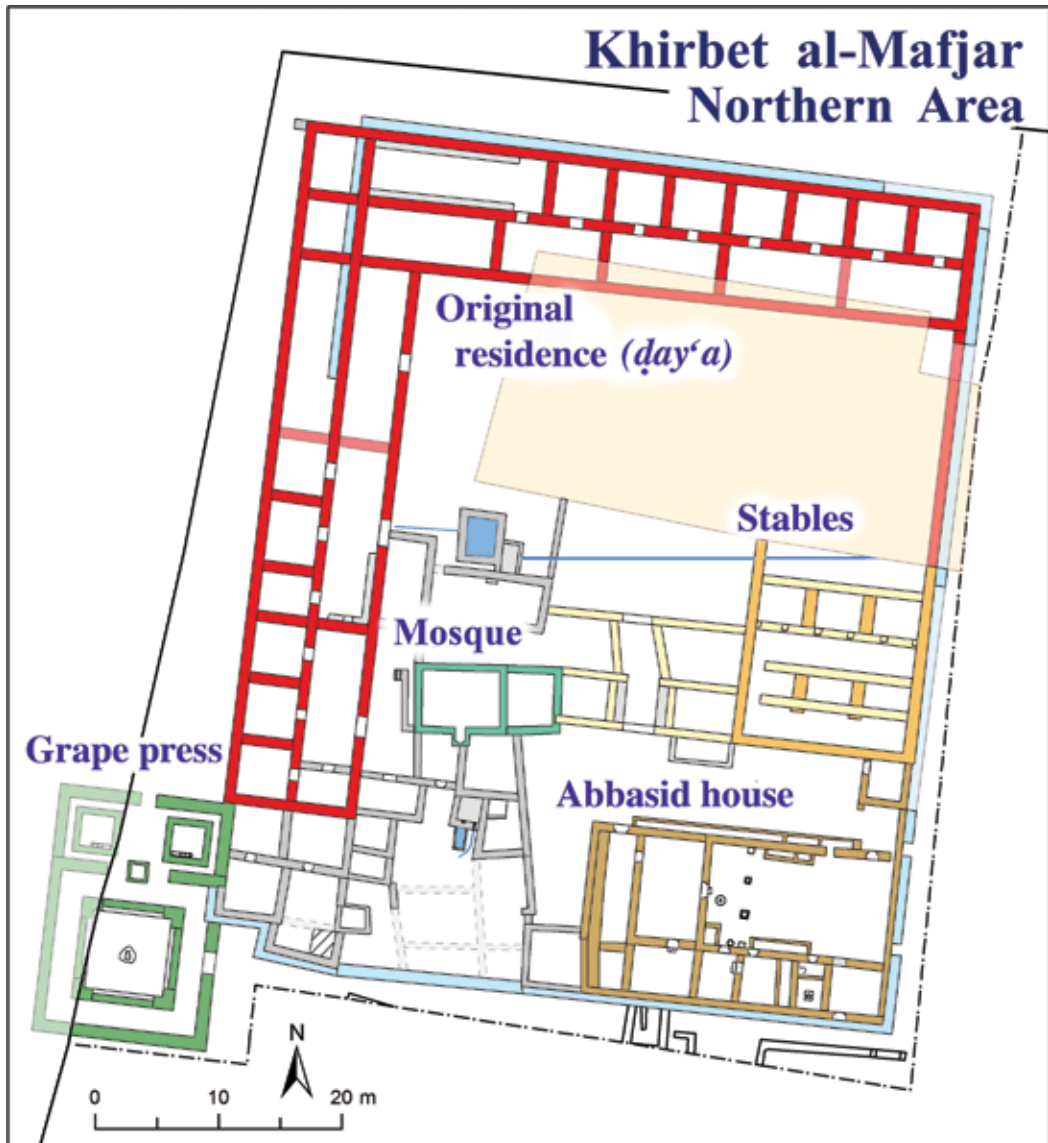


Figure 5. Plan of the Northern Area with the new structures discovered in 2013

from Qasr Hisham into what might be called part of the Madinat al-Ariha (the Islamic city of Jericho). Further excavations promise increasing understanding of new complexities at this archaeological monument.

Hamdan Taha and the author have agreed to assemble a report of these results of the Jericho Mafjar Project. As a first step we have written a general introduction in a new journal, the *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies*. The article may be downloaded from the JMP website ([www.jerichomafjarproject.org](http://www.jerichomafjarproject.org)), courtesy of the Pennsylvania State University.