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Chalcis/Qinnasrin: from Hellenistic city to the jund capital of North Syria

Marie-Odile Rousset

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CHALCIS/QINNASRIN: FROM HELLENISTIC CITY TO THE *JUND* CAPITAL OF NORTH SYRIA

MARIE-ODILE ROUSSET¹

ABSTRACT

The archaeological programme at Qinnasrin aims to study one of the first Islamic cities in northern Syria, which was the chief town of the region (jund) from the 7th until the 10th century. This paper will present the latest results of archaeological work at Chalcis/Qinnasrin, concerning its extension and evolution.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological research programme at Qinnasrin (Syria) has been managed since 2003 in collaboration with the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities and Museums, and the Archaeological Museum of Aleppo. It aims to study city formation in the early Islamic period through the example of Qinnasrin, one of the first Islamic cities in northern Syria.² Qinnasrin is known to have been the eponym and one of the chief towns of the *jund* until the mid-10th century. The question of whether there was a newly founded town of Qinnasrin after the Arabo-Islamic conquest was initially studied by Donald Whitcomb, then subsequently by myself, through work on the site of al-Hadir.³ Al-Hadir seems to have been only a new suburb, founded at the beginning of the Umayyad period, of the pre-existing town of Chalcis/Qinnasrin, which lay 4km

1 CNRS - Groupe de Recherches et d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée et le Moyen-Orient (GREMMO) Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon, France

2 I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the DGAMS, its General Director, Mr Bassam Jamous, and its Director of Archaeological Studies and Research, Mr Michel al-Maqdissi for their help during the work there. The mission was funded by the *Sous-Direction des Echanges scientifiques et de la Recherche, Pôle Sciences Humaines et Sociales* of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and also, since 2010, by the Max van Berchem Foundation. The mission was also grateful to benefit from the help of two staff members on secondment from the *Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives* (INRAP).

3 A first research programme was conducted at al-Hadir in 1997-2001 by an international team under the leadership of Marianne Barrucand (Université Paris IV), Donald Whitcomb (Oriental Institute, Chicago University) and Claus-Peter Haase (Kunsthistorisches Museum Berlin): Whitcomb 1999; 2000. The work under my supervision, which took place in 2003 and from 2005-2007 (survey, excavations, topographical mapping, observation of digging for foundations of new buildings, etc.) showed that the ancient site was only modestly urbanised: no roadway system, no public buildings, no traces of industrial or commercial activities were found. Al-Hadir was thus one of the quarters outside the main town of Qinnasrin, on the edge of the urban area or slightly beyond it: Rousset 2009; Rousset *et al.* 2008; Rousset (ed.) 2011.

west of it. The present focus is therefore on understanding this latter site prior to Islamic occupation, as well as its subsequent evolution.

Surveys conducted in 2008-2010 allowed us to determine the extension of the town from the beginning of its settlement (Middle Bronze Age) up to the last phases of Islamic occupation, as well as to identify the main elements of the site, such as the rampart and doors, tell/acropolis, residential quarters, necropolis, quarries, and artisanal areas. A major discovery was made on the mountain above the city, which is a remarkable observation point rising up between ploughed areas and the steppes. A fortification was built here between the 6th and 9th centuries AD (Fig. 1).

HISTORY AND PREVIOUS STUDIES OF THE SITE

The site of Chalcis ad Belum/Qinnasrin lies under the modern village of al-'Is, 25km south-west of Aleppo. It is located in the foothills of the easternmost part of the calcareous massif of northern Syria, thus in a zone between ploughed areas in the north-west and steppe lands in the south-east.

Qinnasrin, which has been the traditional name of the site since the Aramaic period, was renamed Chalcis when Seleucos Nikator founded a garrison town there. It continued to have this function until the end of its existence. From the time of Pliny, the region of Chalcis, the Chalcidene, was described as the most fertile region in Syria, and the Roman highway from Antioch to Beroea passed through it. Despite its importance, Chalcis is a city with almost no history during the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Cohen 2006: 143-145). The size and significance of the city increased during late antiquity, and it is well known as a centre of early Christianity and the chief town of the district of *Syria Prima*. It was then a stronghold against Persian attacks (Bowersock 2002).

Muslims conquered the city in 637-638, after the expiration of a treaty granting a one-year period of protection to northern Mesopotamia. The *jund* of Qinnasrin was created by Moawiyya or, according to al-Baladhuri, by Yazid I (680-683), who separated it from the *jund* of Hims.⁴ Qinnasrin was considered the capital of the north Syrian area at that time, and it was an important centre of power under the Umayyad dynasty (660-750). Medieval historians talk about Qinnasrin as a rich city, in the middle of a very fertile agricultural region. It was destroyed by the Byzantines during their struggles with the Hamdanids, shortly after the middle of the 10th century. In the 11th and 12th centuries, there is only brief mention of a fortification, as a base camp for the Seljuks while fighting the Crusaders. By the start of the 13th century, the town was known only for its caravanserai, as a stopping point on the road to Damascus.

The earliest archaeological work at this site consisted of the recording of inscriptions in the 18th century (summarised in Feissel 2009: 84). The first map of the city was

4 A detailed history of Qinnasrin in the Islamic period is given and discussed in Rousset 2009.

drawn by Brossé, a French architect, in 1919 (Monceaux and Brossé 1925: fig. 1). He focused his attention on the main parts of the site, located 'between two mountains', near the Qwayq River, and surrounded to the south and the east by marshes. A survey and another, more precise, map of the city were completed by Lauffray and published in Mousterde and Poidebard's volume entitled *Limes de Chalcis* (1945: 7-9, pl. I).

No excavation had been undertaken on the site prior to our own. We conducted a walking survey to collect sherds of pottery to date the different components of the site. This was done using topographical features as guides or by choosing sampling areas based on the aerial photographs (Fig. 2). Two series of archaeological excavations, the vast corpus of written sources and aerial photographs, geomagnetic surveys, topographical maps, and the walking surveys all permitted us to confirm the location of historical Qinnasrin, and to discover that the site was much larger than previously believed. Earlier descriptions restricted the site to the area enclosed by the Byzantine rampart (Fig. 2: grey zone). Several zones were identified, each corresponding to a different kind of settlement: the tell or acropolis in the south and its surroundings; the modern town which overlays half of the site; the Byzantine city and its ramparts; the north-eastern quarter, still free of modern buildings; quarries and necropolis; and Mount al-'Is (Rousset and al-Youssef 2010).

THE EVOLUTION OF OCCUPATION OF THE TOWN

The general trend of settlement in Chalcis/Qinnasrin is a gradual shift from the south of the site to the north and north-west. The earliest objects are dated to the Middle Bronze Age, and come from a necropolis, which overlays the summit and the slopes of the mountain. Many tombs have been damaged by robbers. We recently found two cylinder seals in the debris they left behind. These tombs can be connected to small settlements located near the river and to the ancient occupation of the tell (Fig. 3a).

The settlements of the Hellenistic and Roman period are located on the surface of the tell as well as in its vicinity, to the south-west (Fig. 3b). The earliest sherds uncovered in this area can be dated to the 2nd century BC. Evidence of the classical settlement can also be found in the traces of Hippodamian planning preserved in the present-day road system. For instance, the road coming from Aleppo in the north-west of the city and leading to the centre turns at a right angle to the west. Following it straight, one would reach the citadel at a point where a door once existed in the citadel wall. There are also other vestiges of orthogonal planning, for example the northern part of the triangular school courtyard is perpendicular to the Aleppo road.

Between the modern town and the mountain is an area of quarries, and a necropolis. These marked the northern limit of the classical city. The quarries were used from the late Hellenistic-Roman period (as suggested by a large fragment of an unfinished 0.90 m-diameter column discovered at the bottom of the quarry), until the Islamic period. Some of the quarrying activity cut into and destroyed ancient hypogea bearing

decoration (Fig. 4) or inscriptions. These tombs are dug into the calcareous mountain in a typical layout, that is to say with a *dromos*, a central chamber, and 3 alcoves each with *loculi* (Monceaux and Brossé 1925: fig. 2). A statue from the Roman period was found in a cave in 1919 (Monceaux and Brossé 1925: 348; Seyrig 1970: 94-95).

In P408 (Fig. 2), a large wall was uncovered during the digging of a modern canal. It is 2.70 m in width and is visible as a line on the aerial images. This could well be the enclosure wall of the classical city, as suggested by the 3rd-century sherds found in the earth above it (Fig. 1).

During the Byzantine period, the city achieved its greatest spatial extension. At that time, the fortified tell acted as the acropolis and domestic dwellings were located at the foot of the tell, surrounded by the city wall. Byzantine sherds were found in almost every area surveyed (Fig. 3c). The best preserved construction in al-‘Is is the Byzantine city wall. The western door still bears a lintel with an inscription in Greek mentioning the restoration of the rampart under Justinian by Isadora of Miletus, in 550 (Fig. 5). This work is also mentioned by Procopius (Feissel 2009; Fourdrin and Feissel 1994). Other parts of the city wall are preserved in modern houses (Fig. 1). Geomagnetic survey of the northern quarter has shown that the density of the dwelling is much higher inside than outside the wall.

Outside the city wall, three isolated buildings could have been monasteries (Fig. 2: P63, P91 and P99). In P63, a mosaic floor depicting a fruit dish and bread remain in a courtyard, near a rectangular limestone tank. In all of these buildings tesserae of polychrome mosaic were found.

In the north-eastern suburbs, artisanal activities were found. The surface of sounding A (Fig. 1: A) was covered with numerous vitreous scoriae and a workshop producing plant ash or even primary soda glass has been partly excavated. Its main feature is a huge trench filled with ash mixed with 9th-century material. The trench cuts through levels dating to the Byzantine period. The scoriae are present in both phases, perhaps signifying that this activity lasted until the 9th century. Further excavations will be necessary to understand the exact nature of this activity. Both nearby (Fig. 2: P40) and further away (Fig. 2: P29-32) are surface remains of pottery furnaces, with over-baked elements suggesting a Byzantine date. A geophysical survey in the eastern area showed a total of twenty furnaces.

Sedentary and nomadic settlement were separated in Chalcis in the 5th-6th century. Typical steppe nomads' caves are dug into the mountain, taking advantage of the particularity of the soil: after penetrating an initial layer of solid rock, the soft limestone beneath can be easily removed (Fig. 2: P53, P56).⁵ One lintel above a cave entrance is decorated with an engraved cross.

During the early Islamic period, occupation of the city was reduced to the tell and its immediate vicinity, inside the former Byzantine city wall and the areas to the west

5 This kind of cave, with a *dromos*, light hole and one or more underground rooms, is typical of nomadic Hellenistic-Roman settlements in the area south-east of Chalcis. They were used until the end of the Byzantine period and reused, but without new digging, in the Ayyubid period: Rousset 2011:126.

and south of the tell were gradually abandoned (Fig. 3d). The fortification atop the mountain might have been built during this period (see below).

Outside the Byzantine city wall, in the north, pottery dated from the 5th to the 10th century was found. If we consider the Byzantine pottery to be related to industrial activities, then the early Islamic sherds may mark the date at which the area was first primarily residential.

In sounding B (Fig. 1: B; Fig. 6), a private bath belonging to a luxurious residence was partly excavated. The first level could be dated either to the late 6th century or to the Umayyad period. During the second phase, the building was paved with a mosaic floor bearing a geometrical pattern (Fig. 7). The last occupation of the building dates to the middle of the 9th century. This indicates a continuity of the residential function of this area outside the city wall during the early Islamic period. We know from texts that Qinnasrin was a prosperous city in a rich agricultural region until the first half of the 10th century (Rousset 2009: 364).

Evolution of the settlement during the medieval period is relatively clear. 11th- to 12th-century sherds of pottery have been found only on the top of the tell. This provides an opportunity to study fortified settlements during these centuries, about which we currently know very little. Outside the citadel in the northern part of the site, we also discovered tombstones with carved inscriptions from the same period.

During the Ayyubid period occupation was reduced to a small hamlet inside the Byzantine city wall (Fig. 2: P35, P39, P403). Houses were built near or around caves; probably the latter were there first. Some of the Byzantine nomads' caves in the mountain were reused (Fig. 2: P44-45). At the same time, a small building was erected on the highest point of the small hills of the mountain. It is known as 'Nabi 'Is' and was drawn by Lauffray (Mouterde and Poidebard 1945: 8). The Ayyubid pottery on the slope of the hill (P44) fits with the sources that discuss this mausoleum. It is known from al-Harawi's pilgrimage guide (d. 1215; Sourdel 1957: 13-14) to have been in existence at the end of the 12th century, and is dated by a Kufic building inscription to around 1155 (Combe *et al.* 1937: 288).

Mamluke sherds are present in P16, P40 and P42, where evidence of isolated square buildings appears on the ground. This could be related to the texts mentioning only a caravanserai in Qinnasrin at this time (Rousset 2009: 364).

THE TELL

On the surface of the tell are buildings and fortification walls. The results of the geomagnetic survey remain to be fully analysed, but appear very promising (Bière, Rousset 2009) (Fig. 8). The initial entrance, to the west, was in use during the classical period. A second entrance gate, to the east, was later built during the period of Byzantine settlement. This gate led down a very straight road to the centre of the acropolis. The geomagnetic survey reveals that each gate had its own associated walls network.

In the south-east corner, a building with a circular layout could be a church. There are some other examples of this layout in northern Syrian churches in the 6th century (J.-C. Balty personal communication). We know from textual sources that monks lived in the so-called ‘desert of Chalcis’ at the end of the 4th century. During the conversion of the late Roman inhabitants of Chalcis to Christianity, a monk named Rabulla, who was born in Chalcis, ‘burned the temple on the hill’ and ‘built instead a church’ (Gatier 1995: 445-446). This could well be it.

Without excavations, nothing can be known about the interesting question of the nature of the early Islamic occupation of this acropolis.

The walls currently on the surface of the tell could be from the last period indicated by the pottery, that is, the 12th century. According to some texts, the fortress of Qinnasrin was refortified in 1086 by the Seljukid Qutlumush, who took refuge inside, and later in 1119, by the Zangids (Rousset 2009: 365). So Qinnasrin had an active military function up to the beginning of the Crusader period.

THE CITADEL OF THE MOUNTAIN

On the top of the mountain are the most interesting structures for the study of the urban history of Qinnasrin. Geographically, it is an excellent point from which to observe the territory around the city (Fig. 9). The only preserved monument here is the mausoleum called Nabi ‘Is. This tomb is located in a tower, which is but one of the elements of a fortification that covers the entire summit of the mountain. The fortress is laid out along a line of equal elevation, about two thirds of the way up the mountain slope. Three small tells, which were probably towers (‘Nabi ‘Is’, P49 and P80), are connected by walls. The walls were made of mudbricks in the south (discovered by inhabitants while digging the foundations of a new house in P52) and in the north (P80, P86 and destroyed by the new quarry in P409). In other specific locations, for example across the eastern wadis where stronger walls were needed, ashlar were used, but were later removed for reuse.

The entrance system may have been located in the southern wadi, with parallel walls running along the sides of the valley (P46-47). Sounding C was set at the northern corner of these walls (east of P47), permitting us to observe the masonry inside the walls. Ashlars were used for the foundations (Fig. 10) and the face of the wall (in some cases, the face was built with mid-size, unhewn stone blocks). Almost all of these ashlar were taken for reuse after the site’s abandonment, and only heaps of stone remain with trenches on either side. The inside of the wall was filled with huge quantities of crushed calcareous stones or pebbles.

In the north-eastern corner, four huge tunnels are the remains of ancient chamber quarries, from which the crushed stones for building most of the walls of the fortress were excavated; these lead to big square rooms, one of which is sectioned by the contemporary quarry. The ashlar were extracted from an extensive open area, between

P400, P49 and P66, as shown by the geomagnetic survey, and on the eastern slopes of the massif. On the high point in the middle of the fortress (P400) red soil characteristic of the remains of a mudbrick building was found. The geomagnetic survey revealed a square construction, 80 m a side, on this location.

Some elements might permit dating of the fortification: apart from the Middle Bronze-Age sherds, the pottery on the summit is dated from the 5th to the 10th century. Some of the 5th- to 6th-century sherds are related to the underground Byzantine settlement. Many of the caves were destroyed by the construction of the fortress. This would mean that the fortress could have been built after the 6th and occupied until the mid-10th century.

It is not clear whether the fortification mentioned in texts from the early Islamic period refers to this one, or to the one on the tell. For Ibn al-‘Adim, the mausoleum of Nabi ‘Is could be the tomb of Salih b. ‘Ali b. ‘Abd Allah b. al-‘Abbas (d. 769), governor of Qinnasrin in 758. This cenotaph is located inside a tower bearing loopholes, on the highest point of the mountain, on an artificial tell. It is interesting to note that Salih b. ‘Ali is known to have fortified the frontier against the Byzantines. The fortress of Qinnasrin could well have been one of his works.

The purpose of the fortified settlement on the top of the mountain of Qinnasrin, in a strategic position, may have been to ensure Muslim control over the city and its surrounding territory. It is clear that it became a refuge during the military campaigns between Byzantines and Muslims, and was then abandoned at the same time as the town, in the middle of the 10th century.

CONCLUSION

Qinnasrin is considered the capital of the north Syrian *jund* of Qinnasrin, and an important centre of power under the Umayyad dynasty (660–750). Yet there is no extant mention of a caliphal palace in Qinnasrin, even though such mentions do exist for Khanasir and Aleppo. There are no textual references to any of the known governors of the city having his residence there.

In the 10th century, al-Balkhi (d. 934) and al-Muqaddasi (who was in Aleppo around 965–975) considered Qinnasrin a town without political influence, noting that the power was in fact in Aleppo. If Qinnasrin was already deserted at this time or if Aleppo was the political and economic centre, what was Qinnasrin’s *raison d’être*? Based on our study, it would appear that Chalcis/Qinnasrin was always a garrison town. It was founded for this purpose in the Hellenistic period. Its position, at the edge of the steppe, was of particular interest for maintaining contact with the tribes and managing income from agriculture and breeding in this area. At the time when Muslims first arrived, there were a few hundred soldiers in Chalcis and around 1500 in Antioch. These two contingents formed the most important garrisons of the east, assigned to defend against the Persians. In the early Islamic period, a fortress

independent from the city was built on the summit of the mountain to anchor the new power and to control the area. In the early Abbasid period, the city could have played the same role as Raqqa, that is, as a rear base for military campaigns against the Byzantines. In the Seljuk period, long after the destruction of the fortress on the mountain and the transfer of power to Aleppo, the tell was re-fortified and played a role in the battles against the Crusaders.

Nevertheless, it did not have an exclusively military function. There were significant commercial and artisanal activities, making the city prosperous until the mid-10th century. This prosperity gave rise to luxurious residences and the presence of trade-goods coming from abroad.

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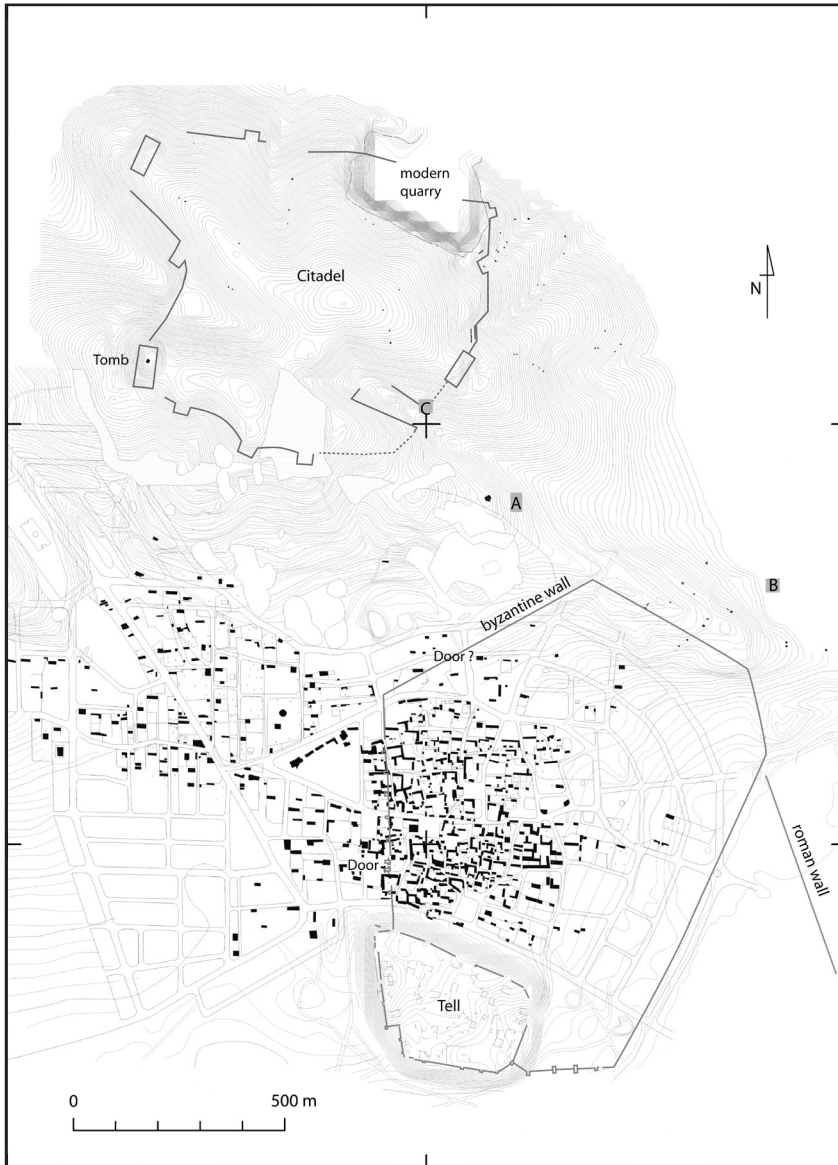


Fig. 1: General plan of Chalcis/Qinnasrin, with the localisation of archaeological soundings and enclosure walls in relation to the buildings of the modern village.

Source: M.-C. Bosert, B. Depeux, M. Rochette, M.-O. Rousset.



Fig. 2: Chalchis/Qinnasrin. Localisation of the surveyed areas. The small grey zone corresponds to the protected area of the site.

Source: M.-O. Rousset, based on a Google Earth image from March 22/2010.

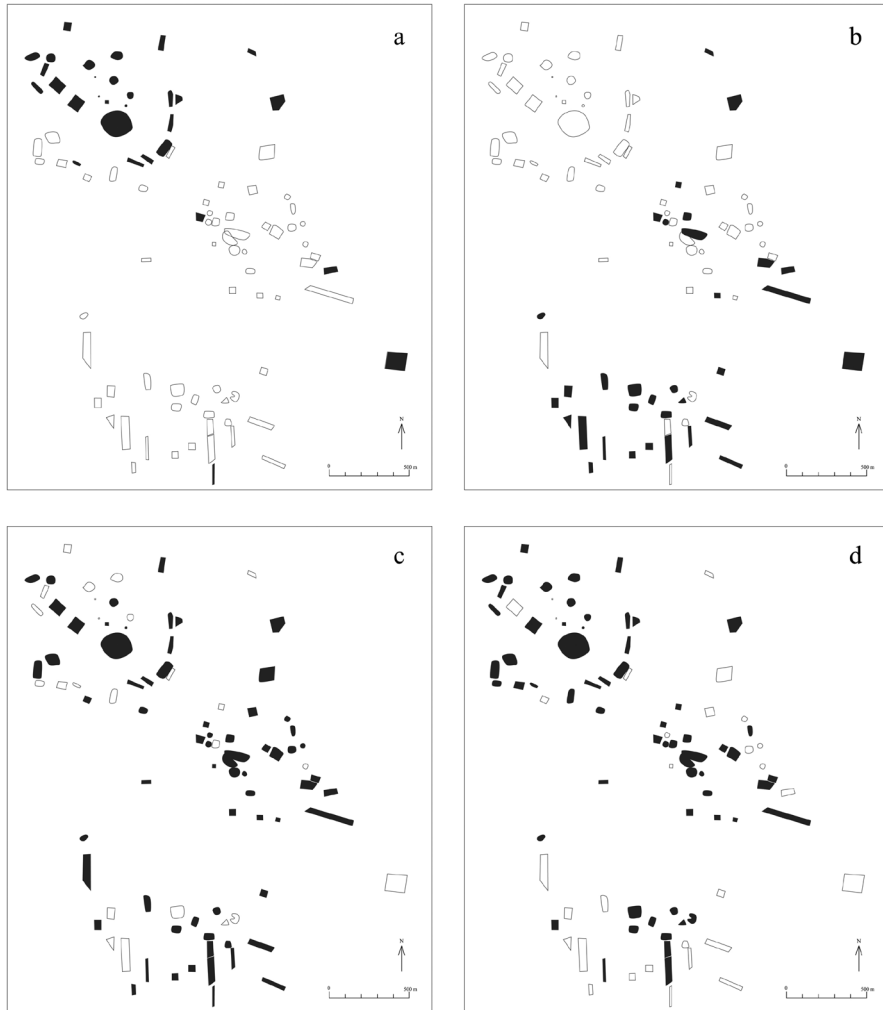


Fig. 3: Chalcis/Qinnasrin. Repartition maps of the pottery sherds from the survey, by chronological periods:

a: Bronze Age; b: Hellenistic and Roman; c: Byzantine; d: early Islamic.

Source: M. Rochette, M.-O. Rousset.



Fig. 4: Chalcis/Qinnasrin, Roman Palmyrenian-style tomb, in area P407.
Source: photograph by M.-O. Rousset.



Fig. 5: Lintel on the city gate of Byzantine Chalcis/Qinnasrin.
Source: photograph by M.-O. Rousset.



Fig. 6: Chalcis/Qinnasrin, general view of sounding B from the west.
Source: photograph by M. Rochette.



Fig. 7: Chalcis/Qinnasrin, mosaic floor of phase II in the bath, sounding B.
Source: photograph by M.-O. Rousset.

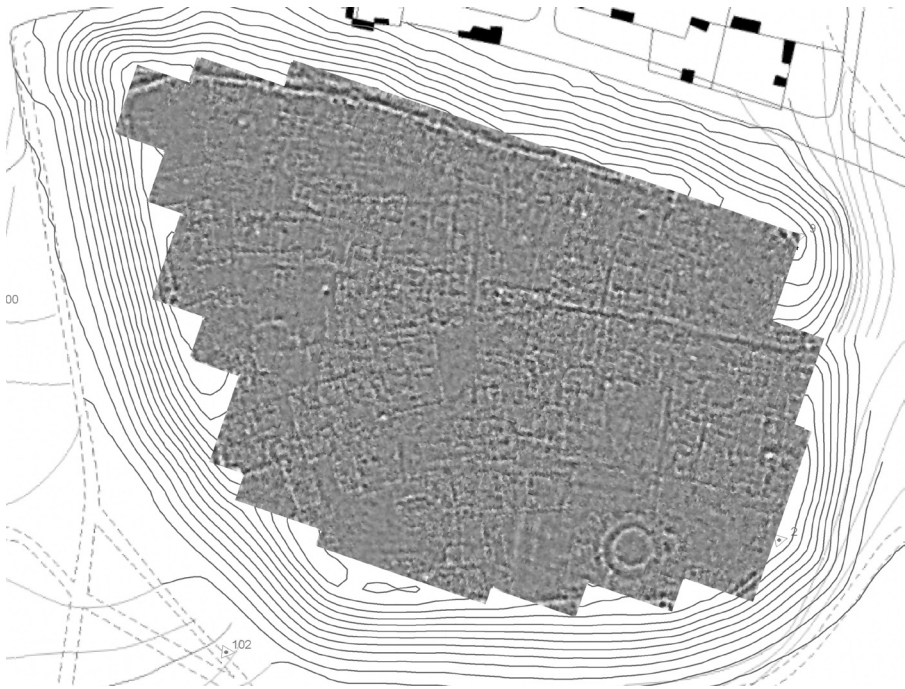


Fig. 8: Chalcis/Qinnasrin, geomagnetic survey on the surface of the tell.
Source: Y. Bière.



Fig. 9: Chalcis/Qinnasrin, citadel of the mountain. Geomagnetical survey and general plan.

Source: Y. Bière, M.-O. Rousset.



Fig. 10: Chalcis/Qinnasrin. The wall of the rampart in sounding C.
Source: photograph by V. Vezzoli.

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