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Khirbat Fāris: Vernacular Architecture on the Karak Plateau, Jordan

For periods when historical documentation is available, it is tempting to ignore the contribution that archaeology can make to a more rounded picture of the past. In addition, the results of archaeological excavation can often raise issues that are absent from the historical record. This is particularly true of marginal subjects in marginal areas. Such a subject is rural vernacular architecture.

During the Early and Middle Islamic periods, written sources indicate a prosperous rural economy on the Karak Plateau supporting a network of villages lasting through to the sixteenth century. This was punctuated by episodes rather than centuries of disruption.¹ One such village was probably Khirbat Fāris, although its earlier name of Tadun does not appear in the histories and geographies of this period.² Nor does it appear in the sixteenth-century Ottoman cadastral records, *daftar-i mufaṣṣal*, when the site was possibly recorded as a *mazrā'ah*.³ The term *mazrā'ah* is usually translated as an agricultural area with no settlement that was dependent on a permanently occupied village. However, several authors have suggested that the term should be interpreted as defining the type of agricultural

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¹For a full discussion of the historical accounts of this period and earlier see Jeremy Johns, "The *Longue Durée*: State and Settlement Strategies in Southern Transjordan Across the Islamic Centuries," in *Village, Steppe and State: The Social Origins of Modern Jordan*, ed. Eugene L. Rogan and Tariq Tell (London, 1994), 1–31.

²The name is recent: in 1987 when the excavation directors were prospecting for a site to excavate they met several of the landowners from the family of Fāris Majālī, who was buried on the site at the end of the nineteenth century. In response to the question "what is this site called?" the landowners replied "Khirbat Fāris." The name that appears on maps is Khirbat Tadun. Thus archaeology gives legitimacy to land-ownership!

³These surveys are generally accepted as based on the earlier Mamluk fiscal landscape and are used extensively by archaeologists as well as historians for providing social and economic information relevant to the Middle Islamic period. The edition used here is Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late 16th Century* (Erlangen, 1977).



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produce, that is grain, rather than the type of occupation.⁴ As the description below reveals, this fits well with the evidence from Khirbat Fāris: the architectural remains for the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries are considerable and show parallels to historically testified village settlement.

Historians and geographers of the Mamluk and earlier periods refer to architecture in general and even detail construction methods.⁵ However, their primary interest, and that of their audience, did not lie in detailing provincial domestic housing. The same is true of Mamluk *waqfīyāt*, which, while being a rich source of information about agriculture, climate, and crops, are not concerned with the physicality of the village houses and farmsteads. Such things did not produce revenue.⁶ In the absence of historical records, the evidence from Khirbat Fāris offers an opportunity to examine trends and changes in Middle Islamic rural life. In the following discussion considerable use is made of ethnographic analogy. Although such houses have been noted archaeologically, there is little in the available historical and archaeological literature describing these types in detail. This is despite the wealth of ethnographic information regarding their construction and use—at least in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries.

Khirbat Fāris is located just west of the King's Highway approximately seventeen kilometers north of the Crusader, Mamluk, and later stronghold of Karak, the Mamluk administrative center of the province⁷ (fig. 1). The site is situated on the northern edge of the Wādī Ibn Ḥammād where the plateau falls steeply away to the wadi below. As an agricultural settlement it was in a favorable position: the vast arable expanses of the plateau still support harvests of wheat, barley, and pulses while the wadi flanks are cultivated with more labor-intensive crops:

⁴This discussion relates to the later Ottoman period but the issues raised may be relevant for this preceding period. See Abdul-Karem Rafeq, "Land Tenure Problems and Their Social Impact in Syria around the Middle of the Nineteenth Century," in *Land Tenure and Social Transformations in the Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut, 1984), 371–96; Linda Schilcher, "The Grain Economy of Late Ottoman Syria and the Issue of Large-Scale Commercialization," in *Landholding and Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East*, ed. Çaglar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (Albany, 1991), 173–228.

⁵E.g., al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm*, trans. André Miquel as *La meilleure répartition pour la connaissance des provinces* (Damascus, 1963), 227. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London, 1958), 2:357–63. See Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn and Laila 'Alī Ibrahim, *Architectural Terms in Mamluk Documents (648–923H/1250–1517M)* (Cairo, 1990), for the rich vocabulary used in these descriptions. However, this vocabulary is focused on Egyptian documents.

⁶Bethany J. Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Transjordan: a "Boom and Bust" Economy," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2004): 119–47.

⁷Muḥammad 'Adnān Bakhīt, *Das Königreich von al-Karak in der mamlukischen Zeit* (Berlin, 1992).



nowadays tomatoes and in the past, according to al-Muqaddasī, almonds, fruit trees, and grapes.⁸ The botanical remains from the excavation show a preponderance of grain, both wheat and barley, and also pulses, figs, olives, and grapes. From the thirteenth century onwards a few exotic crops such as cotton, sorghum, watermelon, pistachio, and citrus fruits start to appear. These required irrigation and were probably grown in the Jordan Valley although there is also evidence for more local irrigation.⁹ This landscape is currently shared with semi-nomads and Bedouin who practise animal husbandry. Animal husbandry is also a very important part of the mixed farming economy of village communities. The excavated faunal remains reflect this with an overwhelming majority coming from sheep and goat with a significant amount of cattle bones in later periods.¹⁰ In order to gain subsistence or even surplus from a marginal area such as the Karak Plateau, this would undoubtedly have been the case in the past.¹¹ Indeed, some of the buildings at Khirbat Fāris, e.g., the nineteenth century “barns,” are interpreted as the structures of semi-nomadic communities rather than settled village communities. Other settlements of similar appearance, namely scattered, ruined stone structures, and surface pottery scatters of the distinctive thirteenth/fourteenth-century hand-made pottery (fig. 2) share the same location and one can talk of a pattern of these settlements at five-kilometer intervals fringing the western edge of the Karak Plateau.

The excavations have shown that the site has been occupied for over 4,000 years, and it may indeed have an earlier origin. However, the main research concentration has been on the post-first century settlement while this article focuses particularly on the twelfth–sixteenth-century architectural and material remains. Calendar dates are chosen over historical terminology: vernacular architecture and functional artifacts are inherently conservative, and distinctions in their typology do not fall conveniently into dynastic divisions.¹² Before excavation started two

⁸Al-Muqaddasī, trans. Miquel, *La meilleure répartition*, 211.

⁹Chantelle Hoppé, “A Thousand Years of Farming: Agricultural Practices from the Byzantine to Early Ottoman Period at Khirbat Faris, the Kerak Plateau, Jordan” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1999). M. P. Charles and C. F. Hoppé, “The Archaeobotanical Remains,” in “Mamluk Khirbat Faris,” *ARAM* 9–10 (1997–98): 181–226.

¹⁰Lisa Yeomans, “The Mammalian and Bird Bone from Khirbat Faris,” unpublished archive report.

¹¹The Faris Project includes as one of its aims the characterization of this complex land-use from the Late Antique period onwards. Recent research focused more directly on the Middle Islamic period is reported in Alexandrine Guérin, “Architecture villageoise et tribu nomade: Définition d’un peuplement dans le Laḡā à la période islamique (Syrie méridionale),” *Berytus* 44 (1999–2000): 79–108.

¹²For further discussion of this topic see A. McQuitty, “The Rural Landscape of Jordan in the Seventh–Nineteenth Centuries AD: the Kerak Plateau,” *Antiquity* 79 (2005): 327–38.



nineteenth-century barns (fig. 3), previously termed Mamluk farmsteads,¹³ a first to sixth-century vaulted structure, and Fāris' tomb were visible (fig. 4).

Fāris Majālī's grave seems to have been placed on top of an earlier Muslim shrine. In 1851 the French traveller de Saulcy stopped at Khirbat Fāris/Tadun and recorded a structure sounding remarkably akin to the remains surviving on the site.¹⁴ He described a square building with walls standing two meters high and approached by steps. He noted a massive lintel into which the formula *bismillāh* was scratched; this lintel still survives. The building was obviously already ruined but it does not sound as if the small "tower" associated today with Fāris Majālī's grave had been erected on these ruins. De Saulcy suggests that while at first it was probably a pagan temple it was converted to a Christian church and then to a mosque. Here it is suggested that the structure was in fact the domed shrine of a *walī* or local holy man. Often such shrines became the focus for cemeteries. The obviously visible graves at Khirbat Fāris are those of the descendants of Fāris Majālī around whose tomb they congregate but there are also traces of earlier examples. There was no folk-memory of an earlier shrine and, if so, for whom it had been built. Equally, without excavation it is impossible to give a date to the structure. However, as part of the push to recover the Islamic character of the region following the Crusader interregnum, there was a burgeoning of shrine construction in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which may be the construction date for this shrine.¹⁵

Excavations revealed several houses of various forms. A nucleus of barrel-vaulted rooms surrounding a central courtyard and connected to the settlement beyond by winding alleys was uncovered at the western edge of the site (fig. 5). The date of this complex appears to be thirteenth–sixteenth centuries based on coin, ceramic, and stratigraphic evidence. It is very likely that the complex continued to be used into the seventeenth century.¹⁶ In addition, several early twentieth-century examples of such buildings were recorded at Ḥumūd, a village thirteen kilometers east of Khirbat Fāris; their construction informs the following discussion. The houses in Ḥumūd were built by people from Karak rather than the "villagers"

¹³Udo F. C. Worschech, *Northwest Ard el-Kerak 1983 and 1984: A Preliminary Report* (Munich, 1985).

¹⁴Félicien de Saulcy, *Voyage autour de la mer Morte et dans les terres bibliques: exécuté de décembre 1850 à avril 1851* (Paris, 1853).

¹⁵Alan Walmsley, "Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Jordan and the Crusader Interlude," in *The Archaeology of Jordan*, ed. Burton MacDonald, Russell Adams, and Piotr Bienkowski (Sheffield, 2001), 533.

¹⁶Given the lack of historical records referring specifically to Khirbat Fāris and a continuing lack of knowledge concerning seventeenth-century village ceramics on the Karak Plateau, it is hard to be more precise.



themselves. In fact these houses were used as part of the cycle of permanent resettlement of the land by Christian tribes in the nineteenth century. One was originally used as a *maḍāfah* (guest-house) for the tribe when they came from Karak with their flocks on a seasonal basis, in spring and late summer. The flocks were stabled in nearby caves. In the spring grain was planted and the flocks grazed on the spring growth while in late summer the same grain was harvested and the flocks grazed on the stubble. Ultimately the seasonal settlement became a permanent settlement in the early twentieth century.¹⁷

The individual buildings at Khirbat Fāris and Ḥumūd are characterized by their relatively small dimensions (average: internal measurements 4.00x3.00 meters and height 2.00 meters) and massive side-walls (average: 1.00 meter thick) which either re-use earlier walls or are constructed from two skins of stones with an in-fill of rubble and mud mortar. The ground plan is often trapezoidal with the wider end being at the entrance. The entrance-wall was not bonded to the vault itself, and in the Ḥumūd examples a rectangular antechamber roofed with reeds and branches marked the entrance. The wall stones are roughly shaped and squared although those for the vault itself are singularly shaped, almost like (European!) loaves of bread. These show no signs of working. Huge amounts of mortar were used to secure the vault which was built over a form of sacks that were later removed. The end walls, being non-weight-bearing, are less substantial. One example from Khirbat Fāris featured an end wall that was merely slapped-up against a pre-existing earth "wall." The roof was flat and consisted of substantial layers of earth and brushwood nearly a meter thick, sealed by a final layer of mud-plaster. In short, the construction seems to have been haphazard. Traces of a much larger and longer barrel-vaulted building were detected on the surface just to the east of the excavated area. A cistern was excavated nearby and its contents of a fine fourteenth-century marvered glass bowl (fig. 6), and several wheel-made water jugs or *ibrīq*, are interpreted as being associated with this larger barrel-vault.¹⁸

Parallels to this type of architecture are mainly confined to Jordan. At Ḥisbān a residential complex of similar-sized barrel-vaulted structures including a *ḥammām* and *īwān* surrounding a central courtyard has been dated to the fourteenth century.¹⁹ This complex is located on the summit of the citadel of Ḥisbān. Adjacent to this suite of rooms is a long barrel-vaulted structure that is interpreted as being the

¹⁷Pierre Medebielle, *Madaba et son histoire chrétienne* (Jerusalem, 1987), 301.

¹⁸M. A. Sarley Pontin, "The Pottery," and M. Khoury, "The Glass," in "Mamluk Khirbat Faris," 181–226.

¹⁹Bethany J. Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Southern Bilad al-Sham in the Eighth/Fourteenth Century: the Case of Hisban," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 62, no. 4 (2003): 251.



storeroom of the governor's residence.²⁰ In the fourteenth century Ḥisbān had been made administrative capital of the Balqā'.²¹ The Ḥisbān examples offer extremely close parallels to Khirbat Fāris in terms of construction details. In earlier excavation reports there are references to "many low-ceilinged vaults" and a vaulted room with plastered *maṣṭabah* and window; this is mirrored at Khirbat Fāris²² (fig. 7). The nature of the material found in the storeroom associated with this complex is remarkable, including "serving vessels monumental in size and bearing lengthy dedicatory inscriptions to unnamed amirs" and lamps, including fragments of a fine glass mosque lamp. This and the similarities of the plan to that of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's palace inside Karak castle have led the excavators to conclude that the barrel-vaulted complex was the residence of the governor of the Balqā'.²³ The architecture is strikingly similar to Khirbat Fāris; the difference lies in the location of the complex within the site, the nature of the associated material, and the general historical background.

Parallels for the smaller barrel-vaulted buildings also come from further afield. A thirteenth-fourteenth-century example from Horvat Berechot in the Hebron hills has been excavated.²⁴ Many of the houses surrounding the better-known town and churches of Umm al-Raṣaṣ on the Mādabāh Plains are of this type but are not arranged around courtyards. These are probably nineteenth century in date. A nearly complete barrel-vaulted structure containing late Ottoman artifacts was uncovered at Ra's al-Qabub in northern Jordan.²⁵ Such barrel-vaulted houses were a common sight in Jordanian and Palestinian villages of the recent past, when they were used as animal stables or oven-houses.²⁶ At the present state of knowledge it would appear that such barrel-vaulted houses fall within the late thirteenth–mid-twentieth-century date-range and are distributed throughout Jordan and the hills of Palestine. Needless to say, this distribution probably has more to do with our state of knowledge than past reality.

At Khirbat Fāris, this architecture is totally different from that of the preceding periods. At the beginning of the twelfth century new houses were built using but modifying the surviving structures of the sixth century. Where the stone roof-rafters

²⁰Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Transjordan," 133.

²¹Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Southern Bilad al-Sham," 251.

²²Phyllis A. Bird in *Heshbon 1968*, ed. Roger S. Boraas and Siegfried H. Horn (Berrien Springs, 1969), 200–2.

²³Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Transjordan," 132.

²⁴Yizhar Hirschfeld, *The Palestinian Dwelling* (Jerusalem, 1995), 43–44.

²⁵Edward B. Banning et al., "Wadi Ziqlab Project 1987: A Preliminary Report," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 33 (1989): 54.

²⁶Ammar Khammash, *Notes on Village Architecture in Jordan* (Lafayette, LA, 1986), 43.



were missing, wooden beams were used to support the flat roof. However, these houses differed in detail from their antecedents. Here the newly-built arches spring from arch-walls, effectively acting as buttresses, or from the base of the house-wall rather than being bonded *into* the house-wall. The space between the arch-walls is used for *rawīyāt*/grain-bins²⁷ for storing the household's harvest. The *rawīyah* was filled through a hole in the roof and taken out through a hole at the base. Apart from the grain-bins there are generally few built-in features, mainly various shaped niches recessed into the thick walls. The entrance is almost always parallel to the arches. This, the so-called "Transverse-Arch House," was also the most common rural house throughout Jordan during the nineteenth and early twentieth century²⁸ (fig. 9).

As pointed out in the introduction, during the periods under discussion, twelfth–sixteenth centuries, the Karak Plateau was known as a fertile and arable land scattered with villages. The area was also well-known for its livestock, including sheep, goats, cattle, camels, and horses, that were raised by the Bedouin tribes and sold to the governments of the time for use by their armies. In particular, the Mamluk state prized the horses of the *bādiyah* tribes.²⁹ Within the time-frame under consideration there was a noticeable change in the type of architecture seen in one of these villages, Khirbat Fāris. What was the impetus behind these startlingly different types of construction? It is the direct interest of the Mamluk state that seems to coincide with the observed change in architecture.³⁰

One possible effect of this that can be seen in the architecture is the changing provision for storage of agricultural produce.³¹ In the earlier twelfth-century "Transverse-Arch House," agricultural storage seems to have been carried out at the household level within each dwelling-unit. By contrast, the later barrel-vaulted houses at Khirbat Fāris exhibited no provision for agricultural storage and were used simply for residence. Storage of crops may have occurred off-site in caves and cisterns as has been suggested for earlier periods and occurred later when produce was hidden from Ottoman tax-collectors.³² Storage may have been centralized on a community level and have taken place in large barrel-vaulted

²⁷*Rawīyah* is a vernacular term in use in Jordan and Palestine.

²⁸McQuitty, "The Rural Landscape of Jordan."

²⁹Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: the Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* (Beckenham, 1986), 115.

³⁰See Walker for detailing of this investment.

³¹For further discussion of this topic see Ruba Kana'an and Alison McQuitty, "The Architecture of al-Qasr on the Kerak Plateau: an Essay in the Chronology of Vernacular Architecture," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 126 (1994): 127–51.

³²Øystein LaBianca, *Sedentarization and Nomadization* (Berrien Springs, 1990), 194.



structures like the one still buried at Khirbat Fāris or excavated as the “governor’s storeroom” at Ḥisbān. Alternatively taxation was direct and was taken in kind at the threshing-floor: there was little need for large-scale storage.

Various reasons for this architectural change can be suggested. It is tempting to assume that as in the case of early twentieth-century Ḥumūd, these barrel-vaulted houses represent the process of sedentarization. More state investment was put into agriculture in the atmosphere of increased security that the Mamluks offered after the turmoil of the Crusader interregnum. Communities were encouraged “to settle down” in villages. However, as both historical records and archaeology have shown, there were rural settlements on the Karak Plateau in the centuries immediately before the Mamluks stamped their authority on the region. A more nuanced interpretation may be that a change in the agricultural administration of the landscape resulted in a change in the control of the surplus produce. What had once been for the family and tribe was now for the state.



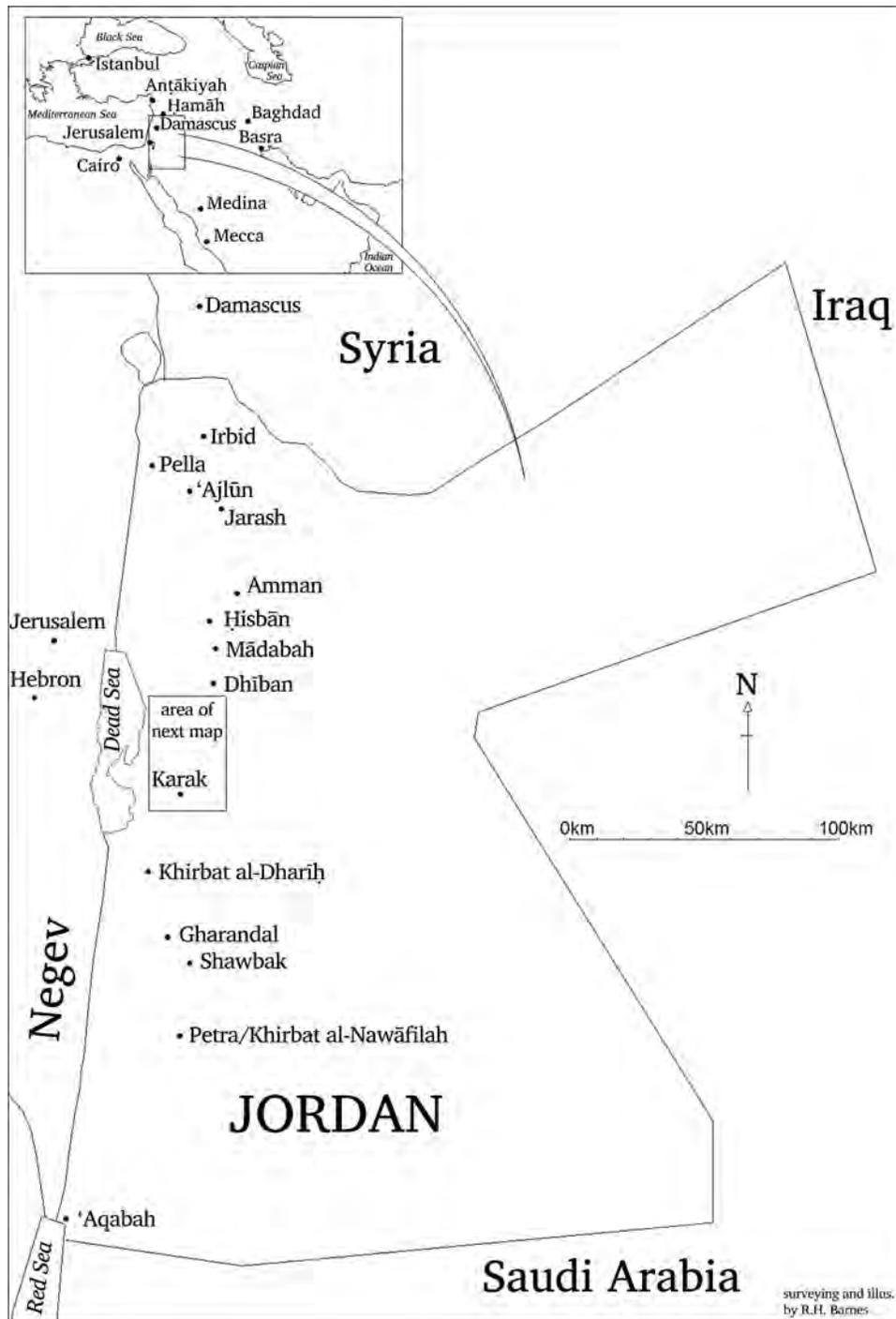


Fig. 1a. Map to show location of Khirbat Fāris



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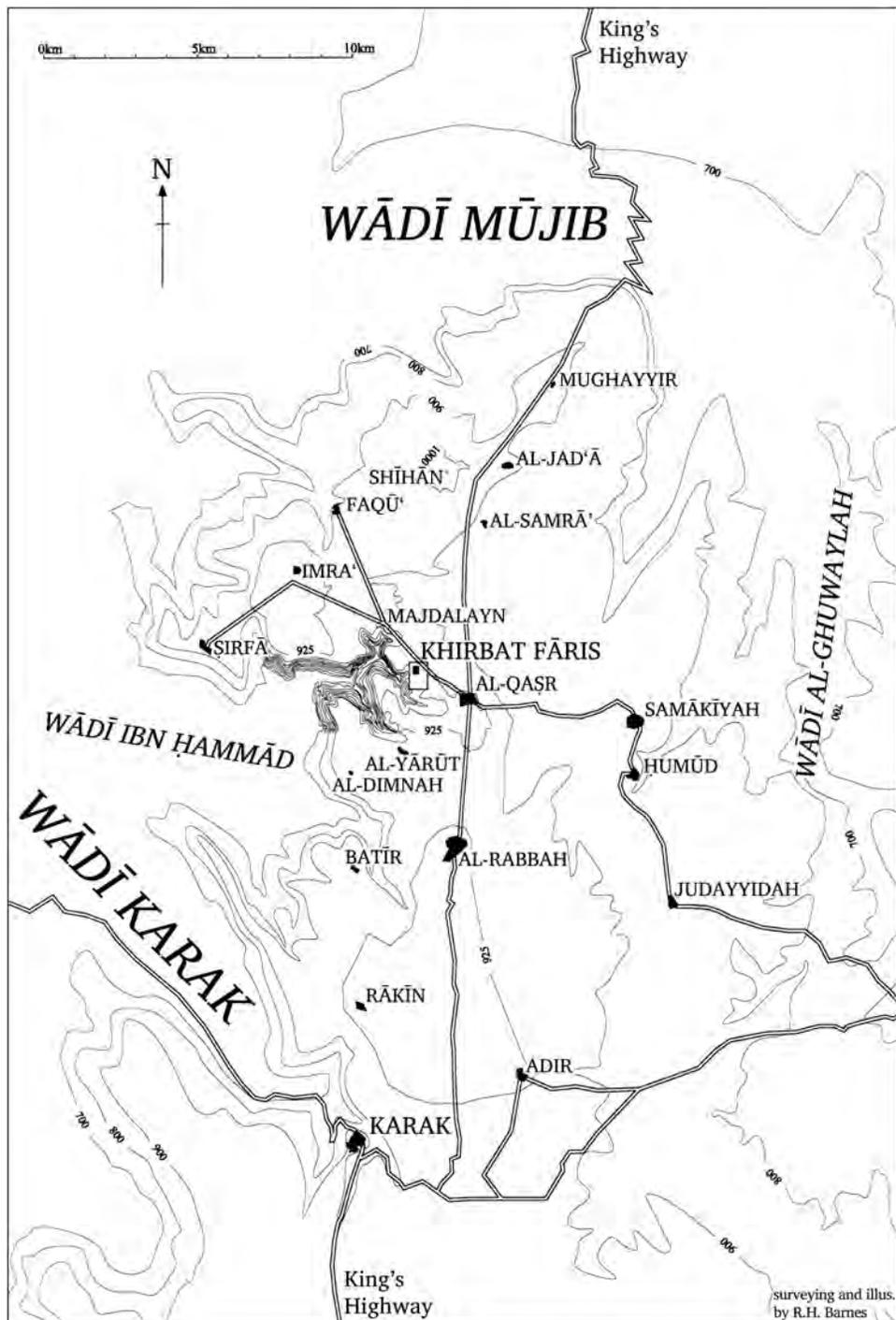


Fig. 1b. Map to show location of Khirbat Fāris



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Fig. 2. Fourteenth-century hand-made pottery from Khirbat Fāris



Fig. 3. Nineteenth-century “barn” at Khirbat Fāris



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Fig. 4. View to show possible shrine on right on which Fāris' tomb, the small tower, is constructed. The tomb on the left belongs to Shilash, Fāris' son.



Fig. 5. View of complex of barrel-vaulted houses at Khirbat Fāris



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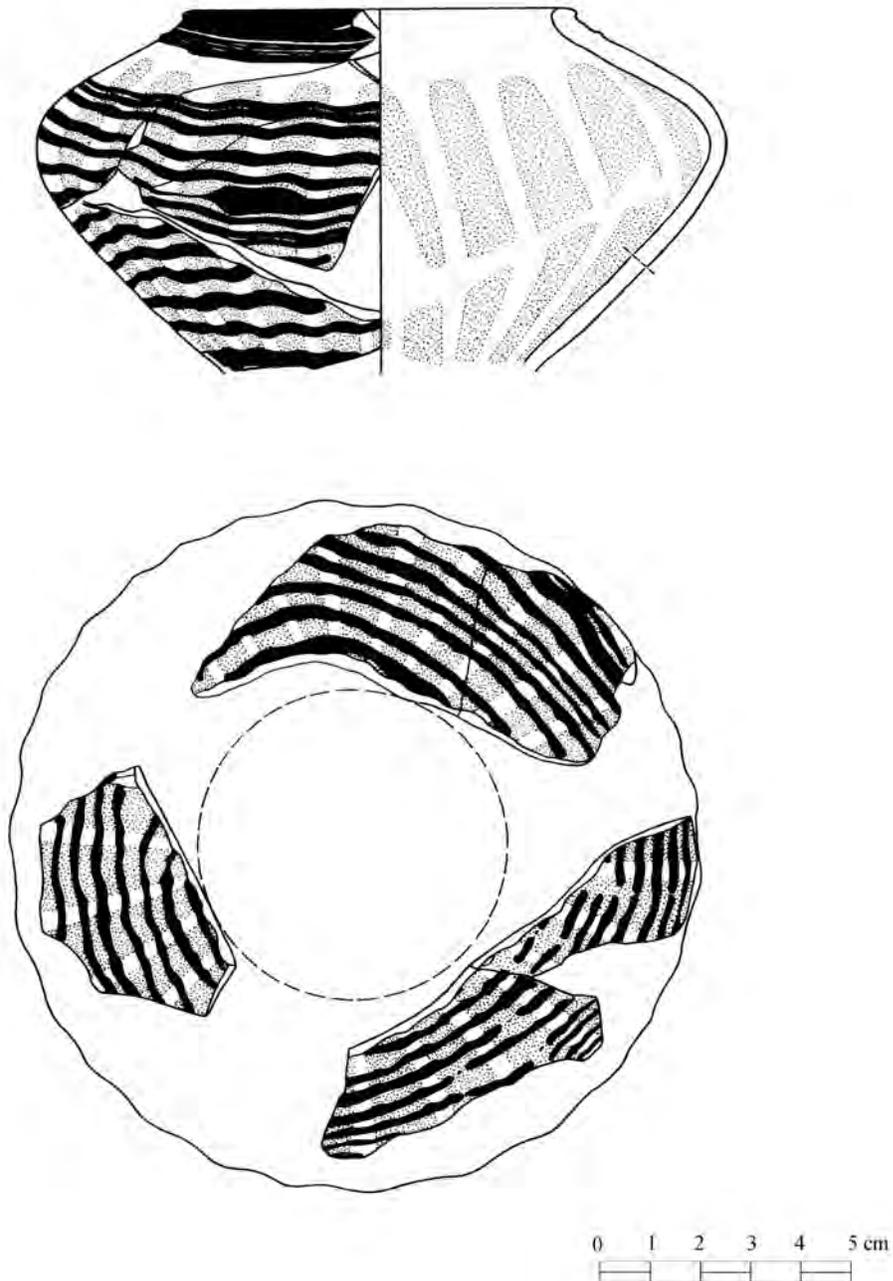


Fig. 6. A fourteenth-century marvered glass bowl



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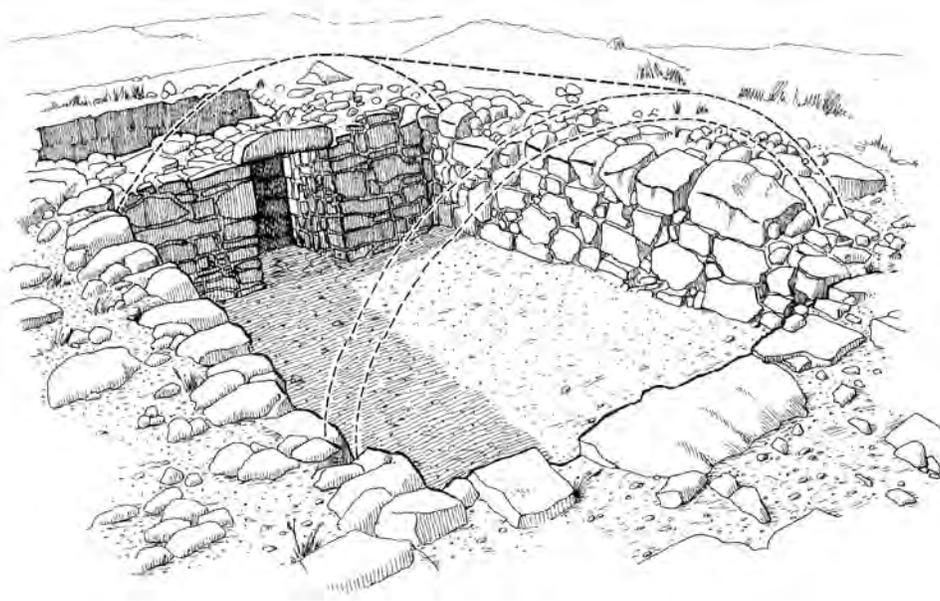


Fig. 7. A reconstruction drawing of one of the barrel-vaulted houses



Fig. 8. *Rawiyat* in a nineteenth-century house



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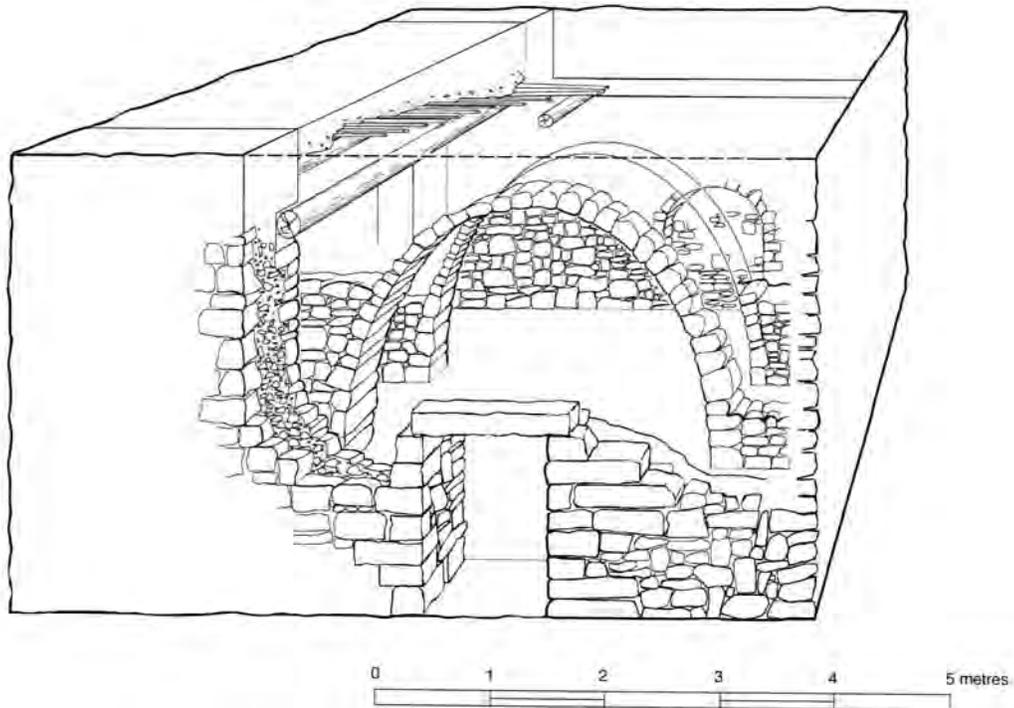


Fig. 9. A reconstruction drawing of a "Transverse-Arch House"



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