ACOR Newsletter

أخبار أكور

Vol. 12.2—Winter 2000

Qastal, 1998-2001

Erin Addison

On a cold afternoon in early February 2000, Ra'ed Abu Ghazi, a management trainee for the Qastal Conservation and Development Project (QCDP), was walking home from the Umayyad qasr and mosque complex at Qastal (map, p. 9). In the lot between the ancient reservoir and his home, he stopped to speak to some neighbor children playing a game. Then a teapot overturned and the late afternoon sun reflected off a blue-green, glassy surface. Ra'ed knelt to get a closer look and brushed gently at the loose earth. The area had recently been bulldozed, so the dirt was loose and only about five centimeters deep. As he washed the surface with tea water, a pattern of brilliant glass tesserae was revealed. Ra'ed had made an exciting discovery at Qastal: a large structure from the late Umayyad period (A.D. 661-750), floored with what experts have called some of the most exquisite mosaics in Jordan (Figs. 1-3). The new structure is only the most recent development in two-and-a-half fascinating years at Qastal.

Fig. 1. West Birkah site, south alcove mosaic

Qastal al-Balqa' is mentioned in the Diwan of Kuthayyir 'Azza (d. A.H. 105=A.D. 723): "God bless the houses of those living between Muwaqqar and Qastal al-Balqa', where the mihrabs are." Although there remain complex questions about this reference to "mihrabs" (maharib—apparently plural), the quote at least tells us that Qastal was well enough known to have served as a geographical reference point before A.D. 723. The ruined settlement had been

Fig. 2. West Birkah site, north alcove mosaic

Fig. 3. West Birkah site, north alcove mosaic, detail

known to western scholarship since H.B. Tristram described it in *The Land of Moab* (1873). The qasr and mosque were also documented carefully at the turn of the century by R. Brünnow and A. von Domaszewski and published in their *Die Provincia Arabia* (1905). The structures were thought to be Hellenistic until Jean Sauvaget (1939) correctly identified the mosque and qasr as Umayyad.

Apart from the mosque and qasr, Qastal's early Islamic cemetery and waterworks (dam, cisterns, and reservoirs) were also well known. In the 1980s, a French team under the direction of Patricia Carlier spent two seasons documenting the qasr and cemetery, in particular. Eleven headstones, dating from the 8th to 11th centuries and bearing early examples of Kufic script, can be viewed at the Madaba Museum. Since the 1970s, nearly one-third of the qasr has been destroyed by the expansion of the diwan Shibli al-Fayez. Between 1985 and 1998, the qasr and mosque were used as a dumpsite for local waste and for debris from nearby road construction. Qastal is a rapidly growing village on the airport highway and land values around the site are rising fast, threatening ancient archaeological remains.

Since June 1989, QCDP, under the direction of Drs. Erin Addison and Stefania Dodoni, has endeavored to clear the qasr and mosque of plants and debris, excavate the water systems, consolidate the site legally and physically, and document the remains of Qastal. At the same time, QCDP is working in the Qastal community on land-use planning issues, including the rehabilitation of ancient cisterns to support drought-resistant landscaping around the site and in the village. One of QCDP's primary goals is to train staff and management from Qastal to maintain the site in the future. Ra'ed had been with QCDP for over a year when he recognized the value of the new mosaics and immediately took proper steps to ensure their safety.

Unlike strictly academic research projects, QCDP operates twelve months a year, working to create an infrastructure that will survive after the initial development phase is over. Once the site was cleared, for example, a sustained effort was necessary to bring trash collection to Qastal and to educate the surrounding community concerning waste disposal.

Vandalism and theft were also serious problems at Qastal: apart from the dramatic bulldozing of the qasr and mosque, ongoing damage was done at Qastal—as at other sites in Jordan—by gold-diggers. It is a pervasive belief that gold is buried under significant architectural features; thus mihrabs, highly carved reliefs, and mosaics invite their own destruction. After two years of community outreach, vandalism at Qastal has ceased, and local families have even begun to return architectural elements of the mosque. The outstanding community response to the new mosaic find is more than encouraging.

These issues also directly affect the success of the water development aspect of QCDP. Channels and cisterns, some pristine and some used continuously since the Umayyad period, have been opened throughout the

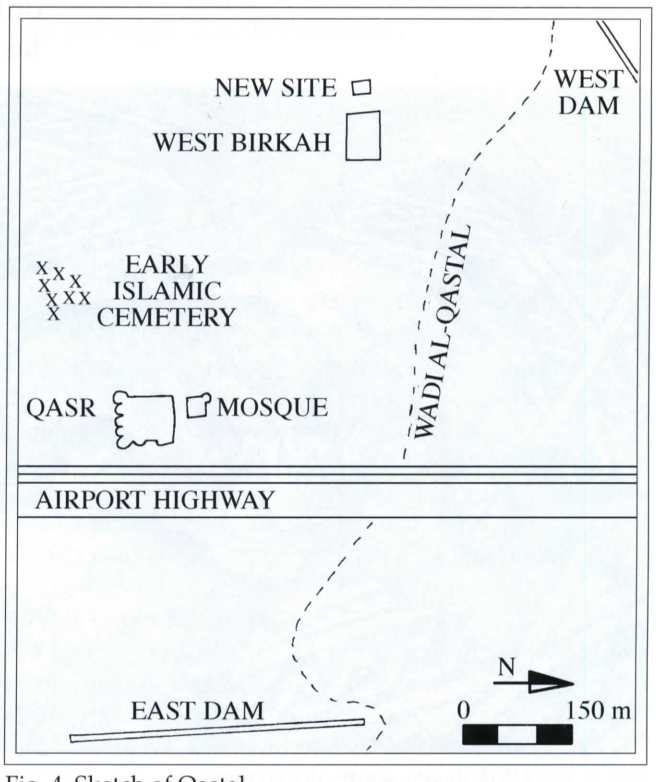


Fig. 4. Sketch of Qastal

site. Apart from the huge central cistern, there are nearly seventy more around the site, many of which are connected by a system of conduits, overflow channels, and filters. They are part of a sophisticated catchment, storage and plumbing network laid down along with the qasr foundations. Most of these cisterns were used to store water or animal fodder until the mid-1960s. Since then, they have been employed as septic tanks and trash dumps. QCDP has cleared and documented nine cisterns adjacent to the site, and selected eight for rehabilitation. Sections of the channel network are exposed for display, as are the cisterns themselves. One intriguing example is a limestone cistern collar surrounded by a mosaic pavement and the remains of a reflecting pool. Nearly identical examples exist in Umayyad structures in Spain.

Fig. 5. Minaret, viewed from the south

Fig. 6. Remains of the minaret's steps

Catchment surfaces are being installed around the qasr to collect rainwater in the cisterns. This water will be used to support drought-resistant landscaping (xeriscape) and for maintenance of the tourist site. The new limestone tile surfaces are intended to mimic, without reproducing, the rather austere cream-colored mosaic forecourt which existed in the Umayyad period. All pavement and landscaping is installed with future research in mind and with buffer areas between interventions and historic structures.

Adjacent to the qasr is the historic mosque, once perhaps the location of 'Azza's maharib. One of the so-called "desert castles," the complex at Qastal most resembles Khirbet al-Minya in Tabariyyah/Tiberias, attributed to Walid bin 'Abd al-Malik, and Khirbet al-Mafjar ("Qasr Hisham," in Ariha/Jericho), attributed to Walid bin Yazid. However, Qastal's independent mosque with its minaret is an important departure from the floor plans of the other qusur. Indeed the minaret at Qastal is the oldest extant minaret built as such. The small mosques attached to qusur do not have minarets; the congregational mosques of the Umayyad period adopted existing towers (*e.g.*, the Great Mosque in Damascus), or the minarets were added later. The internal, spiral staircase at Qastal distinguishes this mosque tower from the towers in other contemporary structures. Mortar analyses and investigation of the foundations confirm that the minaret is contemporary with the qasr.

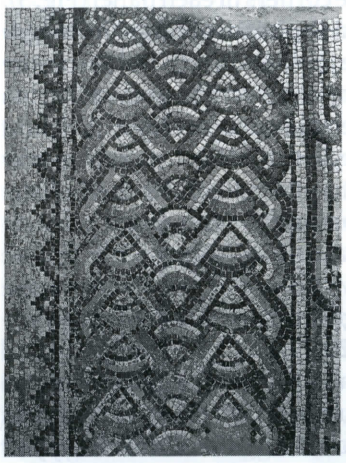


Fig. 7. Qasr, braided border

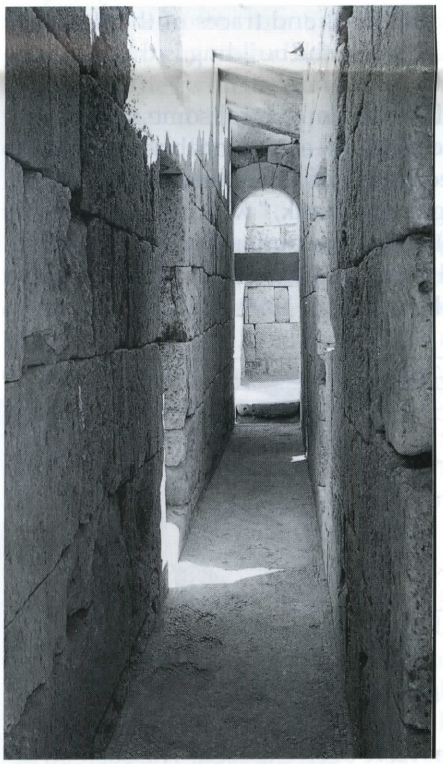


Fig. 8. Corridor with mosaics in the qasr

The decorative motifs of the qasr and mosque are strikingly similar to those adorning the congregational mosque in Amman. They include elaborately carved limestone, wall mosaics, and thousands of square meters of mosaic floors, ranging from simple, three-colored geometric designs to elaborate seven-color braided borders (Fig. 7) and sinuous vegetal motifs. Indeed, throughout the qasr and mosque, the decorative elements appear to have a

garden theme: several leaf patterns are repeated throughout the two buildings; eight different rosette patterns appear in different contexts, but in the same size and geometry. Very little abstract geometric decoration exists except in the simpler mosaic floors. In the qasr and mosque, however, no single example of figural representation, animal or human, has been found. Imagine, then, the surprise at the discovery of two stunning mosaics, each a little over 3 m^2 and both masterly, naturalistic depictions of large cats attacking their prey (Figs. 1-2), with birds in the corners of each panel (Fig. 3).

Once QCDP conducted the initial salvage investigation and determined the extraordinary value of the mosaics, Dr. Ghazi Bisheh took over the excavation for two months during the summer of 2000. Raghda Zawaideh did the cleaning, consolidation and conservation of the mosaics. QCDP is most grateful to the Department of Antiquities for promptly assigning a security guard to the site. It is also a tribute to the Qastal community's growing awareness of the value of the antiquities that no damage has been done since the site was opened in February 2000.

The new find (the so-called "West Birkah Site") actually lies some 400 m northwest of the qasr/mosque complex, immediately across the road from the Umayyad reservoir. In fact, much of the building lies beneath the road and is as yet unexcavated. While virtually all that remains now are the floors and traces of the first wall course, it seems likely that the building is the same one described by Tristram:

"Northwest of the castle ... [are] some singular remains of Greek architecture—one probably a tomb, with elaborately carved lintels of Corinthian character. Below this ... is a large square tank," which is probably our reservoir (birkah). A marble capital fitting his description was salvaged from one of the mounds pushed up by the bulldozer in the winter of 1999 (Fig. 9).

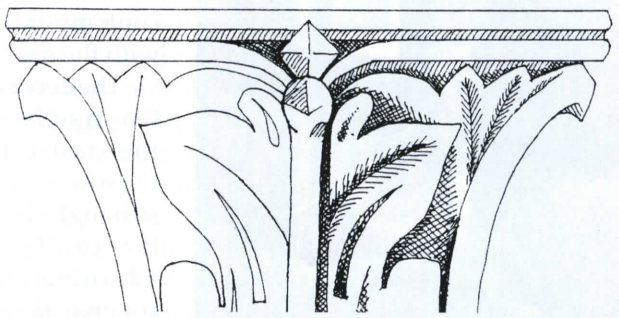


Fig. 9. West Birkah site, marble capital

So far six rooms have been exposed. The basic structure is a small, thick-walled building oriented toward the west. The immediate parallel with Qasr 'Amra is irresistible: the deep apse and small flanking alcove rooms open onto what appears to be a larger room, with the remains of a reflecting pool in the northwest corner. At Qasr 'Amra, however, the apse ("throne niche") is oriented almost due south. It is also the case that there is at least one room original to the Qastal structure opening off of the north wall of the reception room, and the apse itself has two tiny flanking apses (though these again recall the niches in the calderium at 'Amra. Until further excavation is done, it will be difficult to understand the whole structure.

Fig. 10. Marble flooring

Certainly the most striking impression is that of extraordinary richness in the small building's decor. In the relatively small area thus far uncovered, we have evidence of five kinds of mosaic and marble flooring (Fig. 10). Traces of pale gray marble paneling are still *in situ* along the bases of some walls. There is also evidence of wall mosaics and a small collection of carved stucco fragments. It is interesting to note that every remaining stucco fragment reproduces exactly some common motif found at the qasr in carved limestone. Like the extensive decoration at Khirbet al-Mafjar, however, the stucco versions are less lively and organic than the carved stone motifs.

The parallels between this richly appointed structure and the bath at Khirbet al-Mafjar are unavoidable. Pottery finds include Umayyad and Abbasid fragments. The extensive use of glass in the mosaics is intriguing, and—like the pottery finds—tends to place the structure later in the Umayyad period. Deposits of ashy soil and the likely presence of cisterns surrounding the site, as well as its proximity to the reservoir, tempt us to suggest that this may have been a bath associated with the qasr, somewhat as Hammam as-Sarakh is associated with Qasr Hallabat. However, this remains speculation.

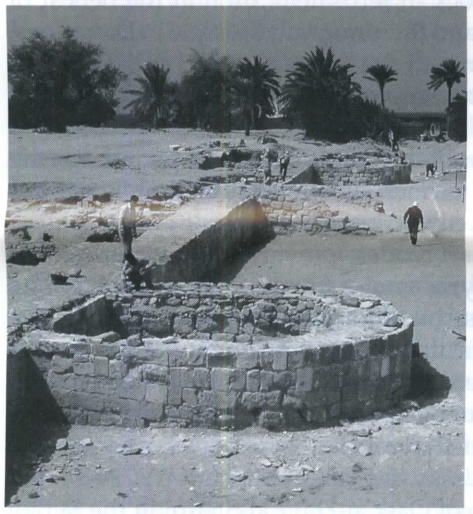
While a great deal remains to be done at Qastal, QCDP is grateful to be able to acknowledge the support of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the Ministry of Culture, the Majlis al-Baladiyya at Qastal, and the Ministry of the Islamic Awqaf.

Funding for the project, in cash and in kind, has been provided by the Department of Antiquities, Fulbright Hays Group Research Abroad, Fulbright Senior Research Fellowships, UNDP's Global Environment Facility, and private donors, including especially: the Main Street Trust of Ventura, California; Gardenia S.R.L. of Verona, Italy; and the Sabat family of Amman. Co-directors Dodoni and Addison began their collaboration while pursuing research on fellowships at ACOR in 1994-95.

The Umayyads and Jordan

The Umayyads (Arabic Banu Umayya) were a clan or extended family of the Quraysh tribe of Mecca, the tribe of Islam's prophet, Muhammad (ca. 570-632). The Umayyads had played an important part in the commercial activities of Mecca before Islam, and a number of their leaders were unquestionably among the Meccan "power elite." After Muhammad's death in 632, several Umayyads figured prominently in the early Islamic conquest of Jordan, Palestine, and Syria in the 630s. Moreover, the third caliph (temporal successor to Muhammad), 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, one of the prophet's early supporters, was an Umayyad.

The prophet Muhammad and his early followers, including the Umayyads, were of course Arabians, but they seem to have had a special interest in geographical Syria (which includes modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel). Some Umayyads are even said to have owned property in Syria before Islam. During 'Uthman's caliphate (644-656), he placed the governorship of Syria in the hands of his kinsman Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan and, after Yazid's death in the 'Amwas plague of 636, of Yazid's brother Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan. 'Uthman himself may have played a key role in establishing the early Islamic settlement at Ayla (modern Aqaba), discovered by Dr. Donald Whitcomb of the University of Chicago and excavated by him in the 1980s and early 1990s as a joint ACOR and University of Chicago project; the ruins of Islamic Ayla, now a public archaeological park adjacent to Aqaba's Corniche, are a "must see" for any visitor to southern Jordan. The discovery of this important site revealed how the earliest Believers (Muslims) from Arabia, when coming into new areas, established themselves in special colonies literally at the gates of existing cities—in this case, immediately adjacent to the older Byzantine settlement of Aila, now being excavated with ACOR's help by Dr. Thomas Parker. Presumably these new settlements *(amsar)* of Believers were to function as garrisons to keep an eye on the towns near which they were built, but they were probably also symbolic of the Believers' sense that they constituted a separate community of the saved, dedicated to the worship of the one God and to pious observance of God's revealed law.



Walls of Ayla; photo by Bert de Vries

'Uthman was murdered by dissidents in 656; this began a prolonged struggle for leadership within the community of Believers that is usually known as the first *fitna* or civil war. Mu'awiya, who remained in Syria throughout this struggle, emerged the victor and was acclaimed caliph in 660—the first of a series of Umayyad caliphs who would, for the next 90 years, rule the growing Islamic empire from Syria. Already in his role as governor of Syria under 'Uthman, Mu'awiya had established close ties with the powerful Kalb tribe that, at that time, dominated the steppe around Palmyra and the city of Damascus. Damascus therefore became, under Mu'awiya and most of his successors, the capital city of the empire.

Because they were among the earliest of the caliphs, the Umayyads were of paramount importance for the development of what we recognize today as Islam and Islamic civilization. As leaders of the early community of Believers, they continued to wage campaigns of conquest by which the new state's borders could expand. This policy of expansion was pursued in fulfillment of what the Umayyads saw as their divine mandate to bring obedience to God's law to the whole world, but it was also very lucrative, for the conquest armies sent large numbers of captives and other booty to the caliphs in Damascus. Under the Umayyads' aegis, the caliphal armies pushed from Egypt across

Qasr 'Amra; photo by James A. Sauer

North Africa, eventually entering Spain in 717; they expanded eastward across Iran to the fringes of central Asia and Afghanistan; and almost annually they launched raids northward against the Byzantines, including two determined but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to seize the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, itself. By the eighth century, Damascus ruled an empire that stretched from Cordoba to Tashkent. And, wherever they went, the Believers established *amsar*, most of

The Dome of Rock, Jerusalem; engraving from Charles Wilson, *Picturesque Palestine , vol. I, 1881*

which developed into true cities from which, in due time, Islam and Islamic culture radiated to the surrounding lands: Fustat in Egypt, Kufa and Basra in Iraq, Qom in western Iran, Marv in eastern Iran, and Qayrawan in Tunisia, to name only the most prominent.

But the Umayyads' activities were far more than merely military. They also oversaw the systematic development of Islamic institutions of state, such as the chancery, tax administration, and judicial system. When Mu'awiya assumed the caliphate in 660, the Believers' "government" was little more than a series of ad hoc arrangements growing out of recently-established military occupations, but by the end of the Umayyad period an organized bureaucracy, functioning in Arabic, had been created. The caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), perhaps the greatest of all Umayyad caliphs, played an especially important role in this process. He ordered that all official records henceforth be kept in Arabic, standardized the empire's weights and measures, and issued a uniform coinage for the whole empire, based on a radically new design, to replace the modified Byzantine and Sasanian coin types that had hitherto circulated.

The Umayyads, as heads of the Islamic community, clearly realized the need to affirm the legitimacy of the Islamic community as a religious entity, and to bolster its religiously-based claims to political supremacy. To do this, they sponsored the compilation of a coherent historical narrative about Islam's beginnings and early development, by patronizing leading scholars of the day who were involved in collecting traditions of the prophet and records about the early history of Islam. (I have studied this process in my book *Narratives of Islamic Origins*.) The Umayyads thus played a crucial role in establishing the Islamic community's very identity, a service to Islam for which, despite its importance, they have not always been given credit. Another part of this process was the Umayyads' construction of magnificent religious buildings that projected this identity and symbolized its claims in physical form—most notably, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, built at the behest of 'Abd al-Malik, and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, built for his son and successor al-Walid (r. 705-715)—two of the finest examples of Islamic art and architecture ever produced.

A distinctive feature of the Umayyad period was the construction of numerous buildings and architectural complexes, often lumped together under the term "Umayyad desert castles," at various sites throughout geographical Syria—not a few of them in Jordan. The nomenclature is a bit unfortunate, because most of these sites were not castles, many were not in the desert, and the majority were probably not built by the Umayyads themselves—but finding an alternative term for them is not easy. They include such diverse constructions as the palace of the Umayyad caliph Hisham (r. 724-743) at Jericho, the site of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian steppe, some distance northeast of Palmyra, the town of 'Anjar ('Ayn al-Jarr) in the Biqa' valley in Lebanon, the bathhouse and audience hall with splendid frescoes at Qasr 'Amra, between Amman and Azraq, and the sites

Qasr Mushatta; photo by James A. Sauer

of Mushatta and Qastal near the Queen Alia International Airport (recent discoveries at Qastal are discussed in the article by Dr. Erin Addison in this issue). Scholars have debated what the function of these "desert palaces" was, but there is a growing sense that no single explanation will cover all of them. A few seem indeed to have been palaces for the Umayyad caliphs, but others may have been the nuclei of planned urban centers, or caravan stations along key trade routes, or the private homesteads of important Umayyad retainers; and, over the past several decades, more detailed archaeological study of these sites has revealed that many had sophisticated catchment and water-management arrangements that were usually not noted by early investigators. The existence of these "water works," some of which involve miles of sluices and dams and vast reservoirs and cisterns, have given support to the idea that some of these sites were intended as centers for agricultural exploitation. Whatever their purpose, they remain a group of thoroughly fascinating historical monuments testifying to the vitality of the Umayyad age in this region.

It is important to remember that during the period of Umayyad rule, the Believers or Muslims were still a minority of the population—at the beginning, indeed, a very small minority—in most of the areas they ruled, including Jordan. Islam spread among the local populations, but only gradually at first, and the Umayyads do not seem to have forced people to abandon their earlier religion. Indeed, there is good evidence not only of Umayyad religious tolerance, but even of a kind of symbiosis, whereby some Christians (and, perhaps, Jews) worked together with the newly-arrived Arabian Believers as part of the Umayyad regime (one only needs remember the case of the Christian saint, John of Damascus, who served as a high administrator in the Umayyad court). Although some seventh-century Christian texts speak of the destruction of churches and villages by the Believers, this probably reflected only the passing instability of the period of conquest and transition, for many other Christian texts describe the Umayyads' ecumenical qualities. Indeed, a Christian author from northern Mesopotamia, writing in about 687, even complains in his Syriac chronicle about this lack of religious bigotry under Mu'awiya's rule: "Of each person they required only tribute, allowing him to remain in whatever faith he wished ... There was no distinction between pagan and Christian ... the faithful was not known from a Jew." (Translation from Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, 1997). Obviously, in his view, this was religious toleration to a fault!

Archaeological exploration in Jordan (and elsewhere) over the past forty years—not a little of it sponsored or facilitated by ACOR—has shown not only that churches continued to be used through the Umayyad period, but also that a number of important new churches were built at this time—a phenomenon studied in detail by former ACOR Fellow Dr. Robert Schick in his ground-breaking book, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule*. In other ways, too, the archaeological record suggests that life of most communities in Jordan continued largely unchanged for many decades after the first arrival of the Believers/Muslims in the 630s. In Jordan, the transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic eras was not abrupt one, then, but rather constituted a gradual transformation of the society that we are still trying to understand. The fascinating mix of the old, the transitional, and the new that marked the culture of Jordan under the Umayyads is now elegantly presented in the recently-published Jordan volume of the "Museum with No Frontiers" project, entitled *The Umayyads*, which surveys admirably many aspects of the culture of this rich historical period.

Fred M. Donner

Dr. Donner is Professor of Near Eastern History in the Oriental Institute and Chairman of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. He is spending the winter and spring at ACOR as National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow, in order to draft a book tentatively entitled "Muhammad and the Believers: at the Origins of Islam."

Archaeology and Environment of the Dead Sea Plain: Excavations at the PPNA site of ZAD 2

La Trobe University (Australia) carried out a second season of excavation at the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) site of Zahrat adh-Dhra' 2 (ZAD 2) in January and February, 2001. The site is currently under investigation as part of the La Trobe University / Arizona State University 'Archaeology and Environment of the Dead Sea Plain' Project directed by Phillip Edwards, Steven Falconer, and Patricia Fall. The region called Zahrat adh-Dhra' (the hinterland of Dhra') lies on the broad Dead Sea Plain, east of the sprawling village of Ghor al-Mazra'a. It is delimited by a roughly triangular area formed by the merging channels of Wadi Kerak and Wadi adh-Dhra', which run to the west, and the Kerak Road to the east. The area is an unusual and spectacular place, and this is best appreciated by approaching it down the long winding Kerak road. As one draws near the edge of the Jordan Valley, deep rock beds buckle over and plunge straight into the ground. No less vivid, the eastern sector of Zahrat adh-Dhra' is dominated by the only extensive exposure in Jordan of the Dana Conglomerate Formation, represented by variously tilted blocks of red and white evaporites interbedded with massive alluvial chert seams. Here lies the PPNA site of ZAD 2, the target of our current investigations, with its companion Middle Bronze site of ZAD 1.

Below the ZAD sites to the west, the Dana Formation is overlain by the Lisan Marl Formation, composed of the sedimentary detritus of Lake Lisan. This brackish to saline body of water occupied the entire Jordan Valley