

Frescoes and carved ivory from the Abbasid family homestead at Humeima

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Since 1991 six field seasons of excavation at the multi-period site of Humeima (Jordan) have identified numerous structures, including Nabataean and Roman-period houses, a Roman fort, 5 Byzantine churches, and an Early Islamic complex.¹ Five campaigns have focused on the Islamic complex (Field F103), which consists of two structures: a large rectangular building (c.61 x 50 m) centered around a trapezoidal court; and a small rhomboidal building (c.5 m sq.) with bonded niche on the south side, located just southeast of the rectangular building. Ceramic evidence indicates that both were erected in the Early Islamic period (before the late 8th c.), and both were constructed in a similar technique, hence probably in association with one another. The rectangular structure has been labeled a *qaṣr* (estate; pl. *quṣūr* and the rhomboidal one a *masjid* (mosque) because of typological similarities to other regional, Umayyad-period (661-750) *quṣūr* with extramural mosques [i.e., al-Ḥallabāt (Jordan), Jabal Seis (Syria), al-Qaṣṭal, al-Risha, Umm al-Walīd, and al-Zabīb (all in Jordan)].

Historical texts recount that the Abbasid family (who ruled the Islamic caliphate 749/50-1250) built a *qaṣr* with *manāzil* (apartments) organized around a court and a *masjid* at Humeima several decades before ousting the Umayyad dynasty in the mid 8th c. Given the accuracy with which the *qaṣr*-mosque complex in Field F103 fits the descriptions and the absence of any other pertinent structures at Humeima, the complex has been identified as the Abbasid family homestead (for correlations with the textual descriptions see *Akhhbār ad-dawla al-'abbāsīyya* 1971: 107-8, 149, 154, 195; al-Bakri 1945-51: 130). At least parts of the *qaṣr* were continually occupied after the Abbasids shifted residence to Iraq (Kufa, then Baghdad) in the mid 8th c., and there was a major remodeling during the Ottoman period (probably at this time a second mosque was constructed adjacent to the original). The excavation findings related to the initial phases are especially remarkable, yielding, for example, an architectural plan unlike any other regional *qaṣr* (fig. 1) and the earliest extant Abbasid material culture, richly evoking their revolutionary activities.

The perimeter wall of the Humeima *qaṣr* is without towers and the original entrance is located on the east, inset from the line of the exterior wall and just south of the central E-W axis of the building. Both the absence of towers in the perimeter wall and the recessed entry differ from other 8th-c. *quṣūr* in the Levant. It has traditionally been argued that the other *quṣūr* were built on local Byzantine models. The *qaṣr* at Humeima, located in the very south of Jordan, may have escaped Byzantine influences and therefore may indicate regional, pre-Graeco-Roman building traditions. The plan may also correlate with building conventions from the Arabian Peninsula, which the Abbasids could have brought when they immigrated from Ta'if (in the late 7th or early 8th c.).

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