

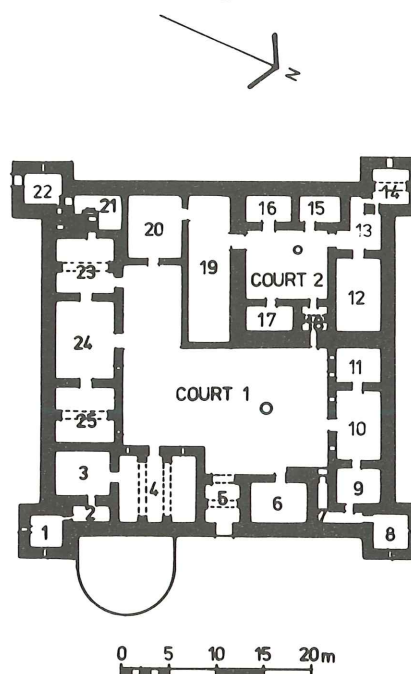
Qasr al-Hallabat: an Umayyad Desert Retreat or Farm-Land

One of the more interesting archaeological remains in Jordan is a number of elaborately decorated buildings constructed in the desert, or in the border between the desert and the cultivated areas, during the Umayyad period, or more precisely during the first half of the eighth-century¹.

For many decades these buildings were interpreted as *Badiyas*, desert retreats of Umayyad princes who, being of nomadic origins, grew weary of the city life with its rigours and congested atmosphere and attempted to return to the desert where their nomadic instincts could be best expressed². This theory was seriously challenged by Sauvaget who pointed out that these chateaux were located on extensive and elaborately irrigated latifundias and as such were centres for agricultural exploitation. He added that many of the agricultural features of these centres were pre-Islamic, i.e. Roman or Byzantine³. This agricultural theory was later elaborated by O. Grabar who also suggested other more complicated co-ordinates for the construction of the Umayyad castles⁴. One such building is Qasr al-Hallabat which provides us with an excellent example of the transformation of a Romano-Byzantine castle into a luxurious residence in the Umayyad period.

Qasr al-Hallabat⁵ is situated some 25 km. to the NE of

1. Qasr al-Hallabat: plan.



Zerqa, north of the highway which connects Zerqa with the Oasis of Azraq. Between 1979 and 1981 three seasons of excavations were carried out at the site of Hallabat by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. In the course of these excavations all the rooms in the southeastern corner of the castle [FIG. 1 (Rooms 1-4)] and along the south wall (Rooms 22-25) were completely excavated; in addition an agricultural enclosure situated some 400 m. to the west of the castle was investigated⁶.

¹The most accessible publication of these Umayyad buildings is that of K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture: Umayyads, AD 622-750* (Oxford, 1969).

²H. Lammens, 'La Bâdia et le Hira sous les Omayyades. Le Problème de Mschatta,' *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale, Université St Joseph*, IV (1909) p. 98; K. A. C. Creswell, *A short account of Early Muslim Architecture*, (Beirut, 1969) pp. 93-95; G. Marcais, *L'Art de l'Islam*, (Paris, 1952) p. 64. For a detailed discussion of the *Badiya* theory and cogent arguments against its acceptance, cf. Fawwaz Touqan, 'The Umayyad Desert Castles: why were they Built?' (in Arabic), *ADAJ*, vol. XIV (1969) pp. 4-25; *Idem*, *Al-Ha'ir: An investigation of the Umayyad castles in the Desert*, (In Arabic) (Amman, 1979) pp. 115-143

³J. Sauvaget, 'Observations sur les monuments Omeyyades, 1: Châteaux de Syrie,' *Journal Asiatique*, ccxxxI (1939) pp. 1 ff; *Idem*, *Châteaux Umayyades des Syrie*, contribution à l'études de la colonisation arabe aux I^{er} et II^e siècles de l'hégire', *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, xxxvi (1968) 1-52 (published posthumously).

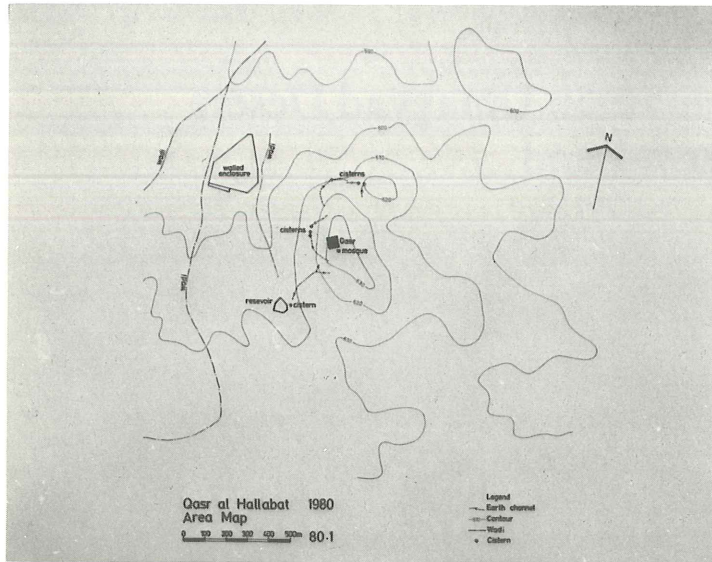
⁴O. Grabar, 'Umayyad 'Palace' and the Abbasid Revolution,' *Studia Islamica*, 18 (1963) pp. 5-18; O. Grabar, *et al*, *City in the Desert, Qasr al-Hayr East*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1978) pp. 148 ff.

⁵Hallabat was visited twice, in the winters of 1904 and 1909, by H. C. Butler, director of the Princeton Archaeological Expedition to Syria, who planned and discussed the castle and the extra-mural little mosque. More recently the site of Hallabat was the subject of a detailed study by Dr Fawwaz Touqan of the University of Jordan and Dr David Kennedy of the University of Sheffield. H. C. Butler, *Ancient Architecture in Syria*,

Div. 2, sect. A. (Leyden, 1909) pp. 70-77; F. Touqan, *Al-Ha'ir*, pp. 405 ff; D. Kennedy, *Archaeological Explorations on the Roman Frontier in North-East Jordan*, BAR International series 134 (Oxford, 1982) pp. 17-65.

⁶G. Bisheh, 'Excavations at Qasr al-Hallabat, 1979,' *ADAJ*, xxlv (1980) G. L. Harding memorial volume, pp. 69-77; *Idem*, 'The second season of excavations at Hallabat, 1980,' *ADAJ*, XXVI (1982) pp. 133-143.

2. Qasr al-Hallabat: area plan.



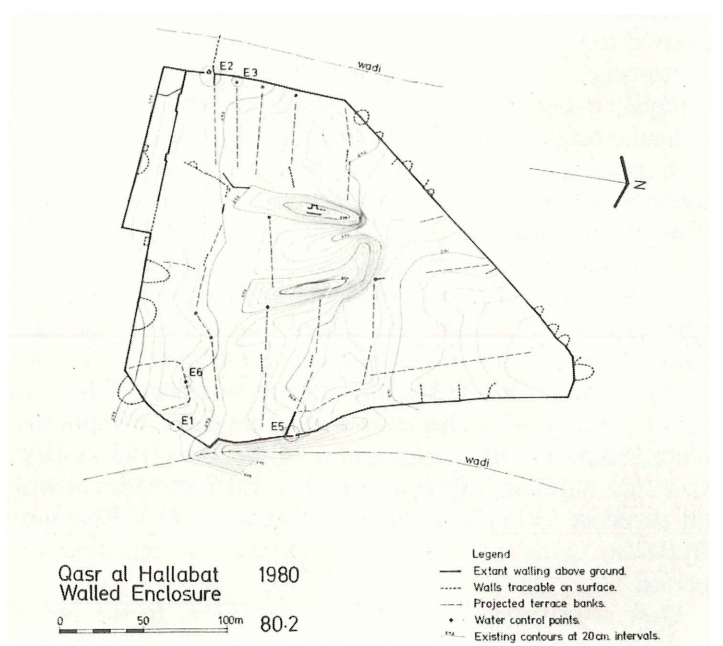
3. Qasr al-Hallabat and the extra-mural mosque: An aerial view.



4. The extra-mural mosque: looking west.



5. The agricultural enclosure: plan.



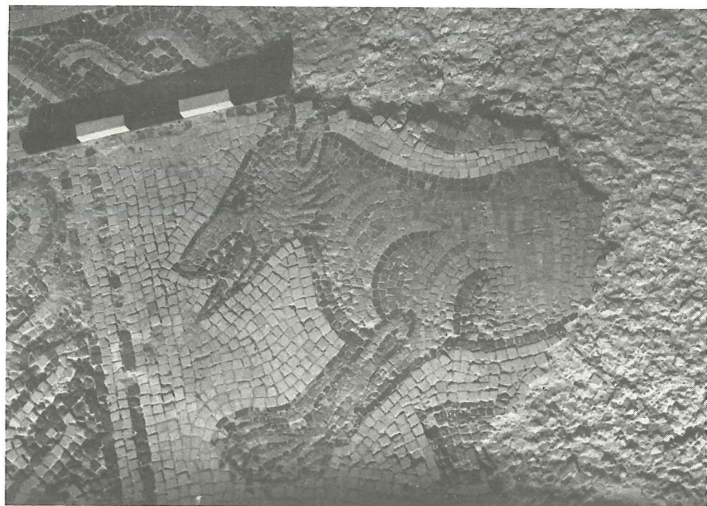
The site comprises the following main features (FIG. 2);

- (a) The castle, situated on an elongated knoll overlooking extensive views on all sides, consists of a square 44 m. to the side with angle square towers (FIGS 1 and 3). Inside, a series of oblong and square rooms surround three sides of a central courtyard paved with flagstones. The northwest corner is occupied by an inner structure measuring 16.25 m. to the side. It also consists of a central courtyard surrounded on all sides by a series of parallel rooms, except on the south side where the main entrance to the structure is situated.
- (b) A little mosque measuring 11.80 × 10.70 m. internally⁷. It is situated about 15 m. to the east of the castle (FIGS 3 and 4).

- (c) A huge reservoir at the foot of the SW slope of the castle, and eight cisterns dug into the western slope and in the plain next to the reservoir.
- (d) The remains of a cluster of poorly built houses which extend to the NW of the reservoir. These houses, which show a more or less coherent plan consisting of a forecourt with rooms on one or two sides, were apparently the dwellings of the labourers and farmers who tilled the land. The excavation of two such houses in 1981 yielded Umayyad pottery with no evidence of earlier or later occupations.
- (e) An irregularly shaped agricultural enclosure situated some 400 m. to the west of the castle. (FIG. 5). It measures 270 m. from north to south, by 220 m. along its widest east-west axis. A series of walls divided the enclosure into

⁷For the mosque, cf. Butler, *op. cit.* pp. 74–77, Appendix, pp. XVII–XIX; Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, pt. II pp. 502–503; Bisheh, *ADAJ*, XXIV (1980) pp. 73 ff.

6. Mosaic floor; Rm. 4.



7. Mosaic floor; Rm. 4.



- rectangular plots, and an elaborate system of sluices regulated the distribution of water to the various plots⁸.
- (f) A little bath building, Hammam al-Sarakh, situated about 2 km. to the east of the castle⁹.

The excavations disclosed that in the last phase of its reconstruction, i.e. the Umayyad period, the castle was provided with elaborate decorations in carved stucco, fresco-paintings, and coloured mosaics (FIGS 6 and 7) which include geometrical patterns, various fruits, and a group of lively animals and birds¹⁰. The high technical skill of the mosaic decorations identifies them as one of the finest examples to be found in Jordan, and attests to the survival of the classical artistic tradition late into the Umayyad period.

These elaborate decorations and the introduction of amenities of high urban living, like the bath of Hammam al-Sarakh, indicate that Qasr al-Hallabat in the Umayyad period was no longer a military structure, but rather it had been transformed into a luxurious residence comparable to the Roman villas. This remarkable transformation of the site of Hallabat in social and economic complexity in the Umayyad period might

be related to the infusion of funds from an outside centre, possibly Damascus. The creation of a settlement like Hallabat, however, was not a viable economic enterprise, and once the funds ceased to flow as a result of the fall of the Umayyad dynasty in the middle of the eighth century, the settlement was abandoned and gradually fell into decay like most of the other Umayyad buildings in the Jordanian *Badiya*. This decay can be attributed neither to a deliberate Abbasid destruction nor to climatic changes, but rather to human factors which are represented in the transfer of the seat of government to Baghdad and the concomitant lack of flow of funds.

It would appear then that Sauvaget's interpretation of the Umayyad desert buildings as centres for agricultural exploitation fits the archaeological evidence better than the *Badiya* theory. But given the size of the agricultural enclosure (less than 60 dunums) and the climate of the area (where the annual precipitation rate is less than 100 mm.) it is obvious that the crops were cultivated for subsistence rather than for outside markets. In other words, the agricultural importance—even if we assume an economic system which combined subsistence cultivation with herding—was not the paramount factor in the creation of the settlement of Hallabat. Another likely reason for the development of Hallabat may have been the need to maintain close contacts with the tribes settled in the district of Jordan, especially the Belqa region, who were vehement supporters of the Umayyads.

⁸ Bisheh, *ADAJ*, XXVI (1982) pp. 138 ff.

⁹ Butler, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–80; Creswell, *op. cit.*, pp. 498–502; F. Touqan, *Al-Ha'ir*, pp. 425 ff.

¹⁰ Bisheh, *Ibid.* pp. 136–138

