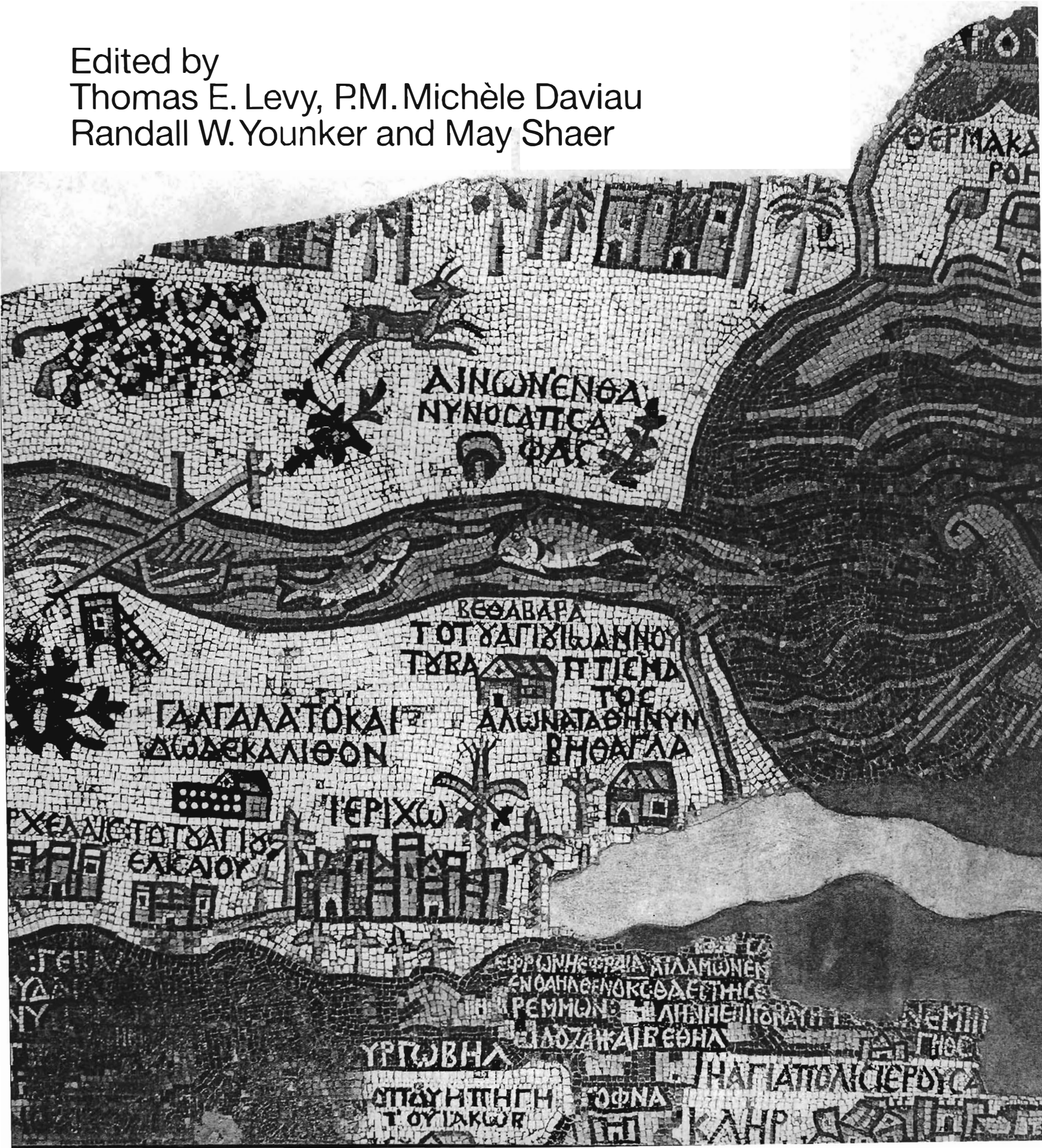


CROSSING JORDAN

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Between Local and Imperial at Umm Al-Jimal

Bert de Vries

Views from the Imperial Center

The interpretive framework for Hellenistic–Roman–Byzantine archaeology in the Levant has lived with the Western tradition of historiography that viewed the fate of the peoples of the region from the classical imperial centers. For outlying centers like Umm al-Jimal this meant their placement on the frontier of empire, and the measure of success or failure, was related to the amount of security provided by the respective empire against various perceived enemies—for example, Parthian/Persian aggressors, raiding nomads. It was stated thus early in the Umm al-Jimal Project: ‘This deliberate fortification provided the stability and safety that enabled the development of permanent settlements like Umm el-Jimal’ (de Vries 1985: 255).

A decidedly ‘post-colonial-theory’ anti-Imperial reaction to this model in the 1990s, recently very well summarized by S.T. Parker (2006: 551-52), stressed the greater responsibility of local populations for their own successes and failures, and de-emphasized the need for the extensive Roman and Byzantine defensive strategies, by arguing, for example, for greater symbiosis between nomads and sedentists.

This revision triggered a shift in framework for explaining the apparent prosperity of late Umm al-Jimal in volume I of the field reports (de Vries 1998: 232-36). Here I argued that the prosperity of Umm al-Jimal in the 5th–8th centuries, apparent from its marvelous houses and churches, occurred at the very time that imperial frontier defenses were breaking down. As a result, local populations—both settled and nomadic Arab-Aramaic speakers—were left to their own devices for security and economy. This relatively prosperous character of late antique Umm al-Jimal—seen in the high-quality domestic architecture—compared very favorably with the remnants of unsophisticated village architecture at the extra-mural site of al-Hirri (excavated as Area R, Momani and Horstmanshof 1995), contemporary with the Roman imperial hegemony of the 1st to early 4th centuries AD. The poverty and poor health of this earlier community is highlighted further by the poverty and poor health of the good-sized skeletal sample excavated from the simple cist burials in the cemeteries outside the immediate perimeter of the built-up areas (Brashler 1995; Cheyney 1997).

The debate between those who stress the essential, beneficial role of empire and those who stress its limits has been unresolved. That the first view persists is evident in two recent important publications. In his final report on the Limes Arabicus Project, for which I served as architect, S.T. Parker concludes: ‘The success of Diocletian’s program is evidenced by the considerable growth in

settlement during the 4th and 5th centuries, when the frontier appears to have been well protected' (Parker 2006: 573-74). And in the latest volume of his magisterial study of the role of the Arabs in the Roman and Byzantine Empires before Islam, Irfan Shahîd argues that the Ghassanid phylarchy succeeded essentially by stepping into the shoes of the Roman defenders of the frontier. Not only did they convert to Christianity and use monumental buildings to assert their sincerity and majesty, they also adapted the Roman *limes* defensive strategy by reusing the surviving Tetrarchic and early Byzantine fortifications (Shahîd 2002).

Paradox of Power

While I have some difficulty with both these positions (see de Vries 2005 for a review of Shahîd 2002), my own extensive research preoccupation with Roman fortifications at Umm al-Jimal and in the Limes Arabicus Project (de Vries, Godwin, and Lain 2006) has brought great awareness of the critical mass of imperial influences on the local cultures of the Levant. That critical mass is evident centrally in the prevalence of Roman and Byzantine fortifications at sites like al-Lajjun, Umm al-Jimal (de Vries 1986), and everywhere in the Levant. Whether willing or resisting, people were certainly aware of and affected by the products of decisions made in Antioch, Rome, or Constantinople, and time and again felt the impact of power from such centers. Did they feel exploited, blessed, enriched? On the other hand, they were also centrally located in their own domain within which they had a measure of power, perhaps fluctuating with the extent of imperial controls, perhaps merely enhanced by sheer distance from imperial centers, protected by tribal and communal structures, maintained by traditions of language and craft. Did they feel free, proud, oppressed, stifled?

Such questions cannot be answered readily from examining pots or buildings, but they do highlight the paradoxes of power in ancient lives. I propose to adopt this concept, 'the paradox of power', as the model for understanding the cultural history of a local settlement like Umm al-Jimal. I envision this as a two- (multi-)directional flow of influences, not so much between center (Rome) and periphery (frontier), but between two centers. In perspective of the project, in fact Umm al-Jimal is *the* center, while the imperial or provincial capital is distant, at the periphery if you will. Thus our focus of attention, the people and culture of Umm al-Jimal should not be obscured by interpreting it predominantly in terms of Roman imperial presence and phenomena. The operative question is Umm al-Jimal's cultural history, not the history of the influence of Rome. Yet that influence is there and should be frankly recognized.

'Paradox of power' makes one aware that the flow is not just one way, from Rome to Umm al-Jimal. It is easy, of course, to see that Rome influenced Umm al-Jimal, in its fortifications, in imperial inscriptions, and, contextually, in reams of literary sources written from the imperial point of view. In contrast, the reverse influence of Umm al-Jimal *on* Rome is virtually undetectable. It is difficult to imagine, let alone prove, that such a tiny and apparently remote rural place, without evidence of a political stature of its own, would have the power to affect a distant, looming Rome. Think of one tiny hint, the slogan 'Victory to the Blues!' inscribed twice on stone, in Greek. Could you imagine this as a *shout* reaching all the way to the hippodrome in Constantinople? (You could say it was in fact a shout *from* Constantinople!)

Such reverse flow can be most clearly seen in the larger context of the history and archaeology of the Levant. An excellent, though still uncommon expression of that is presented by Warwick Ball in *Rome in the East* (2001). Ball's presentation throughout the book is of the *local* culture of the Levant (the 'East'). While not shying away from Roman influences, he succeeds in showing that often cultural elements perceived as Roman do in fact have deep roots in the pre-Roman history of the Levant.

More importantly, he demonstrates convincingly that the influence of the East on Rome was probably greater than Rome's influence on the East, and he laments the failure of most Western scholars' perception and expression of this. He concludes the book with due recognition of the two-way flow of influences: 'The influence of Rome on the East for those seven centuries was profound... But more profound was the influence of the East upon Rome. The process was invariably a two-way one, with ultimately the eastern element predominating' (Ball 2001: 450). Thus Horace's famous line beginning *graecia capta* becomes *roma capta*!



Figure 1. The late Nabataean half of the inscription may be found in the west wall of the courtyard of house VI. 'This is the stele of Fihir, son of Shullai, teacher of Gadhimat, king of the Tanūkh'.

The problem of seeing the reverse flow is not only that the historians, beginning with the Roman ones, have tended to represent the winner's point of view. It is also that they confuse political and military domination with the notion of cultural success and vitality. (That, of course, was, and remains a significant rationale for imperialism.) Again, at a place like Umm al-Jimal one has to imagine there might have been resistance to Roman military and cultural domination, but it cannot be documented. For this one has to look at the not infrequent rebellions for context, for example the two Jewish rebellions and the great rampage of Zenobia (indirectly alluded in the famous Greek-Nabataean Gadhima inscription at Umm al-Jimal, Fig. 1). From such instances one has to suppose that imperial domination, especially when violently or incompetently asserted, is not accepted willingly as a benevolent act of cultural enlightenment. The unrecorded feelings of the people of Umm al-Jimal had to include periodic animosity and begrudging submission to acts of awesome and violent force. For fathoming this, the work done by social/cultural anthropologists studying the impact of globalization on modern societies may provide useful ethnographic parallels (cf. 'power distance' in Hofstede 2001).

Thus the concept, 'paradox of power', can bridge the tendency to champion *either* the empire *or* the local village for a more balanced interpretation of the archaeological evidence of the Umm al-Jimal Project. Inevitably, this balance will be weighted towards Umm al-Jimal itself, both as the

immediate object of study and as correction for the traditional empire-centered perspective. Also, to see the model as a two-way flow is a simplification that must be adjusted in practice. Umm al-Jimal is at one poll of many intersecting power relationships, for example, the Hawran plane, the badiya, the Jabal Druze, Nabataean Bosra and Petra, the Decapolis, *Provincia Arabia*, and so on.

Notes on the Archaeology and History of Umm al-Jimal

Recent work on the Umm al-Jimal Project publications fits in well with the ‘paradox of power’ model. David Graf and Salah Said’s publication of the new Nabataean inscriptions is shedding significant light on Umm al-Jimal under Nabataean influence in the 1st–2nd centuries (Graf and Said 2006), and their in-process work on a large body of new Greek funerary inscriptions with its plethora of Arabic personal names is yielding further information on the Arab-Aramaic community of Umm al-Jimal. The larger religious context of the religious remains of the period (the Dushara altar, etc.) was triggered by the Petra Exhibit’s visit to Calvin College in 2005. A joint project with one student is producing a comprehensive comparative study of the temples of Greater Syria, in the 1st–2nd centuries with focus on distinguishing the local, regional, and Roman design elements (de Vries and Osinga 2006).



Figure 2. Doorway into a Byzantine rebuilt ‘Barracks’ room complex. The rooms were reoccupied by Druze in the early 20th century, who painted the lintel and posts. The names on the lintel, Talāl er-Rūm (?) and Jamāl es-Serūr appear to be post-Druze, and testify to the long-lived Arab presence at Umm al-Jimal.

While ‘Roman’ Umm al-Jimal, as a monumental site associated with the 2nd-century Commodus Gate, has mostly disappeared in later military and domestic construction phases, ‘local’ Umm al-Jimal has come to light in the 1st–3rd-century adjacent settlement of al-Hirri (Momani and Horstmanshof 1995: 472–74). And while the monumental Nabataean/Roman chamber tombs were

already robbed of their elite burials, hundreds of excavated cist burials are giving us insight into the physical culture of poorer local residents, perhaps many associated with al-Hirri, in the 3rd and 4th centuries (Brashler 1995; Cheyney 1997).

Publication of the Limes Arabicus Project reports (Parker 2006), which includes my own work, will enable a better understanding of the in-process interpretation of the Tetrarchic *castellum* at Umm al-Jimal. The puzzle of its early abandonment as a fort, its replacement by the Barracks (Fig. 2) in 411 (Parker 1998), and its reuse as a site for a masonry quarry, a 5th/6th-century church, and 5th–9th-century farmstead will bear heavily on the question of the waning of Roman imperial control at Umm al-Jimal.

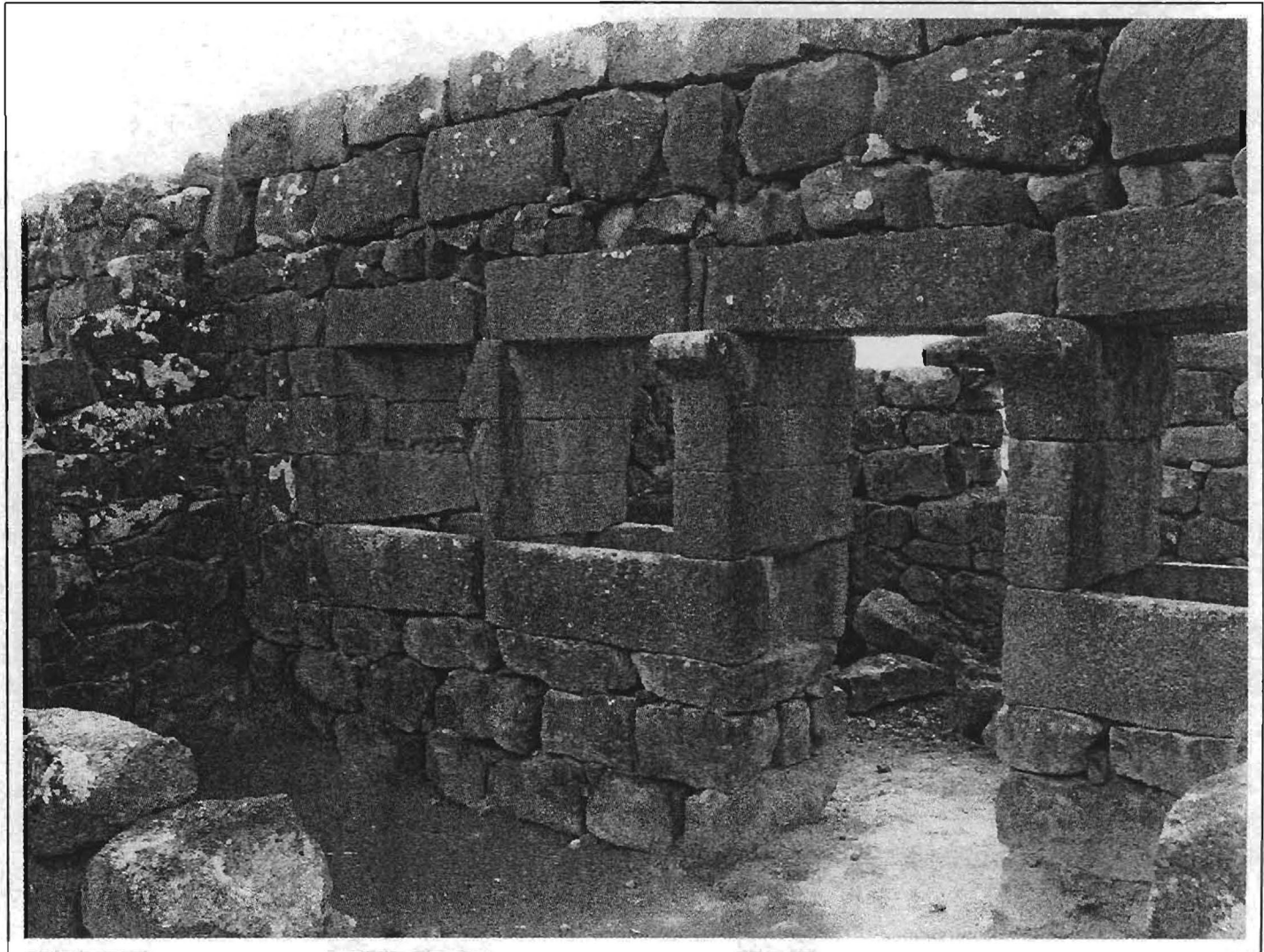


Figure 3. Mangers of Umayyad House 119, exposed to ground level in a recent Department of Antiquities project

The local character of the Byzantine domestic site as local Arab town prospering while Roman military control was *diminishing* was discussed above. Excavation at House 119 (Fig. 3) pointed dramatically to the fact that the domestic prosperity continued in the Umayyad period (de Vries 1995: 422-30), and that the post-Roman community had a continuous history from the Byzantine 5th century to the Islamic 9th (de Vries 2000). The *Praetorium*, published by Robin Brown, is the only monumental Roman building surviving to the end of Umm al-Jimal. Its transformations and reuses represent the subsequent history of autonomy followed by incorporation into the Islamic Empire. In the 5th–6th centuries it was incorporated into an elaborate domestic complex, and in the Umayyad period it was completely and carefully re-floored and its walls were decorated with newly frescoed plaster surfaces, akin to the Desert Castles (Brown 1998: 171-93).

The role of Umm al-Jimal as an Arab town has particular significance in the archaeological history of the emergence of pre-Islamic sedentary society. Irfan Shahîd's latest volume on the material

remains associated with the Ghassanid phylarchy (Shahîd 2002; de Vries 2005) has highlighted the need for careful study of the pattern of Arabic settlement in the Levant, not only to understand the situation on the eve of the Islamic conquests, but now specifically to get a much clearer understanding of the relationship between the mobile and archaeologically ephemeral Ghassanid confederation and local Arab Christian communities. A three-way study linking Byzantium, the Ghassanid phylarchy, and sedentary communities will put places like Umm al-Jimal at the center.

Use of the 'paradox of power' concept promises to be a rewarding integrative device for putting together all the various strands of the Umm al-Jimal Project in which imperial influences can be given their due, but in which the people of Umm al-Jimal will emerge as the 'heroes' of their own history who influenced the distant politically dominant forces at least as much as they were influenced by them.

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