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EARLY ISLAMIC MODELS OF URBAN AND RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN THE SOUTH BILĀD AL-SHĀM

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This contribute aims at an integration between archaeological remains (artefacts and features) and historical sources to shed new light on the settlement system in the southern area of the Syrian-Palestinian region at the beginning of the Islamic period. The intense occupation of the area demonstrates a strong urban and rural organization and also highlights the importance of Ayla as a commercial gateway (junction) to the Red Sea.

Keywords: Early Islamic settlements; Ayla; Jordan; Red Sea; maritime trade

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies on the nature of the settlements of the Early Islamic period in the southern area of Bilād al-Shām have mostly focused on the growth of the settlements over time rather than on developing a model to explain how the rural communities were linked to the urbanization of the area.

The settlements analysed here are Ayla, Ḥumayma and the various sites of the Karak plateau (especially Ṣuḡhar and Shuḡayra), which is the area covered by the narrow strip of territory between the eastern shore of the Dead Sea and the steppic area bordering the Syrian-Arabian desert, now divided into Jordan, Israel and Palestine. From a topographical point of view this area (also known as the Wādī 'Araba) is divided into a southern and a northern region by the canyon of the Wādī Mūjib, whose source is close to the Roman military camp of Lajjūn, or Legio. Other important water courses are the Wādī Hasa, which delimits the southern boundary; the Wādī Wālā, an eastern tributary of the Mūjib; the Wādī Zarqā Ma'in and, on the southern edge facing the coast, the Wādī Karak and Wadi Numeīra.

The majority of the settlements excavated in this area show similar settlement and layout models. The first topographical map of the region was made by Alois Musil.¹ Further important information has come from investigations at numerous sites, even if only some of the results have been published as monographs. We can mention the archaeological investigations by B. McDonald, A.M. Smith II, M. Stevens and T.M. Niemi, by U. Avner and J. Magness and, finally, by S.T. Parker, published from the 1980s on,² as well as the

¹ Musil 1934.

² McDonald 1980; Smith - Stevens - Niemi 1997; Avner - Magness 1998; Parker 2006.

excavations carried out in the town of Ḥumayma,³ on the Karak plateau,⁴ and at Ayla and its surrounding area⁵ (fig. 1).

Thanks to the progress made by recent studies and in particular the excavations carried out by the Universities of Chicago and Copenhagen at Ayla, by the University of Victoria at Ḥumayma and by the University of Mu'ta (Jordan) on the Karak plateau, we have a substantially more complete picture of the urban and rural settlements across a significant part of this area.

1. AYLĀ

The urban settlement dating from the Islamic period was discovered in 1985 by Donald Whitcomb of the Oriental Institute of Chicago University; between 1986 and 1995 the town underwent excavations which allowed clarifying the extent of the Early Islamic occupation⁶ (fig 2a). Whitcomb dated the foundations of the town walls to 650 CE, under the caliphate of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān.⁷ In 2000 S.T. Parker carried out some excavations close to the walls of the residential area to find its foundations and possible stratigraphic contexts, and he confirmed that their first phase dated to the 7th century.⁸

A co-operation between the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the University of Copenhagen and the University of Chicago has led to renewed study and research into the Islamic Red Sea port by the Aylah Archaeological Project (AAP), which began this work in 2011 and brought to light five rooms (IM 1-5) in the south-west quadrant of the site (fig. 2b).⁹

The initial phase of the Islamic conquest was made more effective by two institutional processes: the take-over of local communities by legal settlements (*sulḥ*) and the

³ Oleson 2003; 2010.

⁴ Brown 1991; Walmsley - Karsgaard - Grey 1999.

⁵ The results have been published in articles and reports. For Ayla's history and excavations see Whitcomb 2000; 2006a; 2006b; 2009; 2010; Parker 2003; 2009 (fig. 3b); de Meulemeester - Pringle 2006; Damgaard 2013a; Damgaard - Jennings 2013.

⁶ Many articles on the results of the excavations have been published, for the most recent see Whitcomb 2006a; 2007; 2009.

⁷ As for the date of the settlement and the archaeological evidences of the urban area that go back to the Umayyad period, see Whitcomb 1989; see also Walmsley 2007, 95. Knauf and Brooker suggested (1988) that the walls of the Islamic city actually correspond to the perimeter of the Roman legionary *castrum* of the *Legio X Fretensis*, and that they were reutilised at a later stage; Whitcomb rejected this reading (1990). Later on, even P. Wheatley (2001, 290) wrote about the relationship between the first stage of the urban area and the legionary *castrum*, based on the similarity with the Roman installations built after the reign of Diocletian.

⁸ Parker 2002, 421.

⁹ The excavations opened a diagnostic unit of 10 × 10 m in the south-west quadrant of the town and another one of 5 × 2 m along the outer part of the walls flanking the Egypt Gate (Damgaard - Jennings 2013). The two areas excavated by the Danish mission focused both on the nature and the function of the south-west quadrant of the urban area – particularly on the relationship with the structures excavated by Whitcomb outside the southern walls – and on the regular layout set up in the first building phase, in order to verify if such a layout was respected during the later phases.

establishment of effective military garrisons (*amṣār*) in the most important strategic locations, often near already existing towns.¹⁰

Ayla (and the nearby Byzantine town of Ailana) is a typical example of a garrison town or *miṣr* in this region. It was planned and laid out following an orthogonal street plan, including four main gates linked by two principal axes, with a tetrapylon most likely set at the intersection of the latter. The principles of symmetry and axiality, which formed the basis for the development of this first urban settlement, suggest a return to the bank of knowledge inherited from the Romano-Byzantine world. In successive development phases, this plan was partly abandoned in favour of one which seemed to base itself more on a continual transformation of the urban layout.

In the second half of the 8th century, the settlement of Ayla was significantly rebuilt following the earthquake of 748/49 CE and the contemporaneous Abbasid revolution. The congregational mosque and a new *sūq* were built, the latter located on the outer side of the southern wall facing the beach.¹¹ The pottery from this phase, both glazed and unglazed, suggests new trading links with Iraq, Iran and Egypt.¹² The building work suggested a marked increase in both the economy and the population.¹³ However it also seems significant that the works were mostly carried out along the guidelines laid down by the original plan. In the southern and western sectors, buildings grew up on the outer sides of the town walls. Some of them had doors opening into the towers along the city walls, completely nullifying their military function.

¹⁰ This stage of the Islamic conquest had rather considerable consequences on the territory: rural fields were strengthened and a large part of the income from the North African and Oriental conquests was used for a territorial occupation resulting in an important boost to the economy by stimulating the local demand for goods and services (Bacharach 1996, 35-36; Petersen 2005; Schick 1998, 76). According to Kennedy (1992, 294; 2001, 187-190; 2008, 93) such economic and social growth depends on the fact that in the Bilād al-Shām a large part of the new elites owned urban or out-of-town properties, while in Iraq and Egypt the Muslim town settlers depended directly on the state. Only when the Umayyad dynasty was fully established was a programmatic policy of the territorial organization of the country attempted; when the capital was moved to Damascus the town became the fulcrum of the caliphate. Under the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik the administrative system and the bureaucracy (*dīwān*) were strongly centralized and reorganized from the inside. The grid plan, which was already efficient during the Roman and Byzantine age, was resumed through the *barīd*, a system connecting the main centres of the region. The *barīd* organization was very similar to that of the Roman *stationes* (Hawting 2000, 86-87); the milestones of 'Abd al-Malik constitute archaeological evidence of this fact (see Sharon 1966; Elad 1999). It is useful to stress the economic and social importance of the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca by people coming from a large part of the Islamic world (Damgaard 2009, 92). During this century a crucial role was also played by the *mawālī*, who occupied important positions as bureaucrats, notables, but also land-owners and farmers. Administrative responsibilities were delegated to half tribal confederations under the authority of the provincial government (Northedge 1992, 51; Schick 1997, 76; Hawting 2000, 35; Walmsley 2000, 327).

¹¹ The plan of the mosque shares some features with coeval sites such as Sīrāf (Iran), Banbhore (Sind) and Bilād in the southern part of present-day Oman (Whitcomb 1995, 62).

¹² Ghawanmeh 1992, 55; Whitcomb 1994b.

¹³ This tendency is also confirmed by Thomas Parker's discovery of Umayyad and Abbasid buildings during the works for the *Roman Aqaba Project*; these structures included housing units in the areas A, K and L, situated outside the walls, in the south and north-west areas (Parker 2009).

This pattern of occupation beyond the walls confirms that the northern part of the town extended into the areas around and included houses, shops and streets (at present a large part of the western side of the suburb is occupied by Hotel Mövenpick). Two large pottery kilns, whose original phase can be dated to the 5th century CE, are located only a short distance from the walls of Ayla and were used for the production of the typical Aqaba Amphora between the 7th and 9th centuries.¹⁴

At the beginning of the 9th century there was a revolt in Ayla against the *kharāj*, a sort of property tax, usually levied on non-Muslims. The sources suggest that under the Abbasid caliphate this region was ruled harshly and punitive taxation was frequently levied.¹⁵

Between the 9th and 10th centuries Ayla and Ailana became one town.

The southern part of the district, which currently contains a fort dating from the Mameluke era, includes levels and structures dating to the 8th century, which were in use until the 11th century. These consist of underground water channels linked by wells and embankments which formed a sort of agricultural terracing system.¹⁶ This finding makes it possible to hypothesize a peripheral settlement to the south involved in agricultural production, with a system for the storage and distribution of water. In the valleys surrounding Ayla to the north and west, investigations revealed that the whole area was extensively used for a variety of productive processes (fig. 3a).¹⁷ It is important to recall the discovery of Early Islamic pottery at the site of Jabāl Umm Nūsāila, which was also a centre of agricultural production, halfway between Ayla and Ma'an, with a water storage system suitable for an area of approximately 500 × 250 metres. The entire area was not intended for agriculture alone, as pits for glass grinding and a copper mine have been discovered, which suggest that the area was involved in the working of raw and semi-processed materials.¹⁸

Evidence was found from the late 8th century of the expansion of methods of production, transport and trade and a major reorganisation and reorientation of the trade routes, which also affected part of the urban landscape.

¹⁴ Melkawi - Khairieh - Whitcomb 1994. This type of amphora was discovered in Berenike and Axum, and during an underwater excavation of a wreck off the Eritrean coast (Wilding 1989; Hayes 1996; Pedersen 2000). Damgaard reconstructed part of the commercial landscape of the late 8th century in the Red Sea through an archaeometric study of the *corpus* of 'Aqaba pottery, discovered in the Yemeni site of Zafār (Damgaard 2013b).

¹⁵ The revolt was headed by Abū 'l-Nidā and was promptly suppressed by the troops of caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd. It has been hinted that there were two other revolts under caliph al-Wāthiq (Gil 1997, 292-295; Kennedy 2004, 149-154).

¹⁶ de Meulemeester - Pringle 2004; 2005; 2006.

¹⁷ The data that emerged in the Nineties following surveys of the southern zone of the Negev desert and Wādī 'Araba, respectively made by A.M. Smith II, M. Stevens and T.M. Niemi (1997) (fig. 3c), and U. Avner and J. Magness (1998) are essential for understanding Ayla's hinterland. These rural settlements used a sophisticated system of irrigation, also characterized by the introduction of new crops and industrial activities linked to copper and gold mines, and even quarries.

¹⁸ Avner - Magness 1998, 47.

This continuity of occupation from the Byzantine through to the Islamic era is typical of other areas in the southern part of modern Jordan, such as Ḥumayma and the settlements of the Karak plateau.

2. ḤUMAYMA

The archaeological site of Ḥumayma (an Arabic diminutive of *ḥumma*, “white”) is located about 75 km north of Ayla, exactly halfway between the modern ‘Aqaba and Ma‘an. Known as Avara in classical sources, it was one of the major centres in the area during the Nabatean and Roman periods. The most recent researches have been conducted by John Peter Oleson from the University of Victoria, Canada.¹⁹ He has found evidence for continual occupation up to the 11th century.²⁰ During the Roman period the town maintained its importance due to its position along the *Via Traiana Nova*. The foundation of the city has been dated to the reign of the Nabatean King Haretha III and the city played an important part in the trade of the Nabatean state.²¹

The *castrum*, built on a rectangular plan, measures 208 × 148 m and has a 3 metre-thick curtain wall with 24 projecting towers, all internally accessible (fig. 4b). In comparison with the other Roman *castra* of Udruh and Lajjūn,²² it is the closest to the town of Ayla. All these settlements share a very similar layout since they follow the same model of symmetry and axiality and their walls have semi-elliptical projecting towers, apart from the square towers of Ḥumayma.

At the end of the 7th century the Abbasid family, who boasted of direct descent from the Prophet Muḥammad through Hāshim, appeared on the Syrian-Palestinian scene acquiring land tenure around Ḥumayma.²³ According to tradition, the caliph ‘Abd al-Malik advised a member of the Quraysh clan, ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, a paternal uncle of the Prophet, to move to the region of al-Balqā’ because of its position between Damascus and Ḥijāz. In 687 that son of the merchant from Mecca decided to take his family to live in Ḥumayma, where he built a *qaṣr* and a mosque to the south of the

¹⁹ Oleson 2003; Savane - Zamora - Keller 2003.

²⁰ In the mid-Eighties, John Eadie found sherds of Umayyad pottery by exploring the area around Ḥumayma (Eadie 1984, 220). Similar findings were also made at a later stage, during the works of Clark’s Limes Desert Survey (Clark 1987, 128-135), confirming a different pottery horizon for southern Jordan (Whitcomb 2000).

²¹ Fakhiry 2003.

²² An occupation phase during the Islamic period is attested in Lajjūn, precisely in the north quadrant of the urban area, showing rectangular rooms around a central courtyard. Among them an Early Islamic building has a square plan of 18 m per side, formed by a rectangular courtyard with eight rooms all around, that was subsequently transformed into a caravanserai (de Meulemeester 2000, 196-197).

²³ The sources state that ‘Abd Allāh b. al-‘Abbās ordered the family to move so as to secure a more direct contact with the centre of Umayyad power. Moreover the Abbasid family was kin to Abū Hāshim, the son of Muḥammad ibn al-Hanafīyya, who participated in the second civil war organized by Mukhtar (Hawting 2000, 132-133). The main Arab sources on Ḥumayma are: the 10th century anonymous author of the *Akḥbār al-Dawlah al-‘Abbāsiyya* (1971); al-Balādhurī (1978); al-Ṭabarī (1879-1901); al-Ya‘qūbī (1892); Salah - Azzawi (1997, 356).

Byzantine settlement and built up a network of clients among the local population.²⁴ al-Muṭṭalib welcomed in the *qaṣr* pilgrims heading for Mecca and Medina and built around his palace a series of gardens or orchards containing 500 trees, under which daily prayers would be said.²⁵ This, along with Kūfa and the Khurāsān, was one of the sites where they planned the revolution that brought down the Umayyad dynasty.

Ya‘qūbī identified it as a place frequented and populated by the client groups of Banū Hashīm, i.e. the Abbasids.²⁶ al-Baladhūrī asserted that everyone travelling down from Syria to the Ḥijāz Province, or back, had to pass through Ḥumayma and would be very tempted to stay there awhile.²⁷ The sources provide us with quite a good picture of the ruling class at Ḥumayma, but tell us little or nothing about the town. Oleson’s excavations brought to light numerous structures, including domestic buildings from the Nabatean and Roman periods, a *castrum* and a bathhouse from the Roman era, five Byzantine churches (one of which, a monoapsidal church built on top of a Nabatean necropolis, was turned into a residential complex in the Early Islamic period) and an aqueduct, 26.05 km long, which was fed by three natural springs from Rās al-Naqāb, carrying water to an open cistern positioned at the southern end of the *castrum*.²⁸

It is quite likely that the arrival of the Abbasid family in Ḥumayma led to the growth of the population, detectable by an increase in the number of houses built around the Roman fort containing pottery dating to this Early Islamic period.²⁹

Building F103 (the *qaṣr*), in the south-east part of the urban area, has been identified as the residence of the Abbasid family, dating to the middle of the 8th century.³⁰ This building has a rectangular plan (61 × 50 m) with a series of rooms surrounding a central courtyard. The *qaṣr* was constructed on an earlier structure, detectable only by a series of dividing walls in the northern area (fig. 4c). The entrance, about 21 m wide, is on the east side. From there one entered the courtyard, which had a portico along the east side. A *dirham*, struck in 115 H/733-34 by al-Wāsiṭ, was found at the entrance to the *qaṣr* and is evidence of the movement of people who were, according to the sources, present in the town just before the

²⁴ ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the son of a rich merchant who during the first years of Islam protected Muḥammad while he was in Mecca, had about 22 sons; one of them, Muḥammad Ibn ‘Alī Ibn ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Abbās, was one of the founders of the Abbasid party during the revolt against the Umayyad caliphate in 750. In fact in 749 the Abbasid family abandoned the town and moved to Kūfa, the first seat of the new caliphate. The first two caliphs of this dynasty, Abū ‘l-‘Abbās al-Saffāḥ and Abū Ja‘far ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Manṣūr, were both born in Ḥumayma (see Lapidus 2002, 54 ff.).

²⁵ *Akḥbār al-Dawlah al-‘Abbāsiyya* 1971, 154; Salah - Azzawi 1997, 355.

²⁶ al-Ya‘qūbī 1892, 326.

²⁷ al-Baladhūrī 1978, 53-55.

²⁸ The construction of an efficient system of aqueducts and cisterns (a total of 11) should be attributed to the Nabateans. The main course of the aqueduct, 18.9 km long, connected the spring of ‘Ayn al-Qana (1425 m a.s.l.) to the main water reservoir of the town (995 m a.s.l.). A secondary branch (7.6 km) maintained the water supply from the springs of ‘Ayn al-Shara and ‘Ayn al-Jamām. This supply was partially enlarged under Roman dominion, with the creation of a new cistern, presumably to supply the fort built there (Eadie - Oleson 1986).

²⁹ Schick 2007, 352.

³⁰ Oleson 2003, 55-56.

Abbasid revolution. The *qaṣr* still remained in use after the second half of the 8th century and more building took place there in Ottoman times.³¹

The central room of the western portico is worthy of note.³² Its impressive appearance led to the belief that this was the place where ‘Abdullāh bin al-‘Abbās greeted the members of the Abbasid family. A passage of the *Akhbār al-Dawla al-‘Abbāsiyya* describes this building: when Bukayr bin Māhān paid his first visit to Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, he entered a wide open area or courtyard (*rahbah*) around which the apartments (*manzil*) of the family members were gathered. Building F103 continued to be used subsequently, even though the town was gradually being depopulated.

Two mosques are situated to the south-east of the *qaṣr* and they are among the smallest mosques of the Early Islamic period in Bilād al-Shām. One was built on a square plan (5.75 × 5.60 m) and, according to pottery fragments, dated to the 8th century. The entrance is on the north; inside the space is divided by a transversal arch and the prayer hall is flanked by two washing rooms. On the *qiblī* wall is a semi-elliptical *miḥrāb*. The very limited space for the prayer hall suggests that it may have been for private use, reserved for the adult males of the Abbasid family.³³ South-west from the *qiblī* wall another rectangular room identified as belonging to the second mosque was added at a later date and its *miḥrāb* is semi-elliptical too. No other remains of mosques have been identified at Ḥumayma, which might suggest that the town had few Muslim inhabitants apart from the Abbasid family.³⁴

Building F102 was identified as a church built during the second half of the 7th century.³⁵

This site was continuously occupied even after the Abbasid revolution, when the family had finally moved away to Iraq. However, the number of occupied dwellings fell and some were already abandoned by the end of the 8th century. Al-Ya‘qūbī and Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī record Ḥumayma in their lists mainly for being occupied by the Abbasid family.³⁶ It is worth noting that the Abbasid family completely forgot Ḥumayma after gaining power; no building work of any significance took place there after the middle of the 8th century. Al-Harawī (first half of the 13th century), described it as “a village where Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās once lived [...]”.³⁷

³¹ Oleson 2003, 55-60.

³² Fragments of an ivory panel portraying the profile of a soldier from the Abbasid period were found there. This object may have belonged to someone from these regions who was in contact with the Abbasid family (Oleson 2001, 578). On the basis of a stylistic analysis Rebecca M. Foote suggested the artefact was of eastern origin, probably Iran or Central Asia (Foote 2007, 461-463). Parallels can be found with the ivory panels discovered in Ayla (see Whitcomb 1994a, 28-30).

³³ Oleson 2003, 56.

³⁴ *Ibidem*. Schick (1995) states that Christians were granted privileged status during the Abbasid occupation of the town.

³⁵ Churches remained intact even though some of them were used as houses during the Umayyad period. There is no evidence that these Byzantine buildings were used as mosques (‘Amr - Schick 2001).

³⁶ al-Ya‘qūbī 1892, 114; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī 1866-1873, II, 342-343.

³⁷ al-Harawī 1953, 17.

3. KARAK PLATEAU

The Karak plateau is situated at the southern tip of the Transjordan plateau, in the central area of Jordan, to the south of the Dead Sea at an elevation of c. 900 m above sea level. The region is bordered on the west by the Ghawr plain and to the north by the Yarmuk River.

Investigations carried out by the Karak Resources Project Survey team identified a continuous occupation of the region dating from the Palaeolithic up to the modern era.³⁸ A pattern of small and medium-sized settlements has been attributed to the Islamic period, probably because the fertility of the soil and sufficient rainfall have permitted the cultivation of various cereals and olives since ancient times.³⁹ In the 12th century William of Tyre confirmed the fertility and prosperity of this area based on agricultural production.⁴⁰

In the Islamic period it was a district of the *jūnd Dimashq*, called *al-Sharāt*,⁴¹ including a number of smaller settlements. We mention two examples, Şughar and Shuqayra, the latter in particular offering a more detailed archaeological portrait than other sites on the plateau.

Şughar is a town situated on the southern shores of the Dead Sea. The Arab geographer Dimashqī (d. ca 1327) included it in his list of towns of the Ghawr region and noted that the entire area around the settlement was similar to Iraq due to the abundance of water and land under cultivation.⁴² Even Muqaddasī described it as a town of wide-ranging economic activity and compares it to a small Boşrā.⁴³ The settlement is mostly known from sources, as only the archaeological investigations of the early 2000s found evidence of either buildings with foundations connected to pottery sherds of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, or of an agricultural complex at Khirbat al-Shaykh ʿĪsā.⁴⁴ Nothing more can be said about the town complex without a more substantial excavation, but given its importance, as attested by the sources, it is probable that during the 7th and 8th centuries Şughar was a northern “trading rival” to Ayla.

Shuqayra is close to Khirbat al-Qusba, about 15 km to the south-east of Muʿta on the Karak plateau. In the first half of the 10th century Musil and N. Glueck identified some

³⁸ Brown 1991; Walmsley - Karsgaard - Grey 1999.

³⁹ The rainfall reaches an average of 300 mm per year, while it is much less on the shores of the Dead Sea and in the Jordan Valley, where it rarely exceeds 100 mm. Another important meteorological phenomenon is the *sharqīya*, the hot wind from the East that blows for few days but at regular intervals. The production of cereals, olives and legumes, especially lentils and chickpeas, requires a precise quantity of rainfall of 300 mm. In the period in which the Arab-Muslims settled, the region held a particular record in the production of sugar cane (Benedettucci 2011; Milwright 2008, 9).

⁴⁰ Willelmi Tyrensis 1976, 506-507.

⁴¹ The capital of this district is often identified with Udrūh, and at other times with Şughar or Ayla (Johns 1995, 10-11).

⁴² Al-Dimashqī 1866, 211.

⁴³ In the Geniza documents Şughar is described as a market station between the Syrian-Palestinian area and India (Amar 1998, 5).

⁴⁴ Jones *et al.* 2000.

ruins in the area of Khirbat al-Qusba⁴⁵ and a later survey carried out by M. Miller revealed some pottery fragments datable to the Early Islamic period.⁴⁶ The name Shuqayra comes from the Arabic “little blonde girl”, referring to the yellow-red colouring of the soil.

More information about the Islamic settlement came from the excavations led by the University of Mu'ta, which started in 2002. During six seasons of digging, over four different areas of the site, traces were found of a wide building constructed from blocks of squared-off limestone (fig. 4d).⁴⁷ Its plan shows similarities with the vestibule of the Umayyad castle of Khirbat al-Minya.⁴⁸ In 2006 a trench uncovered the foundations of the vestibule, allowing the first building installation to be dated to the Umayyad period. The complete chronology of the building has been established on the pottery evidence, which shows at least three different phases: a first “Nabatean” phase, from the 1st century CE; a second “Umayyad-Abbasid” phase (8th century); a third “Ayyubid-Mameluke-Ottoman” phase from the 12th to the 16th century. The second phase is the most represented with around 80% of the discovered fragments.⁴⁹ A doorway 1.8 m wide opened onto the vestibule, a rectangular area (8.40 × 4.50 m) leading to a paved courtyard. There were nine rectangular rooms to the north and south of the doorway, on the east side. The southern side of the courtyard provided access to a sort of corridor which probably had a hypostyle roof, inferred from the discovery of three column bases. Even further to the south is Building C, which had a large rectangular room paved by a mosaic with geometric and floral motifs. This is the first mosaic found on the Karak plateau, extending over more than 160 m² and dating to the Early Islamic period. It may have been the audience hall of the whole complex.⁵⁰

The entire settlement had a complex water supply involving underground channels and a cistern some 250 m away.⁵¹

Evidence has been found on this plateau of residential settlements from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods at al-Lisān and Ma'ān, to the east of the Dead Sea, south of the Wādī Mūjib.⁵² The same type of settlement has been found at Khirbat Abū Suwwāna and 'Ayn 'Aneva to the west of the Dead Sea.⁵³ They all feature more or less rectangular rooms surrounding a courtyard, with walls mostly of local stone. The spatial organization of these villages reveals a typical construction method used in settlements and farms that grew up in

⁴⁵ Glueck 1939, 63.

⁴⁶ Miller 1991, 161.

⁴⁷ Shdaifat - Tatwne - Ben Badhann 2006; Shdaifat - Ben Badhann 2008.

⁴⁸ Creswell - Allan 1989, 92-97.

⁴⁹ These three phases correspond to the stratigraphic sequence recognized in the site; unfortunately, from an architectural perspective, no absolute chronological sequence has been ascertained. The discovery of an Umayyad coin and an *ostrakon* with a Kufic inscription is attributed to the second phase (Shdaifat - Tatwne - Ben Badhann 2006; Shdaifat - Ben Badhann 2008, 187-188).

⁵⁰ Shdaifat - Ben Badhann 2008, 186.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Discovered by King in the early Eighties (King 1985, 41-45).

⁵³ Found during Jodi Magness's surveys west of Jerusalem in 1991 (Magness 2003, 11-23; see also Genequand 2006).

the Umayyad period following the settlement of nomadic tribes and the new exploitation of the land for agricultural production.⁵⁴

4. CONCLUSIONS

As far as Ayla is concerned, it is possible to observe that in addition to rural expansion the 8th century saw the growth of towns and changes to their layouts. The way the space was organized suggests that a much larger area was involved than just that enclosed by the perimeter walls. Ayla continued to be the fulcrum of the entire southern region, in both commercial and administrative terms (fig. 4a).

Thus between the 7th and 8th centuries over the whole area it was possible to find occupied land and the subsequent development of agricultural production which, combined with trade, formed the backbone of the economic activities of a population spread out across the territories between the towns discussed. The arrangement of the towns and the countryside was not disrupted by the Islamic conquest which, nonetheless, defined a new urban and rural relationship already in transition. This introduced a new settlement model, characterized by close interaction between town and countryside; towns thus acted as trade centres for local products.⁵⁵

The towns were linked by these “farms/producers” in a network of settlements including a major part of the Wādī ‘Araba and the Negev desert and the urban realities of the Karak plateau.⁵⁶

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⁵⁴ Magness 2003, 23.

⁵⁵ The economic relationship between the inhabitants of the Gulf coast and the northern hinterland is crucial to understand the system of settlements that arose during the Islamic period.

⁵⁶ Other surveys around the Ḥumayma area would be necessary to verify the presence of agricultural systems from an Early Islamic period similar to those of other areas of the territory (Avner - Magness 1998, 39). The role played by the capital of *jūnd*, al-Ramla, is still not clear.

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Antonio Carfi

VO

AL-YA'QŪBĪ

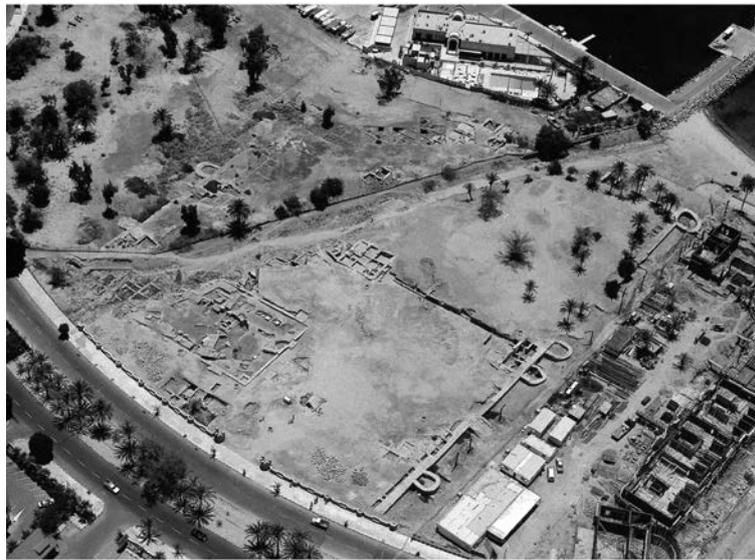
1892 *Kitāb al-buldān*, transl. M. J. DE GOEJE, Leiden 1892.

YĀQŪT AL-ĤAMAWĪ

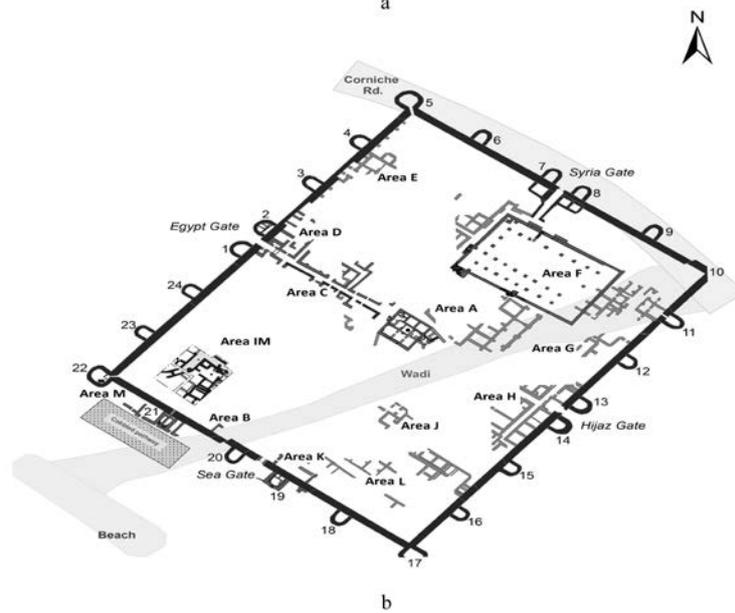
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Fig. 1 - Map of the Early Islamic Bilād al-Shām (after Kennedy 2002, fig. 1).



a



b

Fig. 2 - a. Early Islamic Ayla excavations, panorama looking south east (after Kennedy - Bewly 2004, fig. 12.8A). b. Early Islamic Ayla, GIS-based plan (after Damgaard 2011, fig. 2).

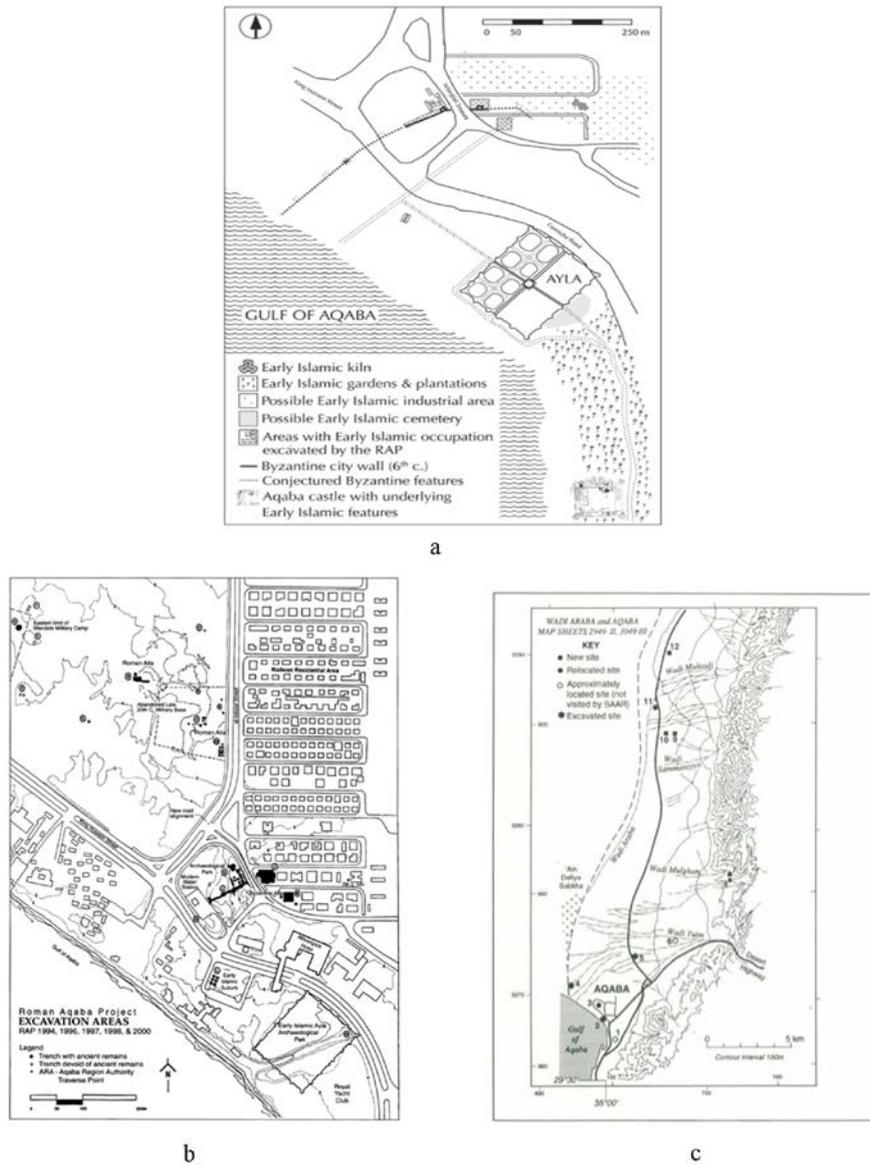


Fig. 3 - a. Graphic reconstruction of Ayla and its suburbs (after Damgaard 2009, fig. 10.2); b. Plan of the excavation areas of the Roman Aqaba Project from 1994 to 2000 (after Retzleff 2003, fig. 1); c. Map of 1994 surveys in the Wadi 'Araba (after Smith - Niemi 1994, fig. 2).

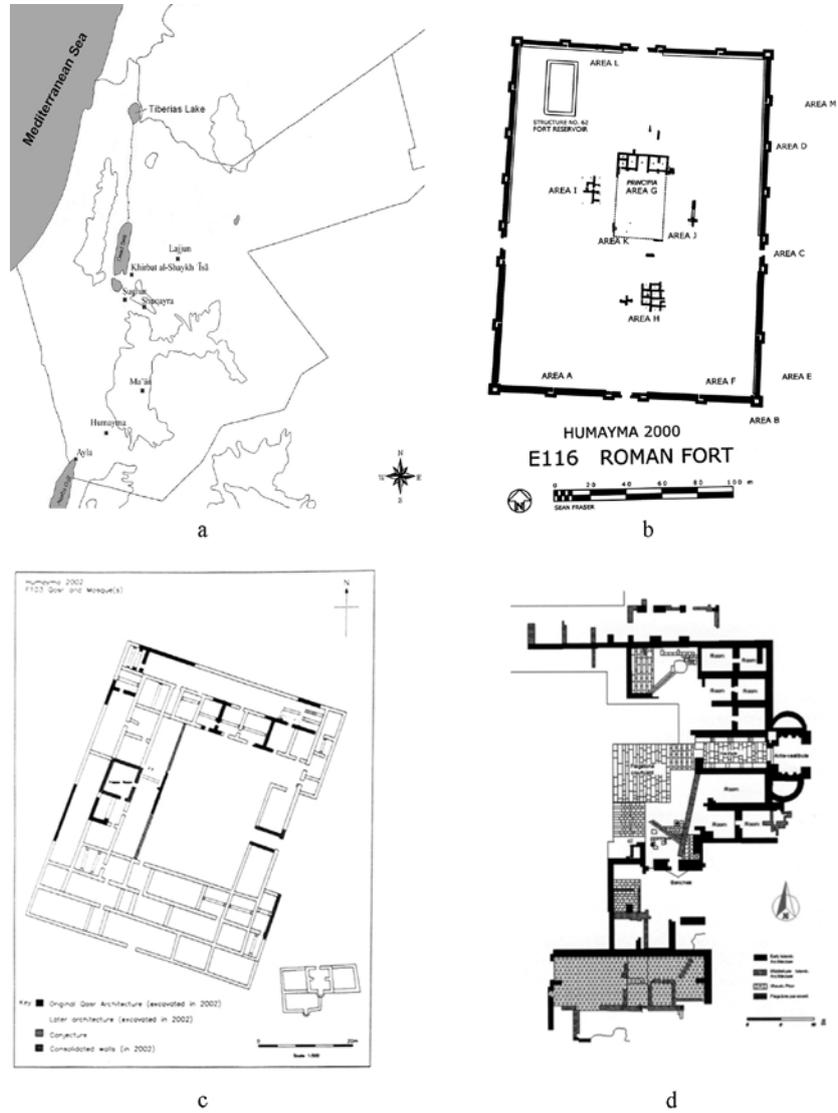


Fig. 4 - a. Early Islamic settlements here mentioned on GIS base Map: Stamen Toner/OSM; b. Ḥumayma *castrum* plan (after Oleson 2003, fig. 2); c. Ḥumayma, plan of the *qasr* and the Abbasid mosque of Ḥumayma (after Oleson 2001, fig. 8); d. Shuqayra, plan of the areas excavated by the University of Mu'ta (after Shdaifat - Ben Badhann 2008, fig. 1).