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The 2021 Season of the Upper
Wâdî as-Sirhân

Survey Project

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Saudi Arabia

2021, 25 Sept.-5 Oct.

Report

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Saud AL-TAMEMI, Jaza AL-HARBI and Dr Tara STEIMER-HERBET



Paris, 2022 May

Introduction

This report presents the main results of the exploration survey undertaken in the northern part of al-Jawf Province between September 25th and October 5th 2021. The survey followed the meeting organized in 2019 in Riyadh between A. Zahrani (Saudi MoC), H. Rozier (French Embassy) and P. Piraud-Fournet (European Commission – Paris 1 Sorbonne). Its objective was on the one hand to start the architectural survey, description and study of the main ancient buildings previously identified in the Upper Wâdī as-Sirhân, also referred as the Qurayyât al-Milh (“Salt villages”) area. On the other hand, it aimed to contribute to the assessment of the amount, quality and perhaps touristic values of archaeological resources and heritage in this area.

In fall 2021, on the field, the team was composed by Dr Pauline Piraud-Fournet, Pierre-Marie Blanc & Thibaud Fournet (CNRS), Khalifah al-Rowaili, Saud al-Tamemi & Jaza al-Harbi (MoC); the survey was funded by the Saudi Ministry of Culture, French Embassy, European Commission HOLYHOST Research Programme and University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, ArScAn UMR 7041-CNRS and we want to warmly thank the institutions and people who made this survey possible.

The report first reminds the historical importance of the region of the Upper Wâdī as-Sirhân and the previous surveys and studies carried out. In a second part, it provides a description and first analysis of the sites recorded during the mission.

The geography of the Wâdī as-Sirhân (the “Valley of the wolf”) is featured by a shallow depression running over 500 km in a southeasterly direction from Bosra-Bostra (Southern Syria) to al-Jawf (Northern Arabia) on the fringes of the Nafud desert (Winnett and Reed, 1970: 56 and Wasse and Rollefson, 2005: 1-2) (**Fig. 1** – Pl. 1). The eastern margin of the Wâdī as-Sirhân is clearly defined by the western edge of the basalt desert (Harra), itself an extension of the volcanic uplands of the Jebel al-‘Arab in southern Syria. The flint and gravel plains of eastern Jordan drop gently down to it through a series of tributary wadis running from south-west to north-east. Permanent water sources are now restricted to a small number of oases (Kâf and Ithra for instance) located on the eastern side of the wadi along the edge of the basalt. However, there is documentary evidence to suggest that marshes and wetlands survived in the basin from the Lower and Middle Paleolithic until well into the Mediaeval period. Throughout history, the Wâdī as-Sirhân has been considered as one of the principal routes from the southern Levant into the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, good agricultural conditions are found in two locations which form a group of oases-villages. The first one formed the Qurayyât al-Milh located not far from the Jordan-Saudi Arabian border, the second group is found in the Jawf region further south.

As early as the middle of the nineteenth century, scholars have taken interest for the history and the heritage of Northern Arabia, even if only a few archaeologists ventured further east into the Wâdī as-Sirhân, which is located away from the medieval and modern pilgrimage routes. Yet, as historians such as N. Glueck in the 1940s, and more recently D. Graf (1978 and 1989), G. Bowersock (1983) and T. Bauzou (1996) reminded it, the Wâdī as-Sirhân is a key place in the history of the Near East because of its location between the Arabian Peninsula, Syria and Mesopotamia. It can be assumed to have been an attractive location for human occupation from the Lower and Middle Paleolithic, and in the Early Bronze Age. The presence of a number of wells located along the wadi indeed made it the favorite route for caravans travelling between Syria and North Arabia (Winnett and Reed, 1970: 56.). Before the Roman period, security and control of the road through the Wâdī as-Sirhân would have been placed under the responsibility of Nabataean desert patrols (Bowersock, 1983: 155). After AD 106, the Roman army took it over and was based in the cities of the Decapolis, in *Bostra*, capital city of the *Provincia Arabia* and in the oases of Dûmat al-Jandal, modern al-Jawf. Thus, the settlements on the northern side of the Wâdī as-Sirhân were probably

built as stops for the caravans (Isaac, 1989: 247-250), perhaps similar to the well-known settlements identified in the Negev. This area is also likely to provide the farthest remains of the eastern extension of the Nabataean Kingdom, as well as remains of Roman and Byzantine (Christian) occupations; two oases-villages, Kâf and Ithra (Fig. 2 – Pl. 1), are supposed to still preserve remains dated to the Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine periods.

As specialists of these latter Periods and ancient basalt construction, one of the aims of P.-M. Blanc, T. Fournet and P. Piraud-Fournet was also to reassess and document monuments and sites that can provide information regarding the occupation of the possible northeastern margins of the Nabataean kingdom and Roman and Byzantine Empire, through an inventory and a proper mapping of their possible architectural remains.

Fig. 1. Map of the Near East, location of the Wadi Sirhan in northern Saudi Arabia (P. P.-F. 2019)

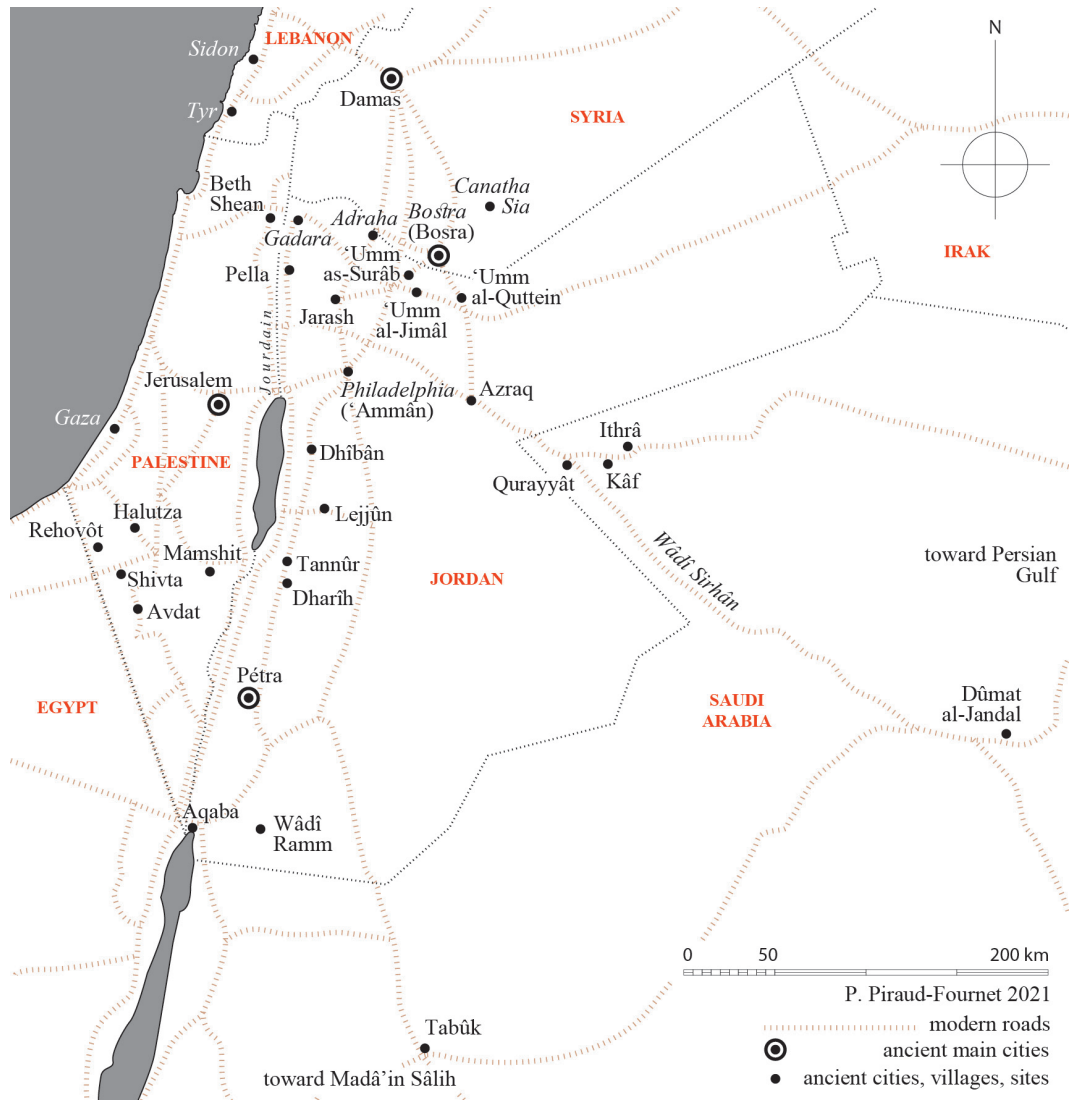


Fig. 2. The oasis-village of Ithra, in front of the Jebel Radwa. On the foreground, the top of the Jebel Washwash (P. P.-F. 2021)



Previous Studies, Surveys and Identified Remains

So far, a few field surveys were undertaken in the area to identify sites, document ancient monuments, collect samples of pottery in order to date the occupation of the sites, search for ancient inscriptions. Following the work of previous explorers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as J. Euting (1883) who provided picturesque drawings of Kâf and Ithra villages (**Fig. 3** – Pl. 2), the most relevant archaeological survey in the northern Wâdî as-Sirhân took place in 1962. It consisted on a three day-survey undertaken by F.V. Wennett and W.L. Reed (1970) who highlighted important remains in Kâf and Ithra areas. According to them, these remains include, in Kâf, an imposing citadel called Qasr as-Sa'îdî and an hypothetical Nabataean temple transformed into a mosque within the citadel; in Ithra, an ancient Qasr north to the oasis, and a hypothetical Nabataean temple in the southeastern district of the oasis-village called Râslaniyah. South to the village, they also recorded a stone bearing a Nabataean inscription, found near a small room “now almost buried in the sand” (Wennett and Reed, 1970: 56-64). In the northern city of al-Hadîthah, they identified the remains of an ancient irrigation channel possibly dated to the medieval Arab period and the ruins of a qasr and ancient cemetery with graves and sherds of the Late Byzantine or Early Arab period. Near Qarqar, they visited the Umm Ayash massif. In all the region, they recorded Thamudic, Nabataean and Safaitic (and one Palmyrenian) inscriptions.

In 1976, an exploration of the Northern Wâdî as-Sirhân was included in the Saudi Arabian Comprehensive Archaeological Survey Program launched by a team of Saudi and foreign specialists. They published a preliminary report of the first phase to present the initial findings (Adams et al. 1977). P.J. Parr carried out the 1976 expedition in Kâf and Ithra areas, that recorded about thirty sites or monuments. According to Parr, the occupation of the Wâdî as-Sirhân in ancient times mainly consisted of villages and burial grounds belonging to Transjordanian peoples and the major occupation of the area could be dated, by comparison with pottery provided by well-studied Jordanian sites, approximately to the 7th century Iron Age II (Parr 1989: 44-48).

In 1996, a one day-survey done by K.I. al-Muaikil and S.A. al-Theeb (Al-Muaikil and Al-Theeb 1996) identified and added to this list some characteristic Nabataean period pottery as well as Iron Age pottery and graves (*rukamiyya*) to the north and east sides of the Kâf oasis.

In 2000, a team in charge of the registration and documentation of the Kâf Archaeological Palace published an important volume (Al-Hussaini, Al-Muaikil et al., 2000). Since this volume has not been distributed outside the Qurayyât region, we only learned of its existence when we arrived in Kâf, thanks to Khalifah AL-Rowaili. The group of authors, Saudi architects and archaeologists, recorded and dated new archaeological sites, such as, in Kâf, Qasr A'qelat al-Masha'an recently unearthed, dated to the Iron Age and, in Ithra, Qasr al-Kharab, located on the southern side of the road, at the foot of Jebel Radwa and possibly dated to the Iron Age.

In 2018, we asked Dr Tara Steimer, who is a specialist of Bronze Age settlements in Southern and Basaltic Syria, to have a look of the area through Google Map's Satellite images (**Annex Document** - last page). She identified a large amount of remains belonging to pre-classical periods, such as tombs, enclosure, dwellings, Desert Kites and so on, which are the type of structures that Parr and his colleagues started to document in the field in 1976 (Adams et al. 1977).

Methods and List of Visited Sites

We based our field survey on the previous and published reports mentioned above and on the very good knowledge of the region of Mohammed and AbdelRahman, the assistants of Khalifah AL-Rowaili (director of antiquities in Qurayyât). We also benefited of the knowledge of local inhabitants and landowners: in Ithra, AbdulKarim al-Muzhein and Abu Tayeb, and in al-Hadithah, and for the Jordanian border area, Abu Naif Falah Mensi Sarari. We spent a lot of time searching ancient inscriptions (Greek and Latin), particularly in private collections of folk art and archaeology, that of Awad al-Jbab displayed in Alghobain Resort (South Qurayyât) and in a private collection of local handicrafts in Qurayyât city, but finally we didn't find any. However, we warmly thank the owners for their welcome (**Fig. 4** – Pl. 2).

Eventually we visited and documented 14 different sites in the Upper Wâdî as-Sirhân and Qurayyât vicinity and we isolated 36 spots, areas and monuments. The GPS coordinates of the sites were surveyed and placed on a map created from GoogleEarth photographs (**Fig. 5** – Pl. 2). We noticed three main areas of ancient settlements. The first one extends to the east fringe of the northern part of the Wâdî as-Sirhân and includes Kâf (sites Kafo1 to Kafo9), Ithra (Itho1 to Itho8) and other villages and sites located between Kâf, Ithra and Qurayyât (Rad01, Wsh01 to Wsh03, Qar01 and 02, Mino1 and 02). The second area gathers, further north, al-Hadithah Village (Had01 to Had05) and other sites in the Jordanian border area (Chao1 and Rsh01). Most of these villages and archaeological spots were already surveyed by at least one of the previous expeditions. The third surveyed area is located further south within the Wâdî as-Sirhân. We spotted on Google Map then visited on the field a place called Gharb al-Qaidat (Qai01) where lies architectural remains of an ancient and extended occupation. This site caught our attention because the remains and their organization looked similar to that of the Christian settlement of Kilwa which was studied in the 1990s by Saba Fares (2010). Compared to the previous surveys, a new element comes into play that has profoundly transformed the landscape of the region. It is the recent construction of a large road connecting Qurayyât to Turaif and the Persian Gulf, and passing through Kâf and Ithra, which is likely to cover or have destroyed remains over about seventy meters (corresponding to the width of the road and sidewalks). The road facilitated our travels but made it difficult to find certain sites mentioned by our predecessors.

In the Eastern Area

Ithra Area

- Ithra “Palace” (Itho1), Village (Itho8), and cemeteries (modern Itho5, and old Itho6)
- Râslaniyah (Itho4)
- The Salt troughs (Itho7)
- Qasr al-Kharab (Itho2)
- Eastern Mountain (Itho3)

Between Ithra, Kâf and Qurayyât

- Jebel Radwa 1 (Rad01)
- Jebel Washwash (Wsh01, 02 and 03): a large kite, *masiada* (Wsh01), a modern cemetery (Wsh03) and the top of the Jebel (Wsh02)
- Minwa (small enclosure Mino1, large enclosure Mino2)

- Aïn al-Hawas (Hawo1, 02, 03), a kite, a source, a fort etc.
- Qarqar (Qar01)
- Umm Ayyash (Qar02)

Kâf Area

- Jebel as-Sa'îdî (Kaf01 and 02)
- Kâf Fort Museum (Kaf03)
- Kâf Village (Kaf04)
- Kâf northwest Necropolis (Kaf05)
- Kâf south Necropolis (Kaf06)
- Kâf old cemetery (Kaf07)
- Kâf north Necropolis (Kaf08)
- Aqelat al-Mashan (Kaf09)

In the Northern Area

Al-Hadîthah and the border Area

- Al-Hadîthah, village (Had01)
- Al-Hadîthah, cemetery (Had02)
- Al-Hadîthah, northern wall of the reservoir (Had03)
- Al-Hadîthah, eastern wall of the reservoir (Had04)
- Al-Hadîthah, sud, "Housing Complex" (Had05)
- Chaïb al-Makhrooq (Sharq al-Hadîthah Cha01), remains and sherds
- Rashrâshîa (Rsh01) in the Harra.

In the Southern Area

On the eastern edge of the Wâdî as-Sirhân

- Gharb al-Qaidat (Qai01), an impressive village 40 km south to Qurayyât.

For all the sites and spots we engaged, when it was appropriate, an assessment of the state of conservation, a photographic coverage, production of 3D photogrammetric models, architectural description and plan drawings and sketches, a study of the chronological evolution of the remains using building archaeology methods, a surface collection of the ceramic and small items in order to date and feature the occupation periods. All the collected archaeological material has been bagged, inventoried, described and photographed, crated and entrusted to Kh. Al-Rowaili in Kâf on October 6th 2021. A copy of the all the photographic documentation and a short preliminary report was given through an external Hard drive the same day to Saud Al-Tamemi for A. Zahrani in Riyadh.

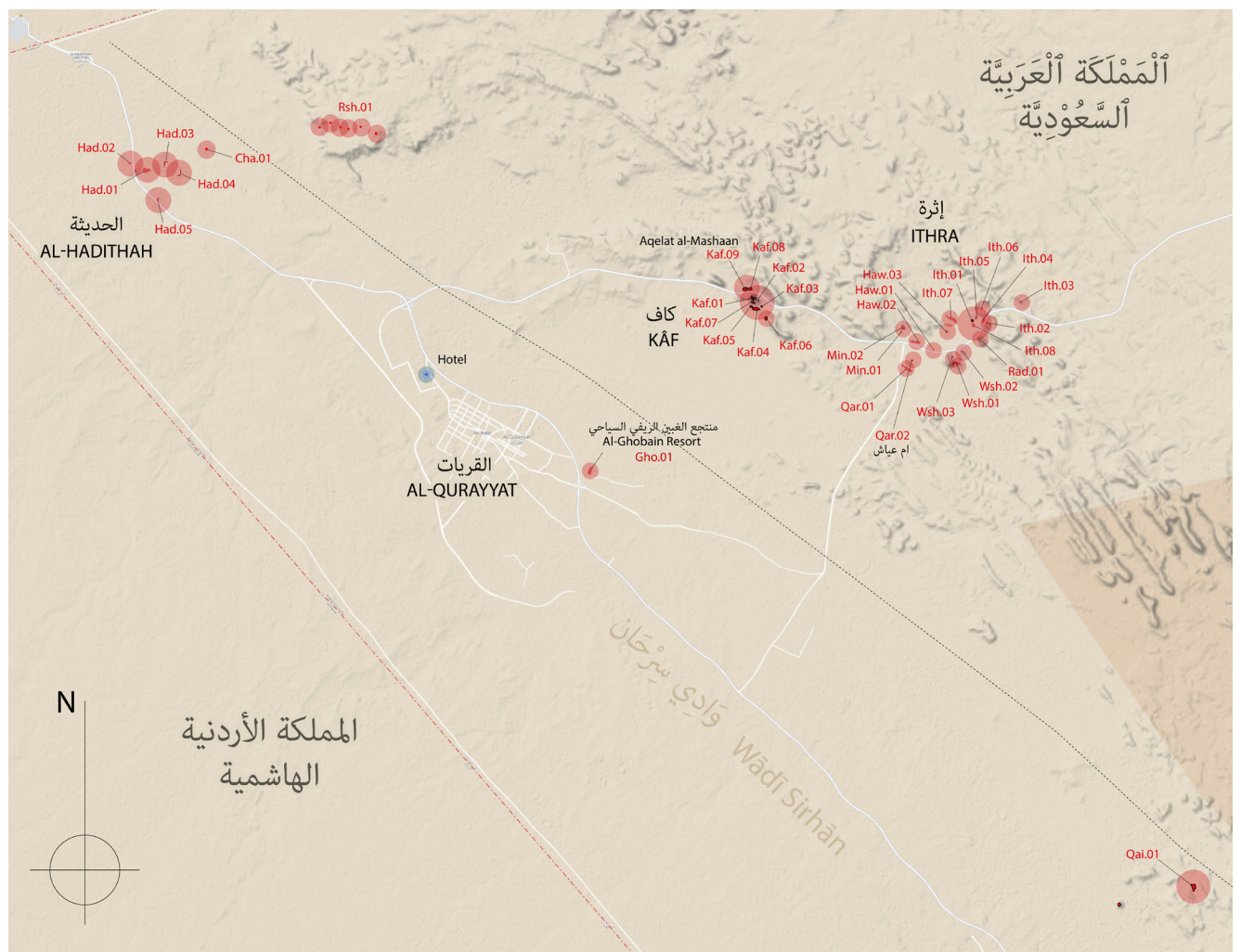
Fig. 3. The Qasr as-Sa'fîdî in Kâf, watercolor (J. Euting 1883)



Fig. 4. The survey 2021 archaeological team (T. F. 2021)



Fig. 5. Map of the Gurayyat region, location of the three surveyed areas (T.F. 2021)



Preliminary Observations and Synthesis

The most relevant sites and monuments are shortly described below within a preliminary synthesis gathering them according to the most obvious period of occupation.

Ancient and Pre-Classical Periods Sites

Most of the remains that stand out in the Upper Wâdî as-Sirhân 's landscape probably dates back to the Bronze and Iron Ages. However, some of the remains are older and the 1970s Saudi Arabian Archaeological Reconnaissance team discovered "Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic B" and provided images of many samples of the "earliest recognizable flint assemblages" found in Ithra vicinity (Adams et al. 1977: 34). In 1989, Parr very briefly evoked the presence of much prehistoric material (Parr 1989: 45). The 2018 Google Map survey as well as the 2021 field survey also recorded traces of an extended ancient occupation (**Annex Document** - last page). Numerous and well preserved small and monumental buildings, necropolis and graves, hamlets, villages and Desert Kites, were highlighted.

Desert Kite

On the field, we took the opportunity to start documenting two Desert Kites (*masiada*), which are monumental stone-made hunting structures and traps. (Hawo3) did not provide archaeological material, but (Wsh01) (**Fig. 6** – Pl. 3) provided flints and pottery sherds dated from the Bronze Age to the Umayyad Period. The latter was recorded by the 1976 field survey; the Saudi and American scholars published a sketch plan and longitudinal section of it (Adams et al. 1977: 35 and pl. 9– site 200-9) and described it as a penannular enclosure with long "tails" attached forming a gradually narrowing corridor leading to the entrance of the enclosure itself. Such devices are now well documented, and some Jordanian samples were dated to 7000 BC. (on this topic, Helms and Betts 1987 and more recently Abu-Azizeh and Tarawneh 2015; Crassard et al. 2015; Abu Azizeh 2019).

Domestic, Military or Cultic Buildings

The most striking monument of the region is the so-called Qasr as-Sa'îdî, set on the top of the Jebel of the same name, which dominates the oasis and village of Kâf (**Fig. 7** – Pl. 3). A ramp-like road (Kaf02) leads to the flat summit of the mountain. It is crowned by a citadel whose construction is not yet dated. According to the previous explorers, the eastern part of it could be very old, perhaps contemporary with the oldest occupation of the summit which could date back to the Bronze Age (**Fig. 8** – Pl. 3). The northern, southern and western walls, much lower, could have been built, or reconstructed, by an Egyptian pilgrim from Port Said at the end of the 18th century (**Fig. 9** – Pl. 4) (Winnett and Reed 1970: 62 and Al-Hussaini, Al-Muaikil et al., 2000: 78-90). The upper parts of the rampart were reconstructed, perhaps at the time of the pilgrim's work, and also more recently, in the 2010s, at the time of the enhancement of the site, installation of lighting, repair of the ramp etc. (**Fig. 10** – Pl. 4). Only one gate, located on the eastern side of the surrounding wall, provides access to the summit plateau (**Fig. 11** – Pl. 4). The door is made of blocs made in ancient (Roman and Byzantine) style, and it bears several Arabic Inscriptions (**Fig. 12** – Pl. 5). It is flanked by two rectangular towers (**Fig. 13** – Pl. 5). Four other square towers ensured the protection of the eastern slope, the most accessible. On a regular basis, small openings were made all along the rampart, on the base; this could have been arrow or shooting slits or water drainage holes. The summit today appears deserted (Kaf01); at first glance a very few constructions are visible. However, two main

buildings are still visible. To the south, a one-room house, probably dating back to the Ottoman era or a more recent time, is preserved on almost all its height. To the north rises the rectangular building described by the Canadian explorers (Winnett and Reed 1970: 62) preserved to a height of about one meter (**Fig. 14** – Pl. 5). It has been restored recently and that makes it difficult to study his architecture. Near it stands a circular reservoir (*birkeh*) and a possible cistern. Our general survey of the site made it possible to identify other occupation remains of occupation, such as possible ruined walls made of earth on a base of stones all around the rectangular main building, possible graves and possible evidences of funeral cremation further north with associate material dated to the Bronze or Iron Age period. In the middle of the plateau stand a ruined but still distinctive two-rooms building surrounded by Bronze or Iron Age sherds. Scattered on the plateau, a lot of pottery sherds are visible, however forms are scarce, probably since most of them have been collected during the previous surveys on the site. Consequently, most of the pottery sherds we collected are ordinary body-sherds, more difficult to interpret in terms of date, type and function. Nevertheless, P.-M. Blanc was able to connect the majority of them to the Middle and Recent Bronze and Iron Ages. Another important part dates to the Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad times. The Nabataean Period is not prominent; Medieval material is almost non-existent and Ottoman period attested by a few pottery sherds.

Another major monument was recently uncovered in Kâf. Located on the northern side of the main road, in the vicinity of a farm, it is referred to as Qasr Aqelat al-Mash'an (Kaf09) (**Fig. 15** – Pl. 6). The site is mentioned in the most recent work regarding Kâf (Al-Hussaini, Al-Muaikil et al., 2000: 71-73). It has been unearthed in the end of the 1990s using a bulldozer by the landowner himself who was looking for a treasure. The rough excavation uncovered a huge building with thick walls (90 to 100 cm thick), regularly pierced with small windows (20 cm large, 48 high) placed at eye-level (**Fig. 16** – Pl. 6). We collected a large amount of pottery sherds. Five or six fragments of grindstones are lying in the northern part of the building (**Fig. 17** – Pl. 6). Most of the sherds date back to the first millennium BC, Iron Age or Hellenistic Period, a few to the Byzantine, Umayyad and Islamic eras. Against the southern wall of the building is a well full of sulphurous water. This well partly undermines the monument and threatens its stability. A few dozen meters from the Qasr, stand the remains of a possible extensive enclosure. Qasr Aqelat al-Mash'an (**Fig. 18** – Pl. 7) could correspond to the so-called al-Uqayla Kâf, mentioned by Parr's team. It was described as "a flat site at the foot of the towering Jebel as-Sa'îdî" where the majority of picked up sherds "have close affinities with Iron Age II pottery (...) dating from the 7th century BC." (Adams et al. 1977: 36).

As we can see, the site of Kâf presents different spots such as a citadel (Qasr as-Sa'îdî), a massive and fortified building (Aqelat al-Mash'an) and surrounding cemeteries. If these units belonged at least at one moment to a coherent whole, could Kâf be compared to the site of Qurayyah in the Hejâz for instance? Such comparisons are likely to help us, while waiting for excavations to be undertaken, to interpret the remains and understand their functions. The fortified plateau (*mesa*) of Qurayyah could have been "an ideal place for the celebration of highly relevant communal ceremonial and/or burial activities" (Luciani and Al Saud 2014: 141) and also a fortified place that "occasionally offered refuge for the population" (Luciani 2019).

In Ithra, the remains of the Bronze and Iron Ages seem to be all concentrated on the top and slopes of the Jebel Radwa. The remains of a huge building are still visible on the foot of the northern slope of the Jebel (**Fig. 19** – Pl. 7), separate from Râslaniyah district by the modern road. It is locally referred to as Qasr Kharab (Itho2). The pottery sherds collected belong to the Bronze or Iron Age periods, a very few to the Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic times. This site is mentioned by Adams et al. who date the majority of the sherds from the 7th century BC" (Adams et al. 1977: 36).

Eventually, a Goggle Map survey lead us to undertake the visit of a site located further south in the eastern fringes of the Wâdî as-Sirhân (**Fig. 20** – Pl. 7). Its general appearance and the dimension of the architectural units (**Fig. 21** – Pl. 8) reminded to us the monastic settlement of Kilwa, located further west towards the Hejaz and recently studied (Farès 2010). Located 40 km to the south of Qurayyât, Gharb al-Qaidat (Qai01) is an extended village, today buried but still lying exposed on the surface many stone buildings (dwellings? Cells? Shops? Stores?), independent or semi-detached, alleys and also more elaborated complexes including enclosure (**Fig. 22** – Pl. 8). We collected fifty-four pottery sherds. The majority dates to the Bronze and Iron Period; a few to the Byzantine and Umayyad times, however, we didn't find among the remains evidence of a Christian settlement, such as engraved crosses or characteristic remains featuring a church for instance.

Cemeteries, Tombs and Graves

Numerous ancient graves and tombs are visible on Google Earth (**Annex Document** - last page). Winnett and Reed (1970: 62) mentioned Bronze Age graves in the vicinity of Kâf and Adams, Parr and their colleagues undertaken the excavation of an undisturbed stone cairn belonging to one of the cemeteries in the vicinity of Kâf (Adams et al. 1977: 36 and Pl. 9 – site 200-25). They uncovered with a skeleton two complete pottery jug and amphora attributed to the 7th century BC.

On our side, we went to see several spots previously noticed thanks to Google Map or reported by the local colleagues. We picked up pottery and lithic material on the cemeteries that lie on the south-eastern and northern part of Kâf oasis (Kafo5 and 06, **Fig. 23** – Pl. 8). To the north of the modern road built in the 1990s, we also found vestiges of graves (Kafo8) dated to the Bronze and Iron Ages. In the vicinity of Ithra, we noticed a silted up possible tomb with a trail on the top of Jebel Washwash (Wsho2) and we visited the huge necropolis on the foot, slope and top of the impressive and black Jebel Radwa (Rad01) mentioned above, that dominates Ithra oasis. The flat plateau is covered with stone-made tumulus and graves (**Fig. 24** – Pl. 9). During a short half an hour-survey, we found all around the best preserved circular building (**Fig. 25** – Pl. 9) eleven inscribed stones in North Arabic and Nabataean scripts, but only three pottery sherds, dating back to the Bronze Age and the first Millennium BC. Another impressive site, Rashrâshîa (Rsho1), is visible further north, between al-Hadîthah village and the Jordanian border, to the east of the main modern road. It is an extensive rock art site including a cemetery. This site is known for his numerous rock drawings and inscriptions; several carved stones coming from this site are displayed today in the court of the modern fort of Kâf (Kafo3) (**Fig. 26** – Pl. 10). The border area is a major smuggling point between Jordan and Arabia and is highly controlled. However, thanks to an authorization issued by the customs and accompanied by policemen, we visited the upper part of the site, identifying for instance a looted built tumulus, a pottery sherd from the bronze Age and an ancient bead made of white translucent stone.

So far, according to Parr, the occupation of the Wâdî as-Sirhân in ancient times mainly consisted of villages and burial grounds belonging to Transjordanian peoples and the major occupation of the area is dated approximately to the 7th century Iron Age II (Parr 1989: 44-48 and Adams et al. 1977: 36). Many remains dated to the first millennium were recorded during our survey indeed. However, Pierre-Marie Blanc, and prior to him the archaeologists that surveyed the area in the 1990s (Al-Hussaini, Al-Muaikil et al., 2000), identified also Bronze Age sherds in almost all the sites. Consequently, the study of the pottery (that has been recorded, described, drawn, photographed, and stored for this purpose) by a specialist of the Bronze and Iron ages periods is needed to provide a more accurate reconstruction of the Wâdî as-Sirhân ancient occupation.

Fig. 6. The “head” of the Jebel Washwash Desert Kite, from the top of Jebel Washwash 2 (P. P.-F. 2021)



Fig. 7. Aerial view of the Qasr as-Safîdî in Kâf (Google Map 2022)



Fig. 8. Sketch for the topographical survey of the citadel (T. F., P. P.-F., J. al-H. and S. al-T. 2021)

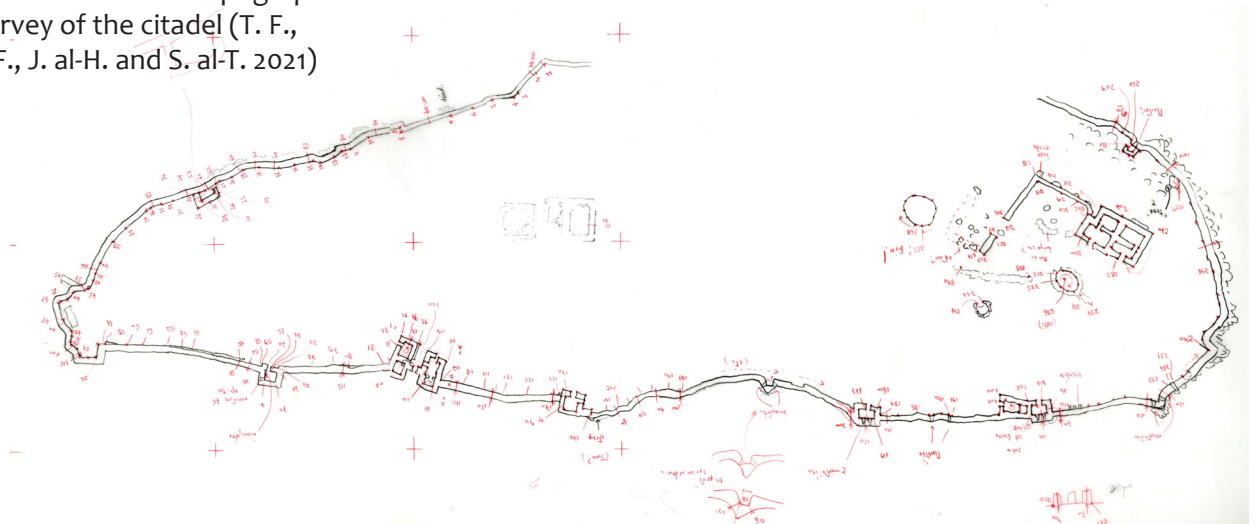


Fig. 9. The western rampart and the topographical survey by J. al-Harbi and S. al-Tamemi (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 10. The eastern rampart (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 11. The gate, from outside of the citadel (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 12. The inscription on the gate (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 13. The gate, from inside of the citadel (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 14. The rectangular building on the top of the plateau (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 15. Qasr Aqelat al-Mash'an from the top of Qasr as-Sa'idi (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 16. The south western corner of Qasr Aqelat al-Mash'an (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 17. Fragments of grindstones in the northern part (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 18. View inside the Qasr, towards the south and Qasr as-Sa'îdî (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 19. Remains of a huge ancient building on the foot of the northern slope of the Jebel Radwa (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 20. Gharb al-Qaidat, in the Wadi Sirhan. Aerial view of the site (Google Map 2021)

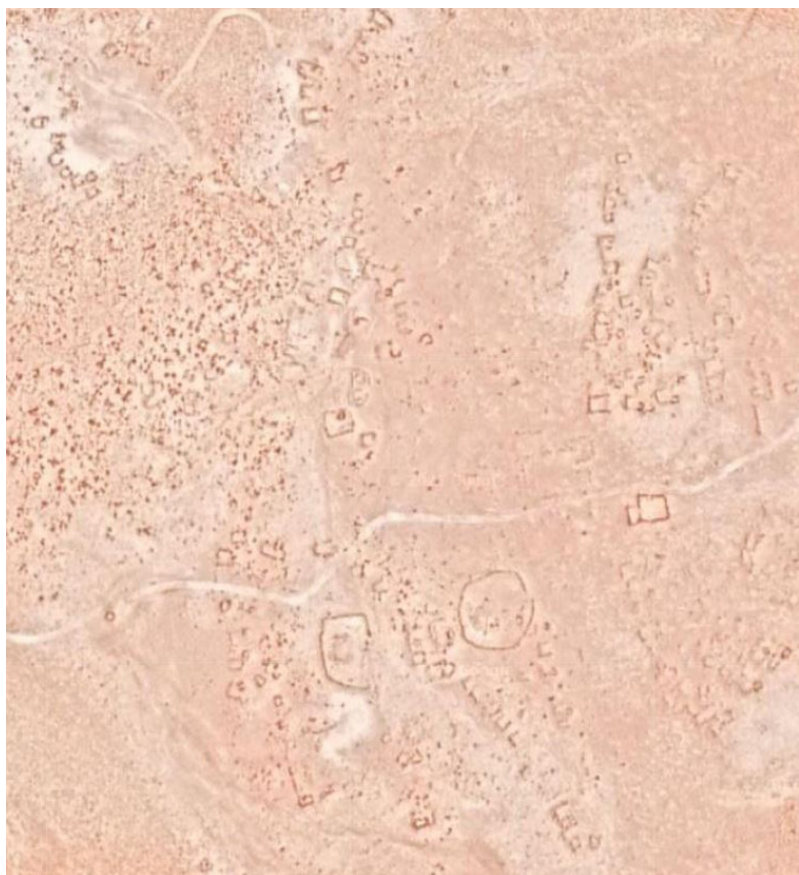


Fig. 21. Gharb al-Qaidat, in the Wadi Sirhan. The site from the west (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 22. Gharb al-Qaidat, in the Wadi Sirhan. Example of enclosed complex (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 23. Kâf oasis. The south-eastern cemetery (T. F. 2021)



Fig. 24. Jebel Radwa. Stone made tumulus and graves on the top of the Jebel (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 25. Jebel Radwa. Aerial view. Location of the best preserved circular funerary building and inscriptions (T. F. 2021)



Coord.: 31°22'46.2"N 37°37'32.7"E (31.37954, 37.62567)

Pl. 9 (<https://goo.gl/maps/g7FqangLU6niRB9x5>)

Nabataean and Roman Times Occupation

It should be emphasized that while most of the visited sites provided pottery sherds dated back to the Nabataean and Roman period, architectural remains related to these periods are very scarce. The Nabataean sherds we found are characteristic, with the thin and red or orange ware, but we didn't find any painted sherds. Yet, in Ithra, Winnett and Reed wrote that they picked up "a number of Nabataean sherds of the beautiful, painted, 'egg-shell' ware" (Winnett and Reed 1970: 60). Furthermore, whereas we surveyed meticulously the eastern district of Ithra village called Râslaniyah (Itho4), we didn't find the remains of the possible sanctuary described by Winnett and Reed (Winnett and Reed 1970: 59-60). We looked for it all along the new main road linking Qurayyât to Turaif, also in the farm lying near the road and most of all everywhere in the recently abandoned equestrian centre associated to a house and a small mosque, built in the local traditional way - a base one-meter high built of stones, supporting walls in earth, then flat roof made of trunks and branches of palm trees and earth (**fig. 27** – Pl. 10). However, already in 1977, Adams, Parr and their colleagues did not find this foundation and argued that they were "hidden beneath a recent building" (Adams et al. 1977: 36). Yet, the ground around the traditional house and the small mosque is particularly overshadowed by basaltic dust and loaded by archaeological material. We found there on the surface a large amount of ostrich egg fragments, at least twenty thin and unpainted Nabataean pottery sherds of small bowls –half is imported from Petra, half is local made. We also picked up seven lamp fragments dated to the Nabataean et Herodian periods (1st century BC-1st century AD), one lamp fragment dated to the late Hellenistic period, six Eastern *Sigillata* fragments (1st and 2nd century AD), cultic stone vessel and stone slabs fragments bearing "Thamudic" or North Arabian inscriptions. All this material exactly corresponds to the material uncovered and described in 1962 by the Canadian scholars, which allowed them to interpret the architectural structure associated as an ancient sanctuary (**fig. 28** – Pl. 10).

Eventually, we looked in vain, on sites and among private collectors in Qurayyât city, for Latin and Greek inscriptions. We didn't find the Nabataean inscription which was seen in the south side of Ithra oasis (Winnett and Reed 1970: 60, n°130: 160), but we documented eleven North Arabian (Thamudic) and Nabataean inscriptions, possibly unpublished, identified on the top of the Jebel Radwa. They are nowadays scattered all around the best-preserved circular tomb located at the northern extremity of the rock ridge overlooking the oasis (fig. 25). Regarding the Roman sherds found in small quantities in almost all the sites, they seem to be made in local, dark red ware.

Byzantine and Early Islamic (Umayyad and Abbasid) Periods

Ithra

The so-called Qasr in Ithra (Itho1) is considered as one of the major architectural monuments of the northern province (Adams et al. 1977: 33). It is located to the north of the oasis and village. Winnett and Reed (1970: 59) provide a brief description, while Parr and co offered a first plan survey of it (Adams et al. 1977: 37 – Pl. 10. A, site 200-3). According to their report it was referred to as Qasr Ibrâhîm (Pl. 10. A) or Qasr Muhammad (p. 33). On our side we were referred to it as Qasr al-Nabati. Today it appears as an isolated building, however, the testimony of the previous explorers (Winnett and Reed 1970: 60) and our survey possibly identified other buildings further south, towards the centre of the modern village (Itho8). However, they are buried and it is difficult to distinguish them from the more recent and ruined and buried basalt walls of the village and enclosures of the oasis.

In the Qasr al-Nabati, there is numerous evidences of repair and re-occupation of the building, including recent ones, and evidences of clandestine excavations and vandalism. The monument is in serious danger of ruin.

Our survey allows us to describe the Qasr al-Nabati as a slightly trapezoidal square, massive and closed construction of 1100 m², including four aisles surrounding a large courtyard; the four buildings are not perfectly perpendicular to each other (**fig. 29**– Pl. 11). The entrance is almost located in the middle of the eastern façade. The lintel of the main door supports an inscribed bloc that could have been placed in Medieval times (**fig. 30**– Pl. 11). The eastern and western aisles have deep rooms or rows of rooms accessible from the middle of their main façade. The northern and southern aisles have a series of small rooms each accessible from the courtyard (**fig. 31**– Pl. 12). The eastern, western and southern aisles at least have a second storey, however, we don't know yet where was located the staircase or the stair steps that were likely to led to the first floor. The southern building displays the most elegant façade and its second floor is the best preserved. An original decorative element is still visible: a face carved in relief (**fig. 32**– Pl. 12). The first floor of the western aisle includes a very characteristic facility of the Near East ancient architecture: a large room with troughs (**fig. 33**– Pl. 12). At least, nineteen troughs are preserved, still visible today, while according to Parr's plan (Adams et al. 1977: Pl. 10. A), there could have been twenty-three troughs. Old and more recent works (Villeneuve 1985-1986; Clauss-Balty 2008; Baratte et al. forthcoming) undertaken about this facility elsewhere in the Near East allow to interpret most of them as stable troughs for horses, cows, camels or donkeys.

The northern aisle includes small rooms in row. The construction features meet perfectly those implemented in the well documented ancient buildings and dwellings of the Syrian and Jordanian Basaltic region of the Hawran (Vogüé 1865-1868, Butler 1914, Villeneuve 1985-1986, Clauss-Balty 2008, Piraud-Fournet forthcoming). Regularly the façades include a full course of bonding stones intended to bind the two faces of the walls. On the top of the walls, a course of corbels supported the roof made by jointed stone beams. Compared to the constructions of the Hawran, this building presents at least two particularities: on the one hand, there is no use of arches. For that reason, while the rooms can be long they remain narrow: around 3,5 m wide, to meet the strength constraints imposed by the basalt and the span of the beams placed on corbels. In fact, the architectural survey allowed to find the remains of only one arch, i.e. two pier capitals and at least height voussoirs. Most probably they belonged to the arch (4,5 m wide) that covered the entrance porch, opening to the courtyard. The arch's stones were reused in different reconstruction works within the Qasr. On the other hand, the presence of four aisles around the courtyard distinguishes it from the other possible farms already identified in the Hawran region. Almost all of them have only two or three aisles indeed. Four aisles buildings are scarce, usually identified as “palace” for official figures (such as the “Palace of Trajan” in *Bostra*, see P. Piraud-Fournet 2022), or military fort, or building linked with commercial activities such as caravanserai or inns. This building could be compared with other military buildings, such as the so-called Barracks at Umm el-Jimal for instance. Yet features like the large courtyard, numerous troughs in the stable and small rooms all around the courtyard, and by contrast the absence of specific defence devices, support the idea to see there a caravanserai, a hostel or lodge rather than a fort.

Various clues allow to suggest a date for the construction of the building. Whereas the local inhabitants referred to as “Nabataean”, it was suggested that, in such a context, the word *Nabati* doesn't refer to a period but to a specific identity: The Arab identity as opposed to Byzantine, Ottoman or other cultures considered locally as exogenous (Valter 2002: 283-300, A, 7); thus Qasr al-Nabati should be translated as “huge old, local Arab building”. Already in 1976, Parr and his

colleagues suggested to date the construction of this monument to the Byzantine times because of its resemblance to the Syrian Hawran architecture (Adams et al. 1977: 37). And, indeed, we can argue that architectural practice consisting in inlaying all four courses an entire course of bonding stones in order to ensure the cohesion of the two facings of the wall and reinforce it, is considered to be implemented from the 5th century onwards (Butler 1914, Piraud-Fournet forthcoming). Furthermore, according to Pierre-Marie Blanc and a comparison with *Bostra's* ancient buildings, the slightly curved appearance of the ashlar is also considered to be a feature of the Late Antiquity (Umayyad period). At least three carved Christian crosses were identified on doorposts, here and there in the building. Eventually, during the survey, we distinguished an ashlar of the southern external façade with a few words in Early Arabic scripts. The inscription is upside down and therefore illegible. This suggests that the ashlar is reused in the façade and supports even more the idea to date the construction of the building after the 6th or 7th century.

The environment of the building in ancient times is not clear. A well is still visible but it is located outside the courtyard, directly to the north of the Qasr. We also identified possible ancient walls further south but they are buried and it is not possible to compare or link them with the Qasr. The pottery found inside the Qasr (Itho1) and all around, in the old and abandoned village (Itho8) is quite homogeneous. We found in almost the same proportions pottery sherds dated to the Roman and Nabataean times and Umayyad and Abbasid periods. Sherds of the Byzantine Period are a little bit more numerous, and a very few pottery date back to the Ayyubid, Mameluke and Ottoman times.

Al-Hadithah

Al-Hadithah village is located further north, on the way to the Jordanian border. Winnett and Reed (1970: 64) wrote that they discovered at about half a mile south of al-Hadithah the remains of an ancient irrigation channel constructed of basalt stones and mud-plaster; near the channel, they found sherds with green glaze of the mediaeval Arab period. They also mention the ruins of a “*qasr*” at about two miles south of the village and on a slight elevation not far away was an ancient cemetery with twelve graves and sherds of the Late Byzantine or Early Arab period. However, they did not document further any of these remains. We surveyed this extended village in order to find them, but we were not able to identify such buildings or pottery sherds among the ruins of the modern village made of stone and earth, the farms and cultivated gardens. On the other hand, thanks to the landowner Abu Naif, we discovered and photographed three portions of an ancient enclosure still visible on the surface, built with basalt ashlar and punctuated with buttresses (Hado3 and 04) (**fig. 34**– Pl. 13). The wall is 0,85 m thick, the buttresses are about 0,80 m deep and 0,93 m wide. We were able to follow it for several meters in two different parts of the village. To the east, the enclosure is visible on 15 m long and had two buttresses. To the north, we followed 8,87 m of wall with one buttress, and on the east, 35 m of wall with two buttresses. Only two sherds were picked up in the vicinity of these buried portions of wall, belonging to the Early Islamic period. The most obvious comparison for this construction is the ‘Ayn Sawda reservoir in Azraq located 200 km further north in Jordan (Abu Azizeh et al. 2014) dated to the same period.

To the south of the village, in the vicinity of a huge Housing complex built very recently for the numerous employees of the customs at the neighbor border, Abu Naif showed us the ruins of an ancient building. The remains of four rooms built with ashlar are lying on the slope of a small hill located to the east of the main road (**fig. 35**– Pl. 13). Almost fifty sherds were uncovered there, from the Nabataean to the Umayyad periods, the most of them dated to the Byzantine and Umayyad times.

As suggested by Abu Naif, we asked an authorization to the customs in order to visit some archaeological sites located in the border No man's land. We went to Rashrâshîa mentioned above and to a desert place called "Sharq al-Hadîtha" or Chaib el-Makhrooq (Cha01), an area located to the north of the village. We didn't find architectural remains there, however this was previously referred to as a settlement site and the eighty pottery sherds found dated to the Nabataean, Byzantine and Umayyad periods.

Minwa

Minwa is another abandoned oasis-village located between Kâf and Ithra. To the north of the village is a spot marked by ceramic scatters (Mino1), dated to the Late Roman to Umayyad periods. Further north, outside of the village is a very large enclosure built of stones, possibly an ancient settlement site (Mino2). Most of the pottery sherds uncovered on the ground surface date to the same periods.

Gharb al-Qaidat

Gharb al-Qaidat (Qai01) is the village identified through a Goggle Map survey and described above among the pre-classical settlements, since its architecture and pottery likely belong to Bronze or Iron Ages. However, a portion of the picked up pottery dates to the Byzantine and Umayyad times; it would be appropriate to investigate more in order to identify how this site was reoccupied at that time.

Some pottery sherds belonging to the Byzantine and Early Islamic (Umayyad and Abbasid) times are visible in almost all the sites of the area. The collection presents local (Hawran type well documented in Southern Syria) ware, as well as imported pottery such as Riley Amphorae, Bag shape Amphorae, Aqaba Amphora type and so on.

Medieval and Ottoman periods

Aside from a few amount of pottery sherds, the occupation in the Abbasid, Ayyubid and Mameluke periods is little represented. On the contrary, the late Ottoman occupation is well visible, with the fort of Kâf which was recently abundantly documented (Al-Hussaini, Al-Muaikil et al., 2000) and reconstructed, with another recently reconstructed fort in Aïn Awas, and several abandoned oases-villages made of earth, already mentioned above. Some of the ruined houses still display elaborated facilities, such as several buildings gathered by courtyards, toilets built within tower near the entrance, and columbaria in al-Hadîthah for instance (**fig. 36**– Pl. 14). The mosques have two semi-detached apses in the southern wall, for the *mirhab* and *minbar*. In Ithra and al-Hadîthah, a police fort is built on a hill overlooking the village. The old cemeteries, set away from the center of the villages, were recently enclosed by a wall. We also visited the almost completely abandoned salt extraction troughs (**fig. 37**– Pl. 14). They were dug in the extended *sabkha* areas, to the west of Ithra and the south of Kâf.

Near Qarqar, the Umm Ayyash massif is a geographical anomaly, a rocky resurgence emerging from the steppe. It has remained until recent years a local place of pilgrimage, for fertility rites. Not more than Winnett and Reed (1962) we found here archaeological remains, but a few rock drawings.

Eventually, we were shown in the gardens of Alghobain Resort (South Qurayyât) an old Arabic inscription that we photographed.

Conclusion

The field season allowed to document various identified monuments that had surprisingly been neglected so far. It also was an opportunity to explore other nearby sites and evaluate the potential of the comprehensive area in terms of heritage. The architectural inventory will raise an awareness of the importance of the archaeological sites disseminated and allow strategic plans for further possible fieldworks. It provides new elements for the understanding of the history of the area in Antiquity and later periods, up to modern times and paves the way for enhancement and touristic projects.

The Northern region of the Wādī as-Sirhân has indeed a high potential in term of archaeological and heritage studies and research and in term of touristic activities. Comprehensive survey, study, consolidation and restoration of monuments such as the citadel of Jebel as-Sa'îdî and Aqelat al-Mashan in Kâf, and the Qasr al-Nabati in Ithrâ would be highly relevant. Furthermore, archaeological excavations would help to better analyse their architecture, date their construction and occupation phases, and provide material related to their function. Furthermore, the possible Nabataean temple in Râslaniyah-Ithrâ still has to be identified on the field, excavated, studied and enhanced.

A specific type of tourism could be developed in this area focusing on his majestic landscape. Hiking and not invasive walking tours punctuated by spots for view and archaeological sites, such as the desert kites, tombs with trail, villages, rock art and scripts, would help highlighting the original heritage and geography of the region. Another strength feature of this region is the oasis-villages. There is a need to protect the last farms and their gardens and ensure the cultivation, while restoring the traditional village houses to provide for instance sober and simple accommodations for tourists. Today, the main problem faced by the region is the looting activities, sometimes at great magnitude, carried out on all the sites. Almost every day, during our surveys, we saw looters. Their actions are very destructive, both for the knowledge and enhancement of the sites. Fighting against looting is probably the first action in which it is necessary to invest more; enhancing the sites and attracting tourists also can help protect their integrity. Eventually, the museum already existing in the modern fort of Kâf could be developed to display the ancient material linked to the sites of the area, the modern items already stored in the fort related to the nineteenth and twentieth life in Kâf.

Fig. 26. Modern Fort of Kâf.
Ancient Carved stones coming
from Rashrashia (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 27. Ithrâ, Raslaniyah
area. Basaltic dust area with
archaeological material belong-
ing to a possible ancient
sanctuary (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 28. Ithrâ, Raslaniyah area.
Inscribed stone slabs frag-
ments belonging to a possible
ancient sanctuary
(P.-P. F. 2021)



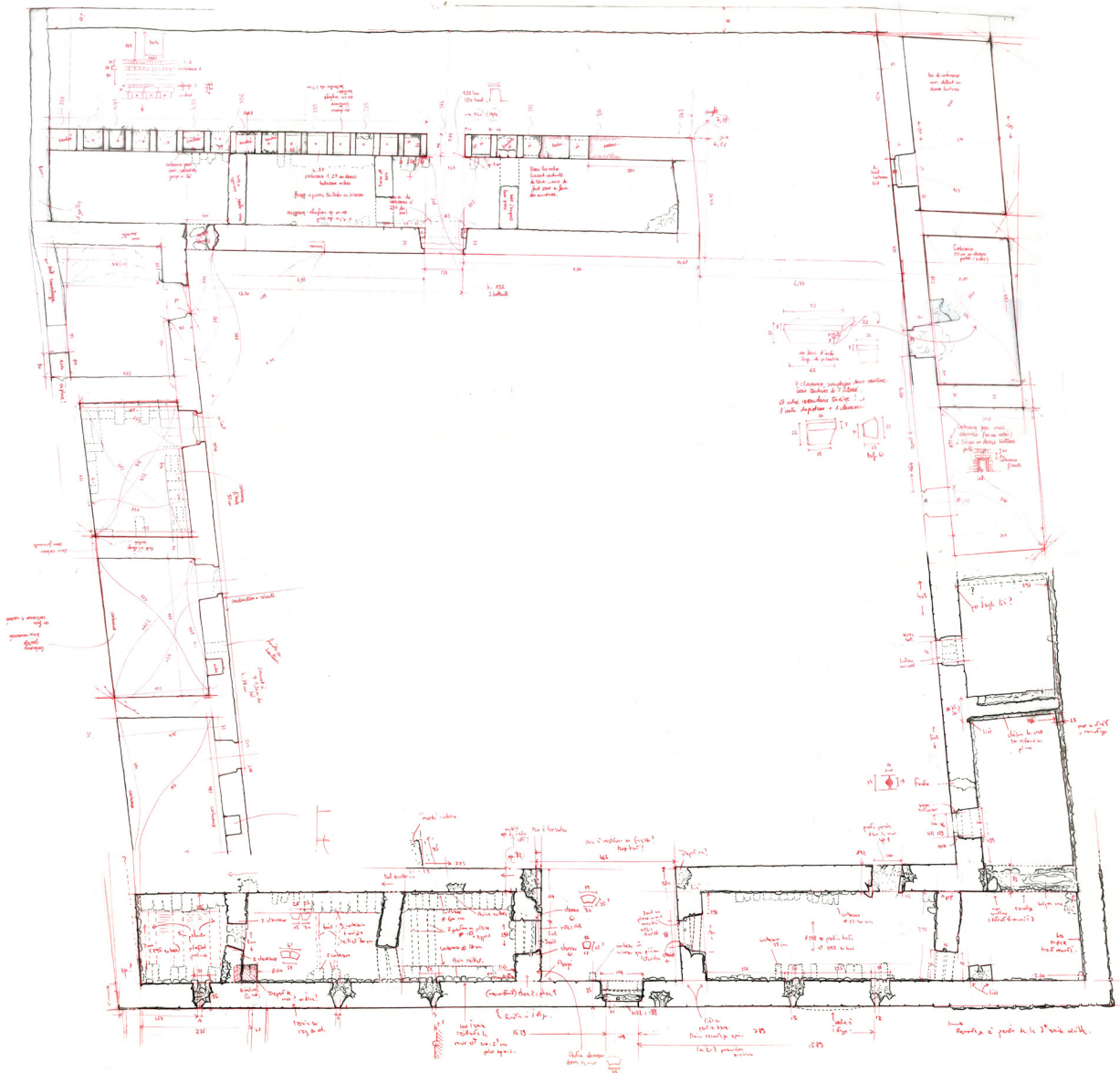


Fig. 29. Ithra, the Qasr. Layout made on the field, stone-by-stone survey (T. F. & P.-P. F. 2021)

Fig. 30. Ithra, the Qasr. The entrance gate and Medieval inscription (P.-P. F. 2021)

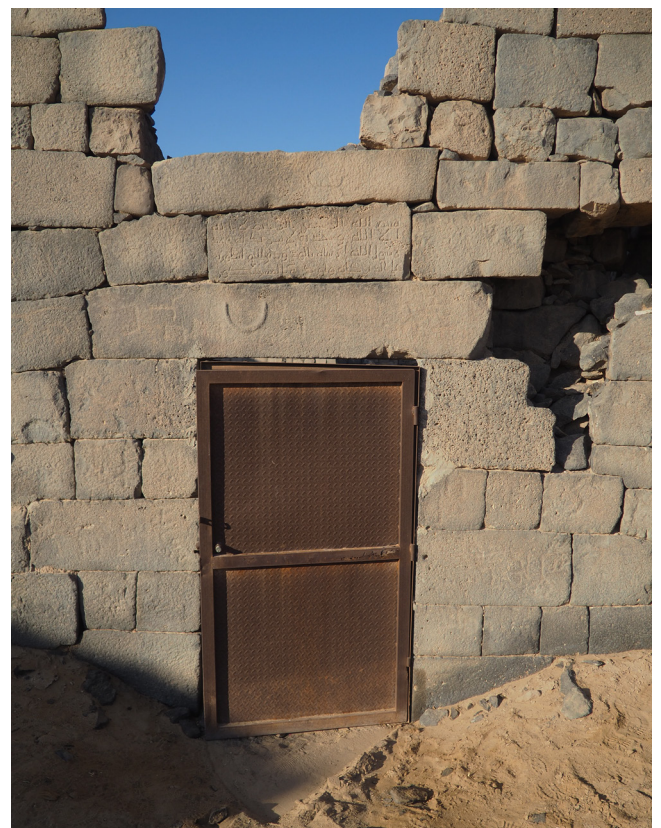


Fig. 31. Ithrâ, the Qasr. The courtyard and the northern and eastern aisles (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 32. Ithrâ, the Qasr. The façade of the southern aisle and the decorative carved face, from the courtyard (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 33. Ithrâ, the Qasr. The narrow room with troughs within the eastern aisle (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 34. Al-Hadīthah. Ancient enclosure punctuated with buttresses (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 35. Al-Hadīthah. Ancient house near the modern housing complex built to the south of the village (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 36. Al-Hadīthah, the old village. Columbarium in a traditional house built in earth (P.-P. F. 2021)



Fig. 37. Ithra vicinity. Old salt extraction troughs (P.-P. F. 2021)



List of the Surveyed Sites and Archaeological Items Bags

- Kafo1: Top of Jebel as-Sa'îdî (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo2: On the way to the top of Jebel as-Sa'îdî (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo3: Qasr, fort built on 1919-1922 (photographed archaeological material).
- Kafo4: Oasis village (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo5: nord of the village, possible necropolis from the Iron or Bronze period (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo6: South-east of the village, possible necropolis (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo7: Old cemetery of the village, on the South edge of the Jebel as-Sa'îdî (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo8: North of Jebel as-Sa'îdî and north of the road, possible necropolis (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Kafo9: North of Jebel as-Sa'îdî and north of the road, so-called Palace Aqelat al-Mash'an (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Itho1: So-called « Nabataean Palace » in Ithrâ (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Itho2: « Palace » of Qasr al-Kharab (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Itho3: North-east of Ithrâ, about 2,7 km from the Palace: engraved stones with ibex.
- Itho4: Eastern part of Ithrâ : Râslaniyah area (archaeological material – 2 bags).
- Itho5: Modern cemetery (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Itho6: Old cemetery (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Itho7: Salt extraction troughs in Ithrâ.
- Itho8: Old village (archaeological material – 2 bags).
- Rad01: Top of Jebel al-Radwa (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Wsh01: Kite - *Masiada* in front of Jebel Washwash 1 (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Wsh02: Jebel Washwash 1 (archaeological material – 2 bags).
- Wsh03: Modern cemetery (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Qar01: village of Qarqar (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Qar02: Umm Ayyash (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Hado1: Old village of al-Hadîthah.
- Hado2: North-West cemetery of al-Hadîthah.
- Hado3: Enclosure north to al-Hadîthah. (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Hado4: Enclosure east to al-Hadîthah. (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Hado5: Ancient building near the Modern « Housing Complex » south to al-Hadîthah. (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Min01: center of the village of Minwa, near a small enclosure (archaeological material – 1 bag).
- Min02: Large enclosure north to the village of Minwa (archaeological material – 1 bag).

Chao1: Chaib al-Makhrooq – Sharq al-Hadīthah. Site with sherds (archaeological material – 1 bag).

Rsho1: Rashrâshîa (archaeological material – 1 bag).

Qiao1: Gharb al-Qaidat, east to the Wâdī as-Sirhân (archaeological material – 1 bag).

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Fig. 34. Al-Hadîthah. Ancient enclosure punctuated with buttresses (P.-P. F. 2021).

Fig. 35. Al-Hadîthah. Ancient house near the modern housing complex built to the south of the village (P.-P. F. 2021).

Fig. 36. Al-Hadîthah, the old village. Columbarium in a traditional house built in earth (P.-P. F. 2021).

Fig. 37. Ithrâ vicinity. Old salt extraction troughs (P.-P. F. 2021).

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