

The Ottoman Qasr at Hisban: Architecture, Reform, and New Social Relations

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Toward the end of the nineteenth century, merchants from Palestine settled in Transjordan. Many were taking advantage of new land-tenure policies implemented by the Ottoman state that were designed to create private landholdings, encourage market-based agricultural production, increase the state's tax base, and help in the state's modernization efforts. In the process, some of the new settlers consolidated their resources and capital, established large farmsteads, and became important merchants and local notables. At the same time, the construction of large farmsteads by these new "pioneers" changed the lives of the tribal groups and peasant *fellahin* already living in the area.

Located just southwest of Tall Hisban in Jordan lies a complex of farm buildings dating to the late Ottoman period. Known as the "Qasr" or "Bayt Nabulsi" (the Nabulsi House) in the Village of Hisban, this complex is but one example of late-nineteenth century farmsteads that can be found throughout the Jordan countryside. Its position above the surrounding valleys and commanding views of its environs helped transform the built landscape of Hisban during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. More importantly, the Qasr represents a period of major social and economic change in Transjordan, and provides evidence of a changing way of life for the people who lived in this frontier region of the Ottoman Empire.

One way to understand the relationship between the Ottoman state and its subjects is to examine how local landscapes change when new state policies are implemented. Landscapes and architecture are the physical stages on which life is played out. The way that these spaces are used

on a daily basis can illustrate how people organize their lives and societies. As a result, the landscapes and architectural composition of late-nineteenth century farmhouses like the Qasr at Hisban provide evidence for the changing political economy of the late Ottoman period in Transjordan (1516–1916) and its effects on the people living on this frontier.

Reform, Investment, and Crisis

During the nineteenth century, major economic and political transformations swept throughout the Ottoman Empire and its provinces. Beginning in 1839, the Ottoman state initiated the Tanzimat reforms, which established new rights for all Ottoman subjects. These included individual property rights, more equitable taxation, and new land-tenure policies. In 1858, land-tenure reforms required Ottoman subjects to register private landholdings with the state. Private landholding was intended to encourage investments, agricultural production, and a strong tax base for the Ottoman state.

Energized by new reforms and economic policies, the Ottoman state once again turned its interest to its Arab provinces. In Transjordan, it established a garrison at al-Salt, built the Hijaz railroad, settled immigrants in frontier regions, built roads, and established a functioning regional government.

Large farmsteads were being used as the model for profitable private landholdings in most of the empire, and the Ottoman state offered land grants to colonists and migrant populations in Transjordan. Tracts of pastureland—once used primarily for sheep and goats—were converted to farms (Rogan 1999: 89). The new emphasis on grain provided a degree of security to those involved in its production; during times of plenty it could be sold on the international markets, but when yields were low, prices rose and presented significant profits to local producers. Private landholdings became a



The Qasr, an Ottoman-period farmhouse in Jordan. View facing southwest. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.

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valuable commodity, providing its owners with substantial profits from produce as well as agricultural rents (Rogan 1994: 51). The potential for profit attracted entrepreneurs who saw agriculture and land acquisition as an economic venture. Merchant families west of the Jordan River in particular were drawn to the region by the prospect of acquiring agricultural land (Rogan 1992: 240). Faced with the competition for limited amounts of land, settlers and Bedouin alike registered land, thereby gaining state recognition of private ownership. Some local Bedouin registered lands in their names, but, not interested in agricultural pursuits themselves, made agreements with merchant-farmers who paid a proportion of the crop to the tribes in return for its use and protection (Lewis 1987: 129).

Ultimately, not all groups benefited from the Tanzimat policies. The new land-tenure system legalized private ownership of the land. In the process, access to and rights over land use were reshuffled and redistributed. Some new settlers secured areas previously used by Bedouin, whose traditional use was neither always recognized nor honored by the Ottoman state (Lewis 1987: 127–29). Many people also lost the right to use lands through cycles of credit and indebtedness. In an economy where liquid capital to pay for taxes and debt was scarce, some local tribal groups mortgaged their lands, usually to merchants or officials in al-Salt who were interested in mercantile endeavors and the profits brought from agricultural production.

The need for cash and capital created a crisis for many people in the region. For the previous two centuries, Jordan had an economy based predominantly on barter and semi-nomadic pastoralism. Until the Tanzimat reforms were introduced, most of the population had little use for cash. As rain-fed grain agriculture became the basis of the new economic system, there was a rise in demand for cash, since it was needed to purchase seeds, tools, draft animals, and other provisions necessary for settled life. In addition, new economic policies that emphasized taxation created a demand for hard currency to pay taxes (Abujaber 1989: 83–84).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, outside investors used this crisis as a new opportunity to extract profit from the local population through money lending (Abujaber 1989: 83–84). Merchants, investors, and moneylenders thus established a foothold in the local economy, through moneylending, land acquisition, and trade.

The collateral that moneylenders would accept varied, but agricultural products or land were most common. As Bedouin and *fellahin* fell into more debt, merchants and moneylenders were able to contract out their land to sharecroppers. Creditors were often patient with debtors; this is clear since some debts were not collected through the courts until they were years overdue. Although leniency may have allowed debtors to fall even more deeply into debt, it is more likely that the moneylenders would not have cared whether or not debts were paid on time as long as the flow of grain was uninterrupted (Rogan 1992: 248–54). When a debtor was unable to pay back the allotted amount, creditors would either collect by appropriating land, or claim rights over its use (Abujaber 1989: 83–85).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous new settlements began to appear between Amman and Kerak (Rogan 1999: 90). Merchants were able to extract a reliable and inexpensive source of grain on these plantation-like settlements. This practice proved to be very profitable and many families became quite wealthy. Several major farmstead settlements developed in the region surrounding al-Salt, including al-Yaduda, owned by the Abujaber family (Abujaber 1989), Umm al-Kundum of the Bisharats, al-Rajib of the Abu Quras, and Hisban of the Nabulsi family.

Records from some of the larger farmsteads like al-Yaduda still survive. However, there is limited information on the operations of small estate farms like the one at Hisban. Yet, the remnants of the buildings and farmsteads themselves, along with oral histories, still remain.

Ottoman Hisban

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the state considered the Hisban area to be farmland. Settlement was seasonal (Russell 1988: 30). Semi-nomadic tribes no doubt made use of the pre-Ottoman-period buildings and cisterns in the region, and a natural spring. The many caves around Hisban were also used for storage, shelter, and as animal pens (LaBianca 1990: 76; 2000: 210).

By the nineteenth century, Hisban was inhabited seasonally by two tribes, the Ajarma and the Adwan (Russell 1988: 31). Both tribes were semi-nomadic pastoralists, involved in limited cultivation of the land. Archaeologists have recently uncovered on the summit of Tall Hisban (located to the north of Bayt Nabulsi) evidence of temporary Ottoman-period use of the site for agriculture and animal husbandry, and a series of nineteenth century Adwan burials dating prior to 1876 (Walker 1999; Walker and LaBianca 2003).

Members of the Ajarma tribe registered Hisban and the surrounding region with the Ottoman state in 1881 (Lewis 1987: 127–28) in an attempt to secure official rights to use of the land. According to ethnohistorical sources, the farmstead was registered to a local strongman named Salman al-Barare. It is not clear whether the registration of land in al-Barare's name was due to his strength as strongman in the community, or if registration created new leadership through state legitimization. Reportedly, the Adwan did not complain when the Ajarma registered the land, since they wanted to form an alliance with the Ajarma that would allow them to stand against the larger and more powerful Beni Sahkr tribe (Conder 1892: 322; Russell 1988: 32).

Exactly how and when the Nabulsi family came to Hisban is still unclear. While in Nablus, the family became quite wealthy through soap production and property transactions. They were one of the richest families in the city by the nineteenth century (al-Nimr 1938: 87). When the east bank of the Jordan River became more secure for investment, members of the family saw an opportunity to diversify their income and assets. One branch of the Nabulsi family moved to al-Salt. Controlling considerable amounts of capital, they became merchants and moneylenders, and acquired money-lending contracts with local tribes (Kana'an 1993).

According to the Nabulsi family, Haj Mohammed al-Nabulsi “bought the land from Bedouin.” It appears that members of the Ajarma tribe, borrowing money from the Nabulsi family, gradually fell into debt (Russell 1988), and were obliged to sell the land at a low price. Al-Barare, the farmstead’s original owners, was pressured by his fellow tribesmen to sell his home to the Nabulsis. The Qasr remains in Nabulsi family control to this day. The farmstead is currently jointly owned by the third generation of the al-Salt Nabulsi family.

Once in control of the land, the Nabulsi family turned their attention to making a profit through agriculture (Ferch, Russell, and Vyhmeister 1989: 31–33). Needing seasonal workers, the Nabulsi hired the Ajarma to work the fields. Later, migrants from the Jordan valley and West Bank were added to the workforce. Members of the Nabulsi family came to Hisban during the summer months to make sure the harvest took place without incident. But for the most part, the Nabulsi family did not live in the farmstead throughout the year. Instead, they lived in their home in al-Salt. Local accounts confirm that the Nabulsis were only part-time residents. This was not uncommon, since other landlords in the region, such as the Abujaber family, also resided at their plantations only seasonally.

Hisban was run by the Nabulsis using the *muraba’a* system of labor (Abujaber 1989: 85–86, 274). Under this system, a workman received one fourth of the production divided by the number of pairs of oxen employed to till the land (Burkhardt 1822: 295). In some cases, the workmen would have been entitled to free room and board, and if they chose to live off the farmstead, they would have received some household provisions (*muna*). A workman who agreed to work for the landlord would almost always have agreed to stay for a complete year; this meant that he would have been present for ploughing and harvesting (Abujaber 1989: 85–89).

Harvest took place from mid-April through mid-August. This was the most important time of the year, as it required complete mobilization of the available workforce. There was always the possibility of a brush fire igniting the crops, or of locusts devouring a year’s work in a few days. Although security had improved, the Bedouin continued to pose a threat, carrying off whatever they could (Abujaber 1989: 54–55). However, the greatest source of concern for the farmers were the herds of animals brought into the cultivated regions in early May to feed, as they would have devoured grazing areas as well as crops (Rogers 1889: 177).

Architecture, the Built Environment, and New Social Relations

If the landscape is the stage on which social life is played out, changes in its organization provide evidence of new social relations over time. The construction and development of architecture at Hisban provides clues to understanding local power structures in this region, and illustrates how control over Hisban shifted during the late Ottoman period. While the reforms made by the Ottoman Administration opened the area

east of the Jordan River to investment, local-level changes such as building and maintaining the Qasr at Hisban provide details about how specific families such as the Nabulsis were able to gain and legitimize their control over this area.

Over the past 150 years, the landscape at Hisban has been transformed by changing settlement patterns in the region. Part-time farmers and semi-nomadic pastoralists went from living in tents, caves, or the abandoned ruins at Hisban to a daily life centered around a complex of buildings, stables, storage rooms, and workers quarters, similar to the more urban-style houses of towns, especially in Palestine. What was once a transhumant, seasonal use of the site was transformed into settled life by the construction of a plantation-like complex, which was relatively formal, with urban architectural elements. At the height of its use, it would have been both imposing and impressive, visible from the summit of the tell as well as the fields in the valley. The construction of the Bayt Nabulsi provides evidence of the profitable investments made by merchant-moneylenders in the fertile Balqa plains in the nineteenth century.

According to Nabulsi family history, the two-story farmhouse was built around 1850. The farmhouse went from being a single residence to the center of a substantial farm complex, whose function included storage of surplus agricultural goods. The Qasr complex, however, also included stables, private quarters, and smaller structures possibly used as domestic space for workers, complete with stables, storage rooms, living quarters, and perhaps even guest rooms. It is likely that much of the Qasr complex was pieced together in stages on the footprints of several earlier buildings, sometime between 1882 and 1890.

The largest building, on the eastern edge of the site, was a reused structure, and included the bases of two octagonal towers, and Umayyad or Roman arches, which predate the construction of the complex on this site. These buildings were used as stables, and occasional domestic space, and include concrete troughs, as well as an oven and grinding installations.

Just to the west is another large structure with a courtyard (which was bisected in the 1970s by the road that leads into the village of Hisban). This dome-vaulted structure, which abuts



Second story of the Qasr. When in use, the upper story contained at least three rooms with dome-vaulted ceilings and was accessed by an external staircase. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.

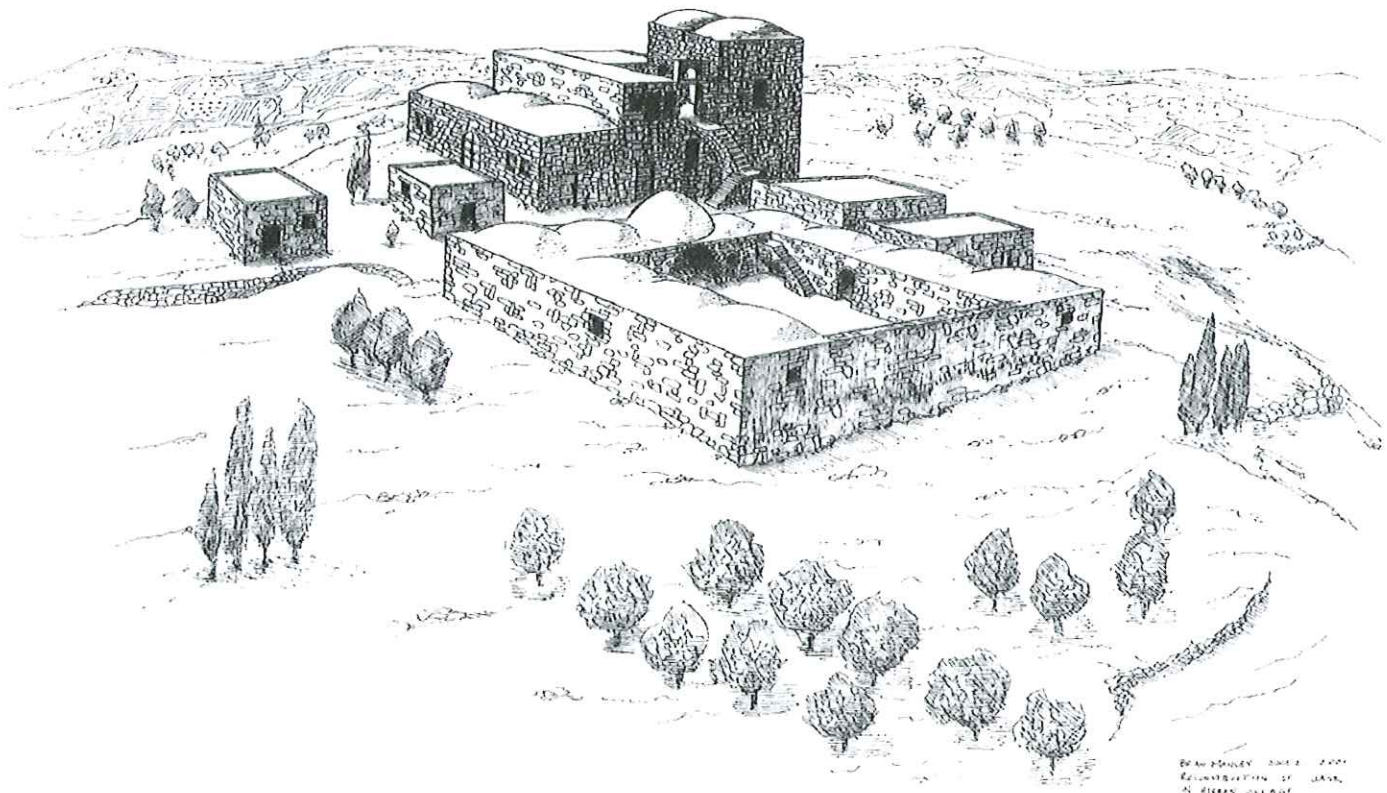
against a wall of the large eastern building, includes troughs along the wall, storage facilities, and a staircase, which leads to the roof of one of the buildings, offering views of the entire complex and the Wadi Majar. A smaller dome-vaulted building, and a series of non-descript single roomed buildings, all used primarily as domestic space, define the western edge of the complex overlooking the wadi. Finally, a series of single-story, one-room structures east of the main buildings (but not yet included on our site maps) were used as domestic space for workers.

Two caves located beneath the two-story Qasr also provide evidence of a new use of the landscape. An animal pen, located in the back of the cave, and nails for hanging torches provide evidence for the cave's use. A large structure was also built in the cave, and was probably used for storage. Interestingly, local oral history describes the caves and structure as a hiding spot used to avoid Ottoman tax collectors, and the only entrance into a large structure inside the cave was a hole located in the inside of the main storage room inside the Qasr.

While these buildings create the western, eastern, and northern boundaries for the Qasr complex, and the caves are located at the southern end, the most impressive building is the two-story farmhouse found in the south of the site. This structure, constructed predominantly of sandstone, includes building materials taken from nearby ruins. The inclusion of earlier architectural elements in several buildings indicates that the area was used prior to the late-nineteenth century. Although these buildings were constructed among previously standing



The entrance to a large habitation cave below the Qasr. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.



Artist's depiction of the Ottoman period Qasr at Hisban, circa 1900. Drawing by Brian Manley.

buildings, its configuration around a central, defined space illustrates a far-reaching political economy, which encouraged private ownership and a new system of land-tenure policies.

The farmhouse at Hisban is a rare example of early modern architecture in Jordan; it represents an architectural style unique to al-Salt with influences from the West Bank, identifiable in its large size and style of stonework. Architectural details, such as roof construction, window style, and the general house plan, help us date the farm complex to sometime before 1890 (Muaz 1990: fig. 2.15). The two-story farmhouse includes single-storied dome-vaulted storerooms and a second story used as a residence, as well as a guesthouse. The presence of a second story was unusual for a rural context, and suggests that the building could have been constructed by skilled workers. The house differs from the homes of the *fellahin* who would rarely have been able to employ skilled professionals. The two floors and the different architectural characteristics represent successive building phases from the 1880s through the 1950s and differ considerably from a typical single-room home and from tents used in the region whose open design gave it the ability to meet a variety of purposes for the family (Amiry and Tamari 1989: 27–34). Instead, each room of Bayt Nabulsi could have served a different purpose. Parts of the house are physically separated, making some private and others public. The lower floors were reserved for storage and for wheat, as well as a guesthouse (*madafeh*), while the upper story served as the residence.

The ground floor was built in different phases. The two major components of the farmhouse were constructed during the first phase. On the building's north side, there are several rooms with vaulted ceilings that fit the region's typical late-nineteenth century style. Originally, these rooms were probably used as the family's main living space and perhaps also were used for entertaining or receiving guests. Its large windows were



Remains of storage rooms and a central courtyard, with a staircase leading to the roof of the structure. The road (left), which leads into the modern village of Hisban, was constructed in the 1970s, bisecting the structure. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.

constructed in the conventional style of al-Salt during the years 1866–1890 with rounded arches and flat detail. These large windows allowed light and air to move freely about the rooms (Muaz 1990: fig. 2.15), although these windows are presently filled in with rubble and concrete to prevent theft. The only ornamentation that can be found is a small eight-pointed star on the arch of a window, which is typical of the late Ottoman period (Khammash 1986: 96).

Evidence of the changing use of the farmhouse includes the creation of a second story, which allowed the structure's use to change from primarily storage to housing. Metal I-beams were added to support the weight of the second story as well as to allow a small balcony. The building's second story functioned as a sleeping quarters, providing privacy for its occupants. This upper floor was reached by the use of an arched stairway, which led to a doorway with a rounded arch lintel. On the western side of the second story there are two distinctly private rooms with windows and vaulted roofs. The walls and ceilings were at one time plastered and may have had rudimentary frescos visible when initially constructed. The windows found in these rooms are large and similar to the ones found on the building's first story showing stylistic influence from al-Salt. Both rooms have small niches in the walls (*tâqah*) for storage. These niches may have been used to hold bed linens (Amiry and Tamari 1989: 30).

An addition was constructed under the orders of Wadhah Nabulsi and is located on the south side of the structure



North façade of the Qasr, facing southwest. Note the construction of a second story, an external staircase, and beams, which would have supported a balcony. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.



A herd of sheep and goats is led through the Nabulsi farmstead complex. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.



Remains of an animal pen in the back of a cave beneath the Qasr. The low cave ceiling, and the built wall (left) provide an enclosure for penning animals. Photo courtesy of Lynda Carroll.

(Walker and LaBianca 2003: 460). The addition was built with an architectural design characteristic of the early-twentieth century (1918–1935), using a flat roof, small doors, and little ornamentation. It was constructed using rough concrete and cut stone. The final addition to the building was added during the 1950s when a small room, which is little more than a concrete cubical used for storage, was built.

An earthquake in 1927 heavily damaged the structure, evidence of which can be seen in cracks in the façade and in rooms that had to be repaired before they could be reused (Walker and LaBianca 2003: 459). However, the structure was not completely abandoned. Instead, the farm continued to use the structure for storage and supplies. Construction continued into the 1950s and the farmhouse is maintained even today, illustrating its value throughout the twentieth century.

Symbols, the Global Economy, and the Ottoman Frontier

The Ottoman state initiated the *Tanzimat* as a way to reform property rights amongst its subjects. In reality, global capitalism and large-scale agricultural production worked to the advantage of moneylenders, merchants, and families of substance as

The Ottoman Period in Jordan

The Ottoman Empire gained control of Transjordan in 1516. At that time, the region was well populated and included sizable villages—the survivals of Mamluk-period settlements—throughout most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Khammash 1986: 11; Walker 1999). However, the state viewed Transjordan as a rural frontier that offered few economic benefits and strategic advantages, aside from the months when Hajj caravans traveled through Jordan to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Although the Ottomans established a series of forts along the Hajj route to provide security for the caravans of pilgrims, as soon as the Hajj season passed, so too did the state's interest in the region (Abujaber 1989: 24).

Using great flexibility in its approach to rule over its subjects, the empire often relied on the local administrators and their knowledge of the provinces (Greene 2005). During the seventeenth century, Ottoman investment in the area declined and much of the region returned to tribal leadership and semi-nomadic pastoralism (Johns 1994; Walker 1999). To some extent, raids, taxation, government reprisals, and fear of conscription may also have made settled village life undesirable (Amiran 1953: 78; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977). Settled villages declined steadily as their populations abandoned them to move to the more secure highlands and plateau fringes (Brown 1992: 87; Hütteroth and Abdulfattah 1977: 55–67). By the late 1860s, *al-Salt* was the only substantial town remaining on the east bank of the Jordan River.

the seeds of capitalism, modernity, and reform were spread in Jordan in the late-nineteenth century. Yet, despite their access to the wealth afforded by an expanding global economy, and the legal rights over private ownership provided to them by the empire, new landlords and moneylenders would need to establish their legitimacy. While the state could legitimize control over its domains through grants and official state registration, legitimizing control of land and rights of ownership among tribal groups would be more difficult to achieve. For relative newcomers in the area, such as urban merchants and moneylenders, formalizing this new social order would require permanent transformations in the use and meanings of space.

The Qasr at Hisban was not simply a newly created center for productive activities, nor was it a place where people came to work, or a repository for storing grains to accumulate wealth. Hisban also served as a social place, where people lived and engaged in social activities. The use of springs, cisterns, and caves, and the placement of a tribal cemetery at the summit of Tall Hisban (Walker 2001) indicate that the area was an important place historically—a place embedded with meaning. The construction of the Qasr complex, however, changed the fabric and social meaning of Hisban in the landscape.

Formal architecture, as a permanent and imposing symbol of wealth and power, could provide its owners with prestige in their new positions as landlords and leaders. At neighboring Qasrs, such as al-Yaduda and Qasr Tuqan, hired masons and artisans from Nazareth and Nablus constructed large farmsteads to set the Qasr apart from their surroundings, and in the process brought urban sophistication to the rural landscape (Rogan 1992: 255). Likewise, the architectural style of the Qasr at Hisban, which is comparable to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century urban architecture, was intended to conjure symbols of urbanism or sophistication, setting the large, two-story farmhouse and the well-built buildings in the Qasr complex apart from the cave dwellings, tents, or even workers quarters used until that time. Under these circumstances, the Qasr at Hisban was a symbol of the urban brought to the frontier, and of an attempt on the part of local notables, eager to create positions of power, prestige, or legitimation for themselves in a rapidly changing global economy, to construct a more permanent space.

Ultimately, Qasrs served not only as farmsteads, storage spaces, or residences. The construction of Qasrs on the Ottoman frontier was also a symbol of the economic transformations brought to the empire's frontiers at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as of the negotiation of political relations between the Ottoman state, emergent strongmen, moneylenders, and tribal groups. The architecture of Qasr farmsteads is a physical reminder of a new system of political and economic power, in which new landlords become local elites, and their status legitimized by an Ottoman administrative procedure of land registration.

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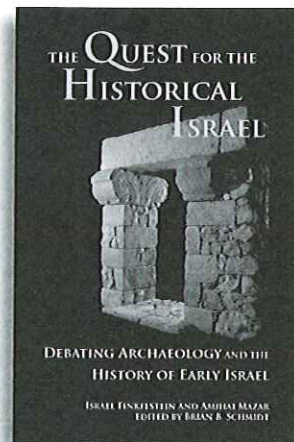


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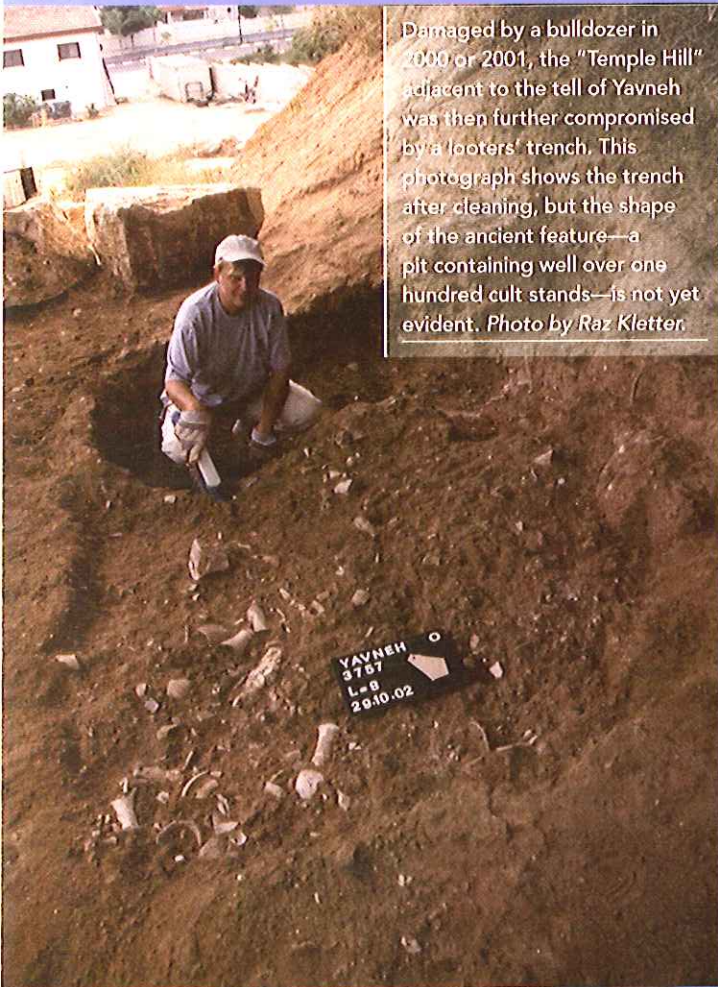
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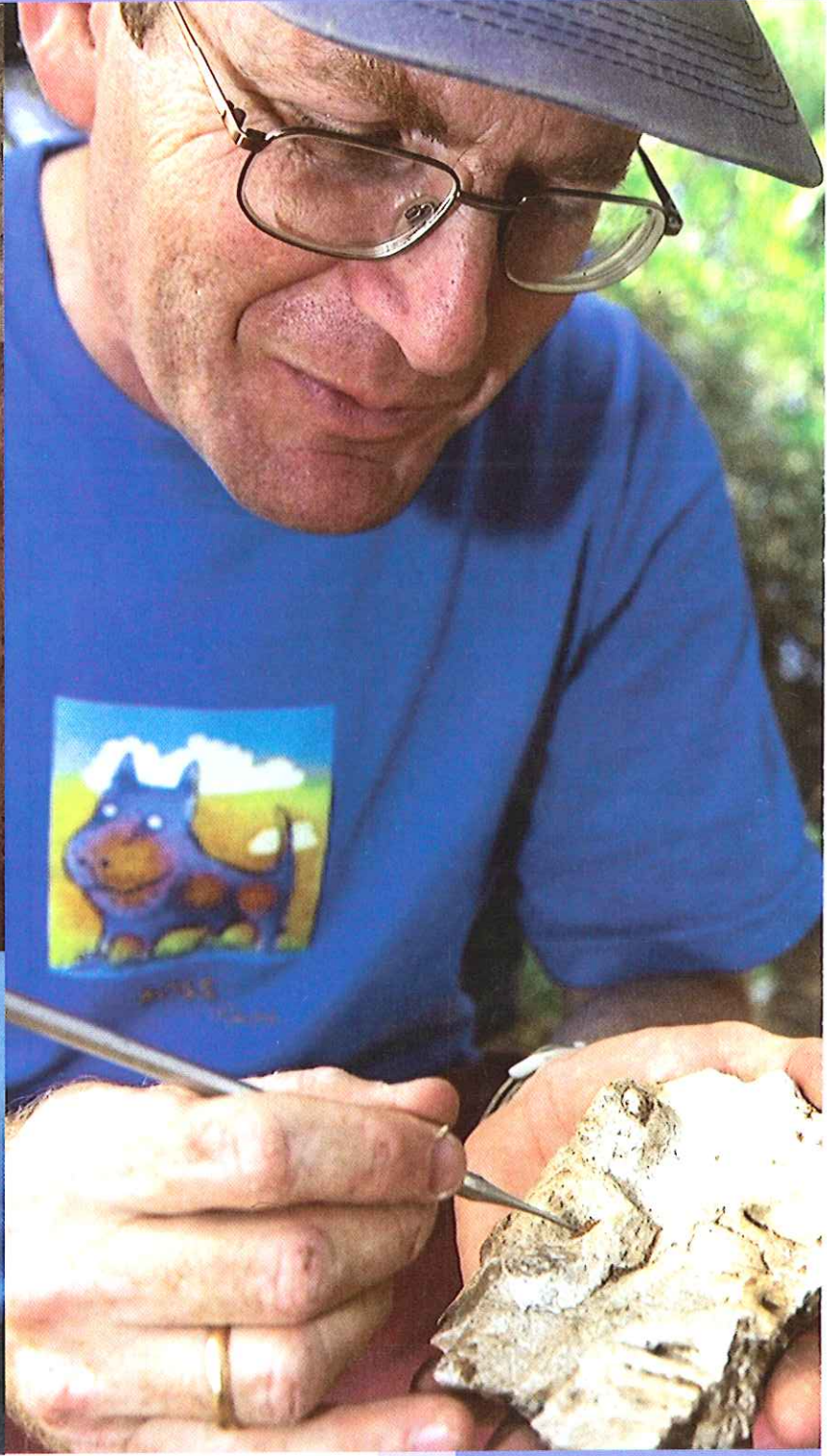
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Damaged by a bulldozer in 2000 or 2001, the "Temple Hill" adjacent to the tell of Yavneh was then further compromised by a looters' trench. This photograph shows the trench after cleaning, but the shape of the ancient feature—a pit containing well over one hundred cult stands—is not yet evident. *Photo by Raz Kletter.*



(Lower left and opposite) The process of excavating and cleaning the cult stands was a painstaking one. The entire pit was dug using delicate tools, such as dental picks, and the removal of a complete vessel often took hours. *Photo by Raz Kletter.*

(Right) Cleaning a stand fragment after recovery. *Photo by Avi Ohayon, the Israel Governmental Press Agency.*