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Khirbet Khiraf: a 2nd-c. fort in the Jordan valley

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The site

Khirbet Khiraf is an impressive Roman military site in Palestine. Despite the importance of the site, located at a central point in the Jordan valley, near the road from Jericho to Beit She'an, its remains were first surveyed only in 1968 (Gophna and Porat 1972, 227-28). The surveyors correctly determined the general outlines of the site, but identified it as a way-station. In a comprehensive survey made by this writer in August, 1987, the site was identified as a fort used by the Roman army in Palestine in the 2nd c.¹ The same chronological and functional conclusions have been reached by Adam Zartal (1990) from his later survey of the site.

The remains of the fort are known as Khirbet Khiraf by the local Arabs; the meaning of this name is as yet undetermined.² The site lies halfway between Jericho and Beit She'an (35 km. from the latter, 37 km. from the former, at coordinates 2001/1762) (fig.1). The remains are found at the top of a hill which lies about 2 km. west of the Jordan river. The hill is flat-topped, suitable for the construction of a large structure on its summit (fig.2). The south end of the hill is truncated by a natural cliff 10-12 m. high. The Roman road linking Judaea and Galilee by way of Jericho and Beit She'an lies at the foot of the hill. Paved sections of this road were discovered in 1968 (Bar-Adon 1972, 104 and 106). A secondary road branches off the main route, and gradually ascends to the site from the south (it has now been paved as the modern road to Moshav Argaman, which lies 1 km. south of the site) (fig.3).

Khirbet Khiraf overlooks the south end of a narrow elongated strip known by geographers as the 'Samaritan gate' (Nir 1975, 141). The strip, about 20 km. long, lies between the east slopes of the Samaria hills and the meandering Jordan river; its average width is about 500 m., but in some places it narrows to less than 100 m. At the north the 'Samaritan gate' opens into the broad valley of Beit She'an. During the Roman period this location (known today as Tel Shalem) was the site of a large legionary camp. It will be argued below that there was an important link between the fort at Khirbet Khiraf and the legionary camp at Tel Shalem. At the south, the 'Samaritan gate' opens out into a flat valley known in the Bible as the Sukkot valley (Orni and Efrat 1966, 85-86) (fig.4). The location of Khirbet Khiraf on a hill top that rises about 130 m. above its surrounds provides it with a full view of the Sukkot valley and with the ability to control the important route at its foot. Water for the hill probably came from several springs that irrigate the plain to the east of the fort; presumably the water was brought up by pack animals.

Chronology

The fort may be dated to the 2nd c. on the basis of pottery collected on the site. The survey and a short exploratory excavation produced a considerable amount of pottery, datable to the 2nd and early 3rd c.³ The pottery consisted mainly of sherds of jars, cooking pots, and small jugs (fig.5). The main types are as follows:

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- 1 All dates in this article refer to the common era. The site was surveyed in the context of a national survey of monasteries on behalf of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The survey was carried out by the author with the assistance of Israel Watkin (surveyor) and Ilan Ashkeloni. In the spring of 1989 an exploratory excavation was conducted to clarify the chronology of the site, carried out with the help of students of the Swedish theological seminary at Jerusalem. I am grateful to Israel Schasman and Hannah Kotan of the Hebrew University for their valuable criticism of a draft of this article.
 - 2 The name does not appear on the lists of sites published by Palmer (1881). I am grateful to Eitan Kohlberg of the Hebrew University for efforts to determine the meaning of the site's name.
 - 3 The dating benefitted from the assistance of Rivka Calderon (Birger) of the Israel Antiquities Authority.