

# 2 Tall Hisban\*

## Palimpsest of Great and Little Traditions

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Some years ago, while surveying the region around Tall al-'Umayri, I encountered for the first time in the field what epigraphers call a "palimpsest." In this case it was not a piece of paper or parchment, but a plaster panel inside an abandoned cistern filled with engraved symbols and painted signs. What I am referring to was our discovery ten years ago in the southern suburbs of Amman, near Yaduda, of the so-called Khirbat Rufays Inscription (Ray and LaBianca 1995). Although there is much about this "inscription" that remains enigmatic, one thing that every epigrapher who has seen it seems not to dispute is that the inscription qualifies as a kind of palimpsest.

From Greek roots meaning "again-scraped," a palimpsest was a manuscript which was re-used. Presumably the original writing was no longer valued and/or easily read, and a scribe decided that the expensive parchment could be better used for something else (almost all palimpsests are parchment; papyrus and paper are not suitable for re-use). In most instances the parchment would be washed and/or scraped and resurfaced, then overwritten, although there are instances of manuscripts which were overwritten without being cleaned. The underwriting of palimpsests is, of course, often difficult to read, although modern tools such as ultra-violet photography help somewhat. But almost all palimpsests are illegible at certain points, and most have lost leaves as well.<sup>1</sup>

I find the palimpsest a useful metaphor for understanding what a tell such as Tall Hisban is like (fig. 1). Like the palimpsest, an archaeological tell is an "again-scraped" surface. However, instead of the surface being a parchment or a cistern wall, in this case it is a hill or mound that has been scraped and resurfaced multiple times over the centuries and millennia. And, like the palimpsest, archaeological tells are filled with messages—some very legible, others partially so, and some nearly impossible to read. Also, like the palimpsest, some messages that once were legible have been completely lost due to multiple scrapings and resurfacings.

It takes the knowledge and skills of the epigrapher to decipher a palimpsest. She brings to her task a protocol for analyzing, layer by layer, the letters, signs, and symbols that are still traceable in the palimpsest. In addition, she comes prepared with specialized training in salient ancient languages and scripts which she relies on as a means to isolate what are words and sentences; what are the scribbles of an alphabet; and what are the marks, signs, and symbols of

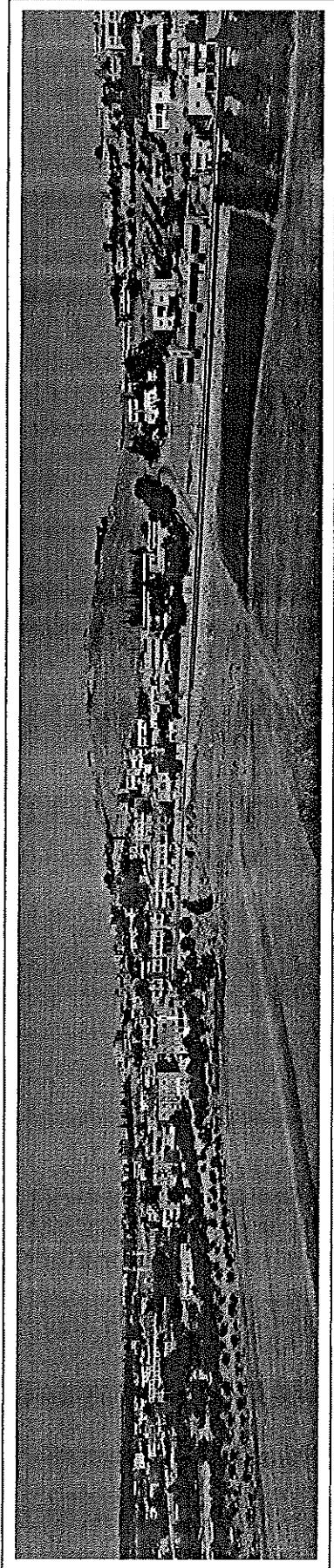


Figure 1. Tall Hisban and surrounding village of Hisban viewed from the southeast  
(photo courtesy of David Sherwin).

ancient graffiti artists. In other words, to successfully make sense out of a palimpsest the epigrapher brings both familiarity with the best practices for uncovering layers of embedded messages as well as extensive knowledge of relevant ancient cultures, languages, and scripts as a basis for ascertaining the significance of a particular palimpsest.

While this may seem like a rather obvious observation when it comes to the epigrapher deciphering a palimpsest, what of the archaeologist deciphering the messages bundled inside the layers of a multi-period, multi-millennial archaeological tell? How might the palimpsest metaphor inform, for example, our understanding of the nature of a multi-layered tell such as Hisban? How might it inform the way we go about studying and interpreting such a site? And how might it inform our understanding of the limitations of an archaeological site? In this article I wish to reflect on these questions—and, in the process, highlight something of what we have learned about the history of this truly fascinating archaeological site.

### The Heshbon Expedition (1967/68–1976)

Forty years ago, in 1968, when Siegfried Horn and Roger Boraas (fig. 2) commenced the first season of excavations at Tall Hisban, archaeology in the Holy Land was carried out largely as an aid to understanding and interpreting the Bible. Thus both these men were Bible scholars and teachers—Horn a professor of Old Testament at the Theological Seminary at Andrews University in Michigan and Boraas a professor of religious studies at Upsala College in New Jersey. The original Heshbon Expedition<sup>2</sup> must therefore be seen as having been, first of all, a biblical archaeology project concerned with discovering at Tall Hisban traces of Biblical Heshbon (Heb. *Hešbôn*).

Tall Hisban is today one of Jordan's best-known and most thoroughly investigated and published archaeological sites. Located 895 meters above sea level on a rise along the western edge of the Transjordanian highland plateau, the site is about 11 km north of the town of Madaba and 26 km southwest of downtown Amman. In the Bible Heshbon is mentioned 37 times—most notably as the capital city of Sihon, King of the Amorites, which was conquered by the Israelites under Moses (Numbers 21:21-31; Deuteronomy 2:24; Joshua 12:2; Judges 11:19-26). This association with biblical Heshbon made it a popular destination of 19th- and early 20th-century travelers and explorers, including Seetzen (1813), Tristram (1873), Condor (1889, 1892), and many others.

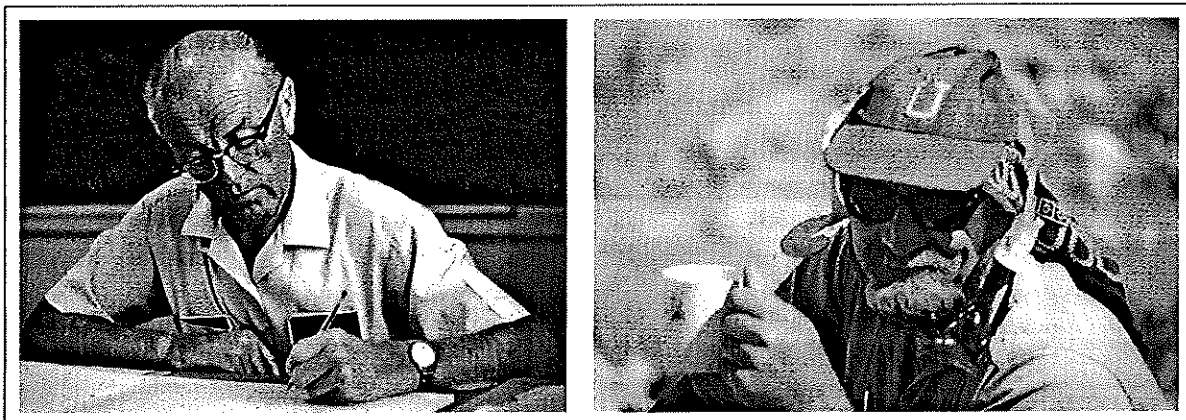


Figure 2. Heshbon Expedition director 1968–1973, Siegfried S. Horn, and Chief Archaeologist, Roger S. Boraas.

More than anything else, what the original sponsors of the Heshbon Expedition had hoped for was that Horn and Boraas would uncover at Tall Hisban evidence that would confirm the biblical story of the Israelites' conquest of King Sihon and his Amorite militia. In other words, as its name implies, the Heshbon Expedition was about searching for a very particular moment in the lives of a very particular people, the conquest of Sihon at Heshbon by the Israelites. Today, 40 years after the commencement of the Heshbon Expedition, it is time to reflect on what we have learned about the viability of this original project and also to state what we today have come to see as the promise and possibilities of a site such as Tall Hisban.

When assessed in the light of the agenda that motivated the original producers of the Heshbon Expedition, what is truly remarkable about the project is what it ended up actually achieving. Highlights of what was accomplished by the original Heshbon Expedition<sup>3</sup> include the following:<sup>4</sup>

- The Expedition established that Tall Hisban's archaeological record spans over three millennia and is divisible, based on stratigraphy and pottery finds, into 21 separate strata. The earliest excavated stratum dates to the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age I transition and the latest dates to the Hashemite or Modern Period.
- It determined that intensive reuse of the tell by later generations of occupants resulted in the vast majority of remains from the Late Bronze and Iron Ages being concentrated in secondary deposits (dumps and fills). Despite the large quantity of Iron Age pottery uncovered, therefore, the expedition found very few undisturbed walls or other *in-situ* ruins from these periods (Ray 2001).
- It uncovered a water reservoir 7 m deep (23 ft) dated to the late 10th/early 9th century B.C.—possibly one of the “pools of Heshbon” mentioned in Canticles 7:4. This installation—along with a large quantity of Iron I pottery recovered from inside this reservoir—is strong evidence for a town at the site during the early Iron Age II period.
- It found that throughout the 9th and 8th centuries this Iron II town appears to have declined as its residents gradually abandon their sedentary ways in favor of transhumance. In other words, the local population adopted more migratory food production strategies which required seasonal movement of families and their herds of sheep and goats between their semi-settled cave village in Hisban and distant production areas.
- It determined that, in the 7th–5th centuries, a large town re-emerged on the hill, this time apparently rebuilt by the Ammonites. Their presence is evidenced by a range of finds, including several ostraca with Ammonite script, pottery typical of their ceramic traditions, and a booming economy based on the production and export of vine products. This town came to an end, however, and its ruins and caves again became the makeshift dwellings of transhumant agriculturalists.
- It discovered that Tall Hisban's most impressive monumental remains were located on its summit. Notable are a perimeter wall with four towers dating to the late Hellenistic period (possibly even earlier to the Ammonite period); a monumental stairway and acropolis area that included a public building, possibly a temple, from the late Roman period; the apse, column bases, and mosaic floors of a Byzantine church; and a residential complex that included a hot-and-cold bathing facility from the time of the Mamluks. Also discovered on or near the summit were fragments of walls and floors of buildings from other periods—including the Persian, Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayyubid, and Ottoman eras.

- It undertook, under the leadership of Douglas Waterhouse, exploration of a Roman/Byzantine cemetery near the tell. The team discovered a wide range of tomb types from this period, including two rolling-stone tombs.
- It initiated, under the leadership, first, of Douglas Waterhouse, then of Robert Ibach, a regional survey of the hinterlands surrounding Tall Hisban that led to the discovery of several sections of paved Roman roads with accompanying milestones; dozens of smaller farmsteads and villages; numerous cemeteries and burial grounds; and a large number of agricultural cisterns, reservoirs, and related water catchments. Most important, they conducted intensive surface surveys of Tall al-'Umayri and Tall Jalul, to which veterans of the Heshbon Expedition returned in 1984 and 1992, respectively, to continue their research under the banner of the Madaba Plains Project.
- The work of ceramicist James Sauer—which was made possible to a significant degree by the high standards for stratigraphic accuracy insisted upon throughout all five field seasons by Chief Archaeologist Roger Boraas—established Tall Hisban as a type site for the study of pottery from the Classical and Islamic centuries in Jordan.
- Finally, as discussed further below, by adapting what has become known as archaeological food systems theory, the expedition became a pioneer in introducing the so-called “new archaeology” into Jordanian archaeology (Dever 1993; Joffe 1997). The advantage of this approach was that it provided a unified frame of reference for studying cultural changes at Hisban throughout its entire multi-millennial history (LaBianca 1990).

These achievements came about in part because of Horn's training as not only a biblical scholar, but also as a scholar of Egyptian and Mesopotamian history and civilizations; in part because of the project's being based in Jordan—an Islamic country with a stake in the development of Islamic archaeology; in part because of Boraas' adamant commitment to systematic excavation and recording of stratigraphy; in part because of Jim Sauer's remarkable gift as a pottery expert in pushing forward the frontiers of Jordan's ceramic typology; in part because of Larry Geraty (fig. 3) and his bold embrace of new approaches and new specialties on the dig during his tenure as director of the project; in part because of *kudos* offered during inspection visits to the dig by senior archaeologists such as George Ernest Wright, Walter Rast, and William Dever. Dever (1993) has commended the Heshbon Expedition for representing the vanguard of the “new archaeology” in Syro-Palestinian archaeology.<sup>5</sup>

What will thus likely stand as the greatest achievement of the Heshbon Expedition is its bold and vigorous engagement with Tall Hisban as a multi-period, multi-millennial archaeological site. Thus was launched a new kind of archaeology in Jordan—one that embraced all historical periods, not just the biblical ones; one that welcomed the participation of anthropologists, conservationists, epigraphers, geologists, historians, palaeobotanists, numismaticists, and zooarchaeologists; one that invited discussion and debate about the aims and purposes of archaeological fieldwork; one that actively encouraged discourse and debate about theory, method, and research design in the planning and execution of archaeological research.

Ultimately this metamorphosis of the Heshbon Expedition also exposed the limitations of focusing exclusively on Tall Hisban as a biblical site. As with the palimpsest, most of the message bundles from the deepest layers have been either totally erased or extensively disturbed in the scraping and rebuilding processes on the summit by later inhabitants. Yet, as in the case of certain types of ceramic designs, construction techniques, and butchering practices (as seen on animal bone fragments), some messages reverberate, albeit faintly at times, throughout the entire multi-millennial history of the site.

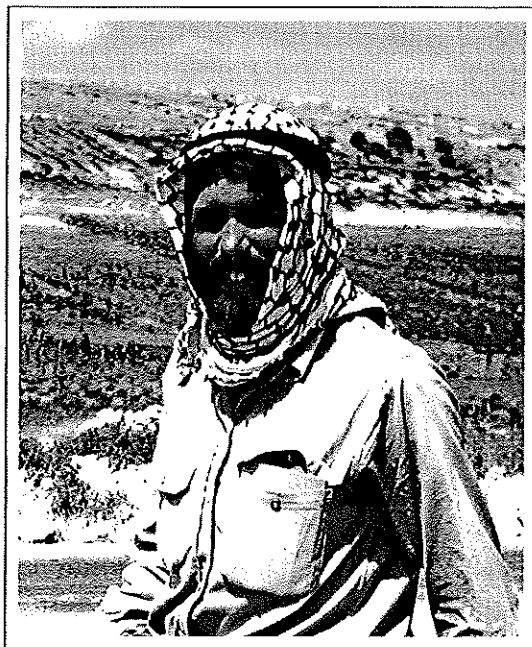


Figure 3. Heshbon Expedition director 1974–1976,  
Lawrence T. Geraty.

To an extent not really anticipated by the Heshbon Expedition, Tall Hisban's earliest layers were overlaid by Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic layers. The message bundles contained in these later layers also continued to reverberate through the site's history, just as in the case of the earlier layers. Thus the lesson of the Heshbon Expedition for biblical archaeology is that the messages bundled in this particular tell's earliest layers are so obfuscated by scrapeovers and resurfacings that very little can be said with certainty about whether or not Tall Hisban was the Heshbon of the exodus—and even less so, whether Sihon and the Amorites were vanquished here by the Israelites. There simply is not enough left of these deep layers of this palimpsest to make any firm statements one way or the other. We turn next to answering the question: How are palimpsestic tells analyzed?

### **The In-Between Years (1976–1996)**

If I were to sum up what has animated my career as an anthropological archaeologist the most since the end of the Heshbon Expedition, it has been to discover a comprehensive approach to analyzing Tall Hisban in all of its layered, reverberating complexity. The first breakthrough in this quest was the formulation, now nearly 30 years ago, of the food system concept. This concept (first operationalized by means of ethnoarchaeological and ethnohistorical research in the hinterland of Tall Hisban during the late 1970s and 1980s) provided a model for grasping the complex unity which lay beneath observed and documented changes in Tall Hisban's occupational history, material object inventory, animal bone corpus, and hinterland settlement patterns. These linked changes, in turn, were understood as being a function of shifts over time in the intensity of the food system in the direction of either intensification or abatement. Thus, as the system intensified, sedentarization was said to occur, and as it abated, the opposite, namely nomadization, was said to occur (LaBianca 1990, 1991).

During the 1990s this quest turned to identifying the social mechanisms—local adaptive strategies—which, throughout the centuries and millennia, enabled local residents to shift back and forth between sedentary and nomadic lifestyles. Ethnoarchaeological interviews were carried out with older residents of the village along with ethnohistorical and archaeological studies of the history of Hisban during Ottoman and early Modern times. From these investigations, the mechanisms that enabled the local food systems to oscillate back and forth between orientations began to emerge. To date, seven such cultural mechanisms have been isolated that help explain how such movement is not only possible, but also essential to survival in this frontier region. Elsewhere I have called these cultural mechanisms “indigenous hardiness structures” in order to emphasize their importance to the survival of the local population (LaBianca 1997b). They include the following:

*Local-level water management.* Instead of relying on large-scale water works such as aqueducts, reservoirs, and dams, local populations secured access to water from natural springs, seasonal streams, and cisterns.

*Mixed agro-pastoralism.* This refers to the classic Mediterranean practice of mixed production of sheep and goats along with cultivation of field crops and orchards. The practice preserves the option of shifting emphasis back and forth between animal and crop production.

*Fluid homeland territories.* There is a saying in Hisban that “land, water, and pastures are from God.” This means that a family had a certain amount of freedom to roam in search of water, crop land, and pasture, which, again, was a means of keeping options open.

*Residential flexibility.* To accommodate shifts back and forth between nomadic and sedentary ways, one had to know how to live in a house, in a cave, or in a tent. A common practice was to divide the household so some would stay in houses near their crop lands, while others camped in caves and tents during migrations with herds of sheep and goats.

*Hospitality.* The practice of sharing one’s shelter, food, and water with another without asking questions has little to do with good manners and much to do with insurance against bad times by building a network of mutual assistance in time of need. Guests are also good sources of information about conditions in nearby regions and the outside world!

*Honor and Shame.* The institution of honor and shame is an ever-present mechanism for mobilizing individual and social action on behalf of family and kin. These institutions are a means of assuring social order in the absence of state-level institutions such as courts of law, a written legal code, and police.

*Tribalism.* For centuries, the tribe has served as the bedrock of social relationships in the ancient Near East. People belong to tribes before they belong to villages, cities, nations, or empires. Tribes are still the foundation of social relations in modern Jordan today.

Such practices, embedded in the local food system, provide the means for the local populace to adapt to shifting social, economic, and natural environmental conditions. They are a proven set of options for survival and resiliency in a region that has become legendary as a crossroads of commerce, contesting armies, and civilizations. They reverberate through every century and every occupational layer at the site right down to the present, making them difficult to study stratigraphically, for they appear much the same from one century to the next and from one stratum to the next. They are the bedrock of social life in this part of Transjordan.



## The Tall Hisban Project (1996–2007)

Renewed excavations at Tall Hisban were begun in 1996 as a joint endeavor of Andrews University's College of Arts and Sciences, its Institute of Archaeology, the Madaba Plains Project, the Municipality of Hisban, and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and its district office in Madaba. The primary goal of this initial season was to clean, restore, and make accessible to the public the most prominent standing ruins at Tall Hisban (fig. 4). In the process of doing this, however, it became clear that many stratigraphic, ceramic, and historical issues remained unresolved from previous fieldwork, particularly regarding the Islamic remains. The prospects of intensifying anthropologically oriented excavations focusing on studying processes of long-term culture change at the site was another important motivating factor. Subsequent field seasons were thus organized in 1997, 1998, 2001, 2004, and 2007.

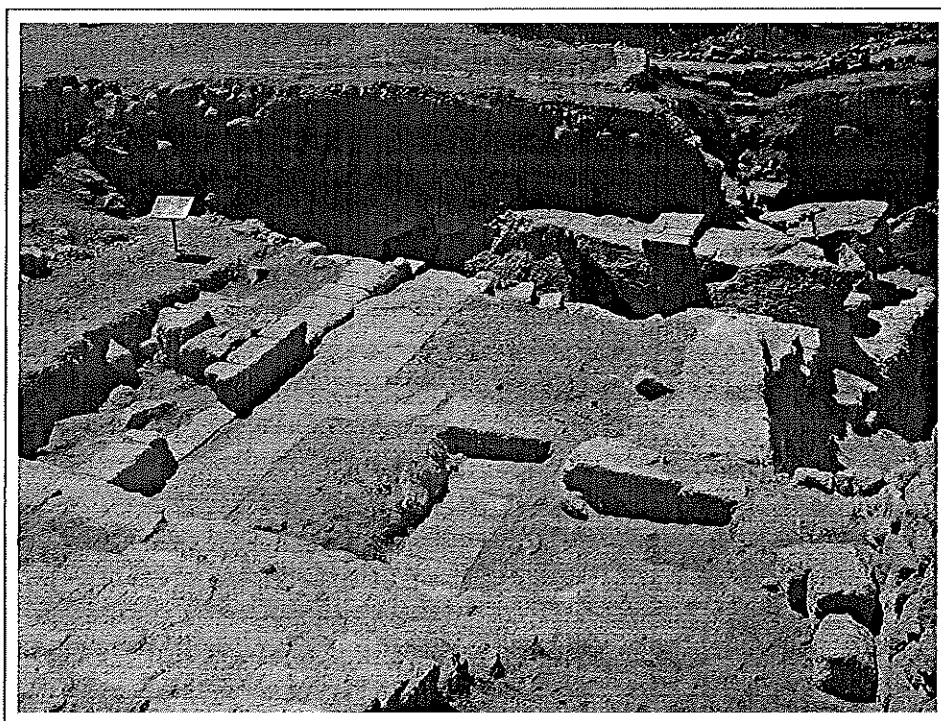


Figure 4. Restored Roman stairway and plaza.

Bethany Walker's intensive work on contemporary textual sources—largely medieval Arabic documents stored in archives in Cairo and other major cities of the region—has been an important innovation of the new project and has produced new studies on land use, tribal–state relations, and imperial decline (Walker 2003, 2004). The project's concern with sustainable agriculture, climate change, political ecology, and food systems has necessitated a multi-disciplinary approach to fieldwork. Building on the wide-ranging methods used by the Heshbon Expedition, current fieldwork combines excavation, hinterland survey, soil and paleobotanical analyses, studies of vernacular architecture, ethnographic research and oral interviews, and archival research. The following are highlights of recent excavations at the site recently published elsewhere by LaBianca and Walker (2007):



- The occupational history of Islamic Hisban reflects the cycles of imperial engagement with local societies and indigenous autonomy suggested for other regions of Jordan. The former Byzantine bishopric was incorporated peacefully into the newly emerging Islamic empire following the Battle of Yarmouk in AD 636. While the separation of Byzantine from early Islamic material culture is notoriously difficult, during the late Umayyad period the pottery and architecture of the site are noticeably different from preceding periods, reflecting some degree of cultural change that can be identified on the summit of the tell.
- The continued domestic and defensive use of the summit in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods is documented archaeologically and historically. The Umayyad-period residents of the citadel continued to use earlier buildings, while constructing many new domestic structures and tabuns. The Abbasid-period site, which can best be described as a fortified residence (early Islamic *qasr*), continued the character of the Umayyad occupation.<sup>6</sup>
- There is scant archaeological evidence for occupation at Hisban between the 9th and 13th centuries beyond the occasional sherd of Crusader and Ayyubid glazed wares. Arabic chronicles mention the construction of a mosque at Hisban by an Ayyubid prince, the remains of which have not yet been identified. It is probable that a village existed here in the Ayyubid period, but the Mamluk building activities on the tell, which largely obliterated earlier phases of occupation, make reconstructing the pre-Mamluk history of the summit difficult.
- The growth of the village, and the re-use of the tell by officialdom, was a product of investments by the Mamluk state in the infrastructure of its imperial periphery in the 13th and 14th centuries. Sultan Baybars, who was responsible for numerous refortification efforts in Jordan (including that at Salt, 'Ajlun, and Kerak), may have also been the driving force behind the reinforcements of the Hisban citadel walls and the reconstruction of the large southwest corner tower in the mid-13th century.
- The site became an important agricultural and administrative center in the early 14th century under the personal watch of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad during whose reign Hisban served as the capital (*wilaya*) of the Balqa, a status it retained from roughly 1309 until 1356. During this time a small domestic/administrative complex (the "Governor's Residence" of Field L) was built in the western half of the summit, incorporating a bathhouse that may originally date to the early Islamic period (fig. 5). The complex, built around an open-air courtyard, was a local variant of the contemporary *qa'a* palatial form and reflects many elements characteristic of Jordanian architecture of the Mamluk period: low-sprung vaults; a combination of long barrel vaults and cross vaults; plastered walls; two-face, rubble-filled walls; and quickly built masonry reusing building blocks from ancient structures.
- The complex storeroom, fully excavated during the 1998, 2001, and 2004 seasons, was one of the most important components of the citadel, as an earthquake of the mid-14th century preserved its rich contents: shelves of locally produced and imported wares (many with historical inscriptions), weaponry, and many large sugar storejars. Citadels of the period regularly served as store depots for agricultural surplus, and it appears that Hisban was a key storage and redistribution point for processed sugar cane grown in the Jordan Valley and its tributaries. With a mid-century earthquake, and the historically documented decision by the state to move the rural capital to Amman, the Hisban citadel was abandoned.

- The surrounding village, however, continued to be occupied well into the next century. The 14th-century “city” (*madinah*) is often described in contemporary Arabic sources, which mention its schools (*madrasas*), mosque, marketplace (which served over 300 local villages), local court, and local intelligentsia who made careers as legal scholars in Damascus and Jerusalem. The extensive remains of courtyard complexes on the western slopes of the tell and at its base (Field C), as well as evidence for intensive use of grain fields and orchards within a 2–3 km radius of the tell, document the vitality of Hisban in this period.
- Outside of squatter (or seasonal) occupation in the citadel ruins and in the farmhouses of Field C, as well as domestic use of caves in the region, there is little evidence for year-round settlement at Hisban between the 16th and 19th centuries. Tax registers of the early Ottoman period (16th century) describe the site as *khali* (with no permanent residents), and only in the late 19th century does the Ottoman state document the residence of tax-paying farmers at Hisban in formal land registers.
- European travelers describe a site largely in ruins for much of the 19th century, with sporadic, and possibly seasonal, occupation in ancient buildings. The Land Law of 1858, the most important application of the Ottoman reforms (*Tanzimat*) in Jordan, transformed the relationship between local people and the state, as well as rejuvenated the countryside through the registration of farmland with individual tax payers and revival of regional markets. This era of reform finds physical expression at Hisban in the construction of the Nabulsi *qasr*, the domestic structures of Field O, and the “Bedouin” cemetery of Field L (early 19th-century use of the Mamluk storeroom on the summit for burials), which together are informative about the modern history of the village of Hisban.
- Architectural and ethnographic surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004 are the basis of preliminary conclusions about the history of the Nabulsi family farmhouse complex located south of the tell. Occupation at Hisban was seasonal by the Ajarmeh and Adwan tribes, until 1881, when the Ottoman authorities formally registered the land of Hisban to the Ajarmeh. The family residence of this grand stone complex was likely constructed at this point, on the ruins of earlier structures, and physically developed for the next ten years. Through money lending, the land eventually passed to Hajj Muhammad al-Nabulsi of Salt, who rented the land and further developed the farmhouse complex, adding storage facilities and stables.
- During the second half of the 19th century the center of the village shifted to the southern slopes of the tell, where complexes of heavily built courtyard houses were constructed (Field O); these have been a focus of excavation since 2004. Agricultural and soil surveys of the Wadis Majar and Hisban since 2004 have contributed important data on the history of land use during this period, particularly in terms of Hisban’s role in regional grain production and the organization of this industry in the late Ottoman and Mandate periods. Archival research on land registers from these periods, conducted since 2005, is also tracing the development of Hisban’s agricultural and community history at the turn of the 20th century.
- The Islamic-era remains of Tall Hisban are among the most historically important and best preserved in Jordan. Since 1998 the project has attracted attention for its contributions to Islamic archaeology, in general, and for raising the awareness of the medieval Islamic and Ottoman heritage of the country, specifically. Among some of the most

important results of the post-1997 seasons are the development of a typology and chronology of Ottoman pottery, the writing of a cultural history of Ottoman Jordan (based on ethnographic work and the study of vernacular architecture) and its tribal societies, the project's environmental and ecological research, and the successful combination of written and archaeological sources in the writing of a new provincial history for the Mamluk and Ottoman periods.

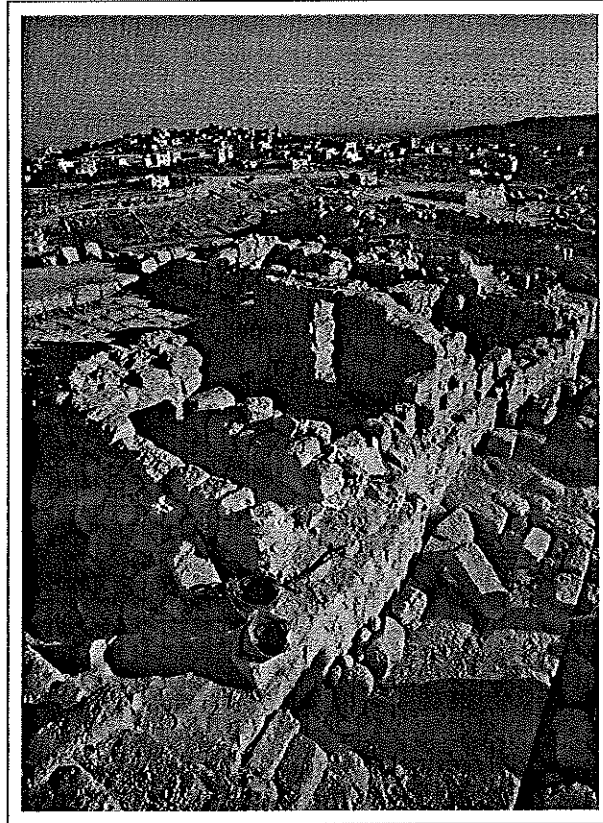


Figure 5. Restored Ayyubid-Mamluk communal bathhouse.

A number of important lessons can be drawn from these findings that provide further insight into the limitations of the archaeological record. Just as some layers in a palimpsest may be very difficult to decipher due to overscraping, and in some cases there are leaves totally missing from the palimpsest, so also in an archaeological tell. For example, despite the progress being made in recovering evidence of settlement at the site during such periods as the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman, it is becoming increasingly clear that these were not periods during which extensive material remains were produced—at least not in and around the summit of the tell where we are digging. For example, no trace has been found yet at the site of either a mosque from the Ayyubid period or even the *madrakah* (school) from the Mamluk period, despite both of these being referred to in texts from these periods. Furthermore, a great deal of re-use of caves and buildings from earlier periods appears to be the norm rather than the exception during these times, which suggests the on-going importance throughout these periods to the local population of the indigenous hardiness structures mentioned earlier. Most of these, however, are notoriously difficult to detect in the archaeological record. They represent the “very difficult to read” portion of the tell as a palimpsest.

## Great and Little Traditions

Despite these limitations, the combined tell-text-ethnography approach that has been integral to the Tall Hisban Project from the start has increased significantly our ability to read the “difficult” and “very difficult” layers in Tall Hisban with some sense. To increase further our ability to make progress deciphering the Tall Hisban palimpsest we have been fortunate to be able to link up with the Global Moments in the Levant Project (GML) of the University of Bergen in Norway. This project’s main goal is to develop theory for studying global–local interactions in the southern Levant, with special emphasis on learning more about the nature of what we call “global moments” or changes that alter people’s daily lives and futures on a more or less permanent basis. To this end the collaboration has isolated four overarching theoretical constructs to help focus the investigations of a team of 20 researchers. Summed up in a sentence they are that the southern Levant is a *contact zone* in which shifting *power constellations* have generated *global moments* that in turn have led to new *inter-civilizational encounters* as agents of invading civilizations come into contact with those that remained from previous encounters. The merit of these four themes is that they apply to all historical periods and eras, thus providing a common framework for research on the past as well as on the present.

Participation in this wider collaboration has enabled Bethany Walker, Bert de Vries (both GML team members), and me to focus our research on how changes in Tall Hisban’s material culture link to global processes—in particular the agency role of empires in importing new cultural templates to our region. A partial list of empires that have impacted the region over the past four millennia includes pre-dynastic Egypt, old Babylon, Hittite, new kingdom Egypt, Sea Peoples, Assyria, new-Babylon, Persia, Greek/Hellenistic world, Rome, Parthia, Byzantium, Sassanid, Umayyad, Abbasid, Tulunid, Fatimid, Seljuk, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk, Ottoman, and British.

We follow Hardt and Negri (2005) in defining “empire” as, simply, an “expanding world order.” We further posit that, in the case of most empires, the social order they seek to spread can be traced to their civilizational roots. A definition of “civilization” that is helpful in this regard is the following (posited by LaBianca under inspiration from Fernand Braudel and LaBianca’s GML experience): “a civilization is a luminous constellation of radiant attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, institutions, and works of art, artisanship, and architecture that emanate from a particular epicenter such as Athens, Rome, or Constantinople.” Thus, Alexander the Great and his successors were champions of Greek civilization—spreading their vision of the “polis” as the ideal social order for humans throughout the ancient world. The Roman emperor Justinian similarly championed Roman “law and order” as the ideal basis for world order and Constantine the Great pushed Romanized Christianity as the ideal template for world order.

This research on the agency role of empires in catalyzing global moments and shaping cultural changes has been facilitated by adoption of Robert Redfield’s “structure of tradition” methodology. This approach allows us to distinguish between, on the one hand, the elite-controlled, often codified, “great traditions” that emanate from the global and regional epicenters of empires and, on the other hand, the uncoded vernacular “little traditions” of the masses that live underneath the influence of one or more imperial world orders. Examples are the indigenous hardness structures identified earlier.

A central objective of this approach is to discover the extent to which efforts by a particular imperial polity to “universalize” and impose a particular great tradition has succeeded, and, if so, to discover the extent to which this has involved “parochialization,” or the selective

incorporation of elements of a particular great tradition within a particular little tradition. To this end our current research at Tall Hisban endeavors to identify “signature artifacts” in the form of monumental buildings, ceramics, crafts, and other material residues that can provide a clue to whether and to what extent a particular great tradition has been universalized and/or parochialized. The opposite sometimes also occurs—that is, elite culture at the epicenter is impacted by its engagements with local little traditions—and to the extent that it does, it highlights the interactive give-and-take nature of global–local interactions.

At Hisban, there is evidence linking the majority of the above-mentioned foreign empires to the site. Of special interest are the interventions of the Assyrians (Iron II), Romans, Byzantines, and Mamluks, for each of these powers link to peak periods in Hisban’s food system (LaBianca 1990).

The first clear instance of a period of food system intensification at Hisban, from about 700 to 530 BC, is the latter part of the Iron Age when there is again evidence of significant external intervention in the region by the Assyrians and successor empires. Their projects in Israel, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria included creation of vassal city states, adoption of the Aramaic language as the new *lingua franca* of commerce and communication, and introduction of silver as a standard means of exchange. At Hisban there is evidence of significant investment in production of wine and olives for export during the period (LaBianca and Younker 1995).

From ca. 50 BC–AD 350 Roman influence in the form of urban planning and architecture as well as infrastructure, such as roads, market plazas, municipal reservoirs, and aqueducts, was ubiquitous throughout the southern Levant. Hisban was no exception, boasting an acropolis crowned with a small monumental building—likely a temple, two municipal reservoirs, and a market plaza (Mitchel 1992). The site was also a major intersection on the *via nova* which connected Aqaba in the south with Bostra in the north. This paved road was originally built by Claudius Severus, a local governor under Emperor Trajan. To this north–south trunk line an east–west section was later added connecting Ebus with Livias, Jericho, and Jerusalem (Ibach 1987).

On nearly every possible measure, Hisban reached its highest peak in terms of settlement density during Byzantine times (ca. AD 350–650). Large agricultural estates graced the slopes of Wadi Hisban and on the plains to the east olives, grapes, and other tree fruits were produced for export. Not surprisingly, connections between Hisban and centers of power outside the local region were extensive during this period. This is attested by the fact that Hisban or Ebus, as the site was known then, served as an ecclesiastical administrative center with its own bishop, one of whom, namely Gennadius Bunnorum Arabiae, on two occasions attended the Council of Niceaea. The ruins of at least three Christian churches date to this period. In two of these, archaeologists uncovered intact mosaic floors.

As already mentioned earlier, our last solid example of external intervention comes from Mamluk times (ca. AD 1450–1600). During this period, the site served as the regional capital of the district known as the Balqa. The Mamluk sultan in Egypt appointed its governor and his place of residence was located on the summit of Tall Hisban (Walker 2003). The fact that an individual of high rank resided at the site is reflected in both the architecture and the pottery. Excavations have uncovered the standing walls of the governor’s residence along with a small bath complex which appears to have been part of the residence. We also found an abundance of so-called glazed relief ware, an army-issue kitchenware specially ordered for the commander of the Mamluk citadel in Hisban. These finds attest to Egyptian/Mamluk investment in the rural economy of Hisban between AD 1201 and 1356.

There is thus considerable evidence that the peaks in Hisban's local food system were influenced by the agency role of empires in the region. Significantly, low intensity periods, such as the Late Bronze Age, Persian-Hellenistic, Abbasid, and Ottoman, were times when such powers were distracted by problems elsewhere in their territories or were simply too weak to exert leadership in periphery areas such as Jordan.

### **Restoration, Presentation, and Tourism**

As was stated earlier, an important reason for returning to Tall Hisban was to clean, restore, and make accessible to the public the most prominent standing ruins at Tall Hisban (figs. 6 and 7). Significant progress has already been made in these goals, including the following completed actions:

- A number of key features at the site have been significantly restored and preserved, including the citadel/governor's residence, the Umayyad-Mamluk bath, the Byzantine church, and the north wall and gate complex.
- Directions to the site have been clearly marked by road signs making it easily accessible to the public.
- A new entrance and gate-complex, including rest-room facilities, have been constructed, and parking has been expanded to accommodate more vehicles and buses.
- Touring the site is now much easier and more informative as walking paths, viewing platforms, and information displays highlighting significant features within the site are now in place.
- An extensive curriculum has been developed for use by local schools, highlighting the fundamentals of archaeology as well as the history, culture, and geography of the site.
- Progress has also been made on establishing a steering committee made up of mostly local stakeholders to take charge of developing Tall Hisban's tourism potential.<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusions**

What I have tried to highlight in this account of our work at Tall Hisban over the past 40 years are the ways in which this project has evolved and metamorphosed as a result of a sustained effort to come to grips with the site as a comprehensive, complex whole. To this end, theory building has complemented data collection and analysis in an ongoing dialectic, theory informing data collection and analysis, and data collection and analysis informing theory building. First came food system theory, with the related constructs of cycles of intensification and abatement, which helped to make some initial sense out of the finds from every layer in the site. Food system cycles, in turn, could be linked to episodes of sedentarization and nomadization. This discovery prompted the search for what we initially called indigenous hardiness structures (but later renamed little traditions) that could account for people's ability to shift back and forth *between* sedentism and transhumant nomadism. Finally, most recently, we have been preoccupied by the role of empires in importing "great traditions"—or, if one prefers, "ordering templates"—that could account for changes in the material culture that could not be attributable to food system changes alone. Future plans call for continuation of this dialectic between theory-building and data collection and analysis so as to be able to decipher maximally and interpret the palimpsest which is Tall Hisban.



Figure 6. MPP 40th Anniversary Celebrations at Tall Hisban. Seated from right to left are Lawrence T. Geraty, Senior Director of Madaba Plains Project; Niels Erik Andreasen, President of Andrews University; H.R.H. Prince Raad bin Zeid; H.E. Senator Leila Sharaf; and H.E. Mustafa Barrari.

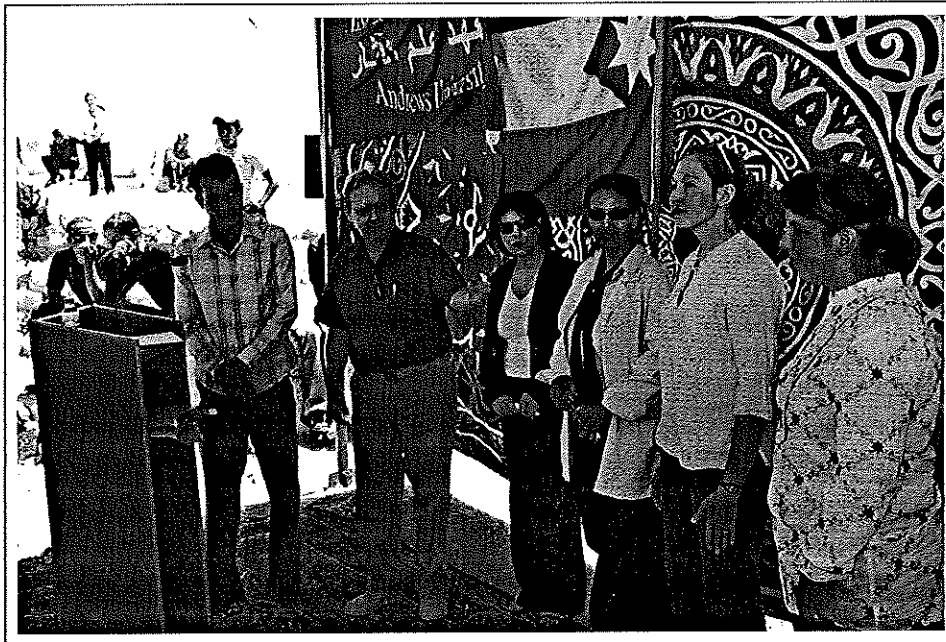


Figure 7. MPP 40th Anniversary Celebrations at Tall Hisban. Line-up of current collaborators in efforts to preserve, restore, and present the site: Anes al-Awawdeh, local school teacher; Øystein S. LaBianca, Senior Director; Madiha al-Barrari, office of the mayor of Hisban; Sabah Abu Hudaib, Representative of the Department of Antiquities; Bethany Walker, Co-director and Chief Archaeologist; and Maria Elena Ronza, Co-director for restoration and tourism development.



## Notes

\* In this article I use Heshbon when referring to the biblical/ancient story or in the official name of the Andrews University Expedition to Heshbon. I use Hesban when referring to usage in the final publications or in the quotes about the site before the Department of Antiquities of Jordan published the new official transliterations for site names. I use Hisban when referring to the site itself.

1. Definition adapted from Wikipedia article on Palimpsest: <http://www.viterbo.edu/perspgs/faculty/RSamuels/palimpsest.html>.

2. The "Heshbon Expedition" was an undertaking of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the American Schools of Oriental Research, the American Center for Oriental Research, and the Ajarmeh families of the village of Hisban. Its Directors were Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Archaeology, Siegfried S. Horn (1968, 1971, 1973) and Lawrence T. Geraty, Horn's successor at the Seminary (1974 and 1976). Chief archaeologist during all five field seasons was Roger S. Boraas, Professor of Religious Studies at Upsala College in New Jersey. Muhammad Murshed of the Department of Antiquities served as foreman for all five seasons.

3. The Heshbon Expedition is credited with a long list of firsts in the archaeology of Jordan. To highlight just a few, it was the first to excavate systematically and on a large scale a multi-millennial tell site; it was the first to concern itself not only with the pottery of biblical and classical times, but also that of Islamic times; it was the first systematically to collect and study animal bones right along with pottery; it was the first to undertake ethnoarchaeological research as an integral part of the field season; it was the first to rework field data during its publication phases so it could be analyzed electronically using computers; it was the first to incorporate geologists to study the topographic and sedimentary history of the site and its surrounding region; the first to publish preliminary reports in a timely manner—within one or two years of each field season; and the list goes on.

4. A series of final publications reporting on the discoveries from Tall Hisban is still in the process of being published. So far 8 volumes out of a total of 14 planned have been published by Andrews University Press. See <http://www.andrews.edu/universitypress> for information on purchase.

5. What the Heshbon Expedition bequeathed to the Madaba Plains Project included a core staff made up of Heshbon Expedition veterans; a high regard for accuracy in stratigraphy and ceramic typology; a standardized system for describing and recording all manner of archaeological data using the computer; a commitment to hinterland investigations as a complement to tell excavations; a readiness to partner with specialists from a wide range of disciplines; a continuing questing for theories and methods by means of which to grasp long-term cultural dynamics; a commitment to prompt dissemination of findings among both fellow scholars and the general public; a tradition of mentoring and facilitating younger generations of scholars; and a consortium of core institutional sponsors with Andrews University's Institute of Archaeology at its core.

6. The early Muslim historian al-Baladhuri describes the revolt of one Sa'id ibn Khalid al-Fudayni, a descendent of the Umayyad family, who early in the 9th century AD led a rebellion against the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun. He fled from the family stronghold at al-Fudayni (in present day Mafraq) to Hisban, where he, for a time, took refuge from the Abbasid forces sent to subdue him. Architectural and ceramic remains of this period on the summit reflect the fortunes of the site in this regard. The tell's enclosure wall was certainly strengthened at this time, and there is evidence of further domestic construction. In Field N there is evidence of a house, originally built during Roman times, being repaired by the Abbasid-period residents—including repair of earlier earthquake damage, reinforcing of walls, and adding ovens and a vaulted stone superstructure. By the mid-9th century the summit appears to have been abandoned for a while by its year-around residents, arguably the result of the political turmoil of the time. No doubt squatters continued to find shelter in its abandoned buildings.

7. A proposal to establish the Hisban Cultural Association (HCA) has been presented to local stakeholders interested in preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Hisban. One of the goals of this association is the development of a Cultural Heritage Education (CHE) Center at Hisban.

The proposed center will welcome visitors and highlight the nearly 4,000-year history of the archaeological tell, as well as the 40 years of excavation performed by Andrews University in partnership with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and with the Municipality of Hisban.

As a not-for-profit association, the proposed HCA will help in fund raising and assist in developing and implementing the center and it will manage and promote the various cultural activities to be held at the CHE. Envisioned activities include walking tours, education programs, hands-on archaeological workshops, archives, a museum, and a restaurant offering ethnic foods from past eras. The incorporation of local culture and traditions will be an important component in the development of the center.

The HCA will work in close cooperation with local property owners, village authorities, and the Ministry of Tourism. Long term, the building and programs will be sustainable through local ownership, in close partnership with the Directorate of Hisban, Andrews University, the Friends of Hisban, and the Jordan Ministry of Tourism, as well as individual donors. The Center, combined with the tell itself, will help the public to understand better the complex history of the region, including its religious significance for the monotheistic religions. Visitors will hopefully leave with a new-found appreciation for the rich culture and diverse traditions of residents in the region.

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