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Late Hellenistic Settlements in Hawrân (Southern Syria). Survival of Proto-historic Urbanism and Village Architecture in a Hellenized Context

Introduction

The other contributions to this session have focused on the genesis of cities in arid environments. The region which I discuss here presents us with a different case, since it is not located within the arid zone, but on its fringe. Hawrân is a semi-arid region which lies between the plain of Damascus in the North and the Jordanian steppe in the South (fig. 1). It is delimited in the West by the Golan plateau and in the East by the arid steppes of as-Safa and al-Hamad. The entire region is volcanic and all its soils derive from basalt. It lies over the 200 mm isohyet, which makes rain agriculture possible - though not necessarily reliable - in most of its areas. In spite of these common features, climatic and pedological variations define several micro-regions with different environmental conditions and agricultural potential. In the South and the West, the plateaus of Nuqrah and Jedur comprise ancient degraded soils and lie over the 250 mm isohyet, which allows for the practice of a relatively reliable cereal culture. In the East, the mountains of Jebel al-'Arab enjoy particularly

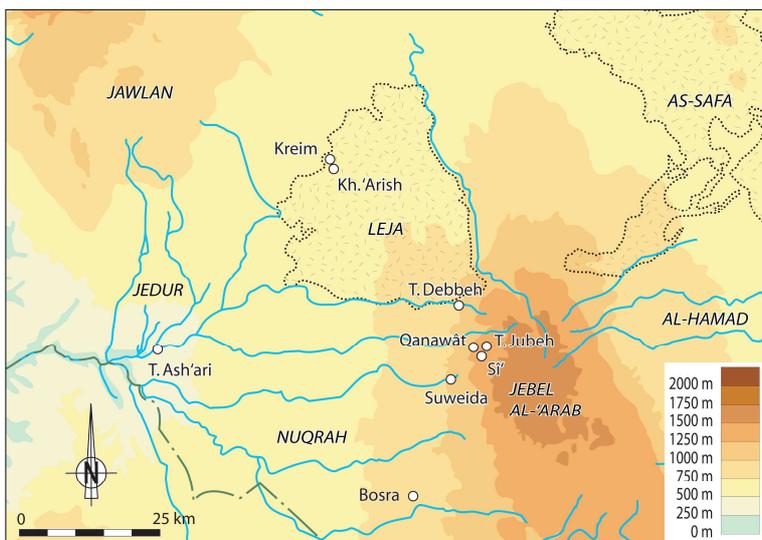


Fig. 1 – Map of Hawrân with localisation of the sites discussed.

high rates of precipitations and are mostly suitable for tree cultivation. In the North, Leja (or Trachonitis) is a rocky enclave resulting from recent eruptions, with a very chaotic topography marked by depressions, rifts and ridges. Save for a few agricultural pockets spared by the lavas, its rocky soils and the scarcity of its vegetation only permit small-scale sheep or goat breeding. In the Hellenistic period, Hawrân was first a Lagid possession, as a part of *Koile Syria*. It fell under Seleucid rule after the battle of Panion in 200 BC. However, by the end of the 2nd c. BC, the kings of Antioch most likely did not exert anything but a formal control over southern Syria. Hawrân became a battle-

ground for neighbouring local powers, such as the Jewish Hasmonean State, the Nabataean kingdom, and the Ituraean principality¹. The southern part of the region, around the city of Bosra, was annexed by the Nabataean kingdom in the late 2nd or early 1st c. BC. After the Roman conquest in 64 BC, Rome entrusted local client states with the task of ensuring the stability of the northern part of the region, which had become a nest of bandits². While the South remained under Nabataean rule, the northern part was handed over to Herod in 20 BC. Hawrân remained under Herodian and Nabataean rule throughout the 1st c. AD, until it was eventually annexed by Rome at the turn of the 1st and 2nd c. AD³.

Until recently, very few archaeological traces of this violent history had been found in the field. The first travellers and scholars essentially focused their attention on the rich Roman and Byzantine remains of the region⁴. However, fieldwork conducted since 1974 by the French Archaeological Expedition in Southern Syria has generated new information on settlement patterns and on the material culture of these local “dark ages”. Most notably, a survey of the northern Jebel al-‘Arab and of the Leja plateau, as well as several excavations on key sites, have led to the discovery of several Late Hellenistic and “pre-provincial” settlements of significant importance (fig. 1)⁵. On the basis of these results, my goal here is to address the morphological characteristics of these settlements, which attest to the survival of proto-historic traditions throughout the Hellenistic and “pre-provincial” periods, and which stand in stark contrast with the previous examples of urban genesis analysed during this session. Indeed, these sites on the fringe of the arid zone draw our attention to settlement schemes which radically differ from the progressive and dispersed mode of development hypothesized for the early phases of the “desert cities”⁶.



Fig. 2 – Bosra: aerial view of the tell (BRAEMER 2002, fig. 2).

Description of the Sites

The Nuqrah and Jedur

Only two cities are attested in the southern plateaus of Hawrân during the Hellenistic period. To the East of Nuqrah, at the foot of the Jebel al-‘Arab mountains, Bosra was a prominent urban centre in the

¹ See KASHER 1988 for a comprehensive study of these conflicts.

² Josephus, *AJ*, 15.342–354; Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2.20.

³ The northern part of the region, which was under Herodian rule, was annexed to the Roman province of Syria either in 92 or in 96 AD. The southern part, which was occupied by the Nabataeans, became part of the province of Arabia after Trajan's conquest in 106 AD. See SARTRE 2001, 469–527.

⁴ See, among others, BRÜNNOW and DOMASZEWSKI 1905-1909 for a compilation of previous travel narratives and expedition reports; BUTLER *ET AL.* 1914, 1914–1941; SARTRE-FAURIAT 2004.

⁵ In Southern Syria, the term “pre-provincial” applies to the period stretching from Pompey's conquest to the eventual annexation by Rome at the turn of the 1st and 2nd c. AD.

⁶ For Petra, see for instance DENTZER, ZAYADINE 1992; DENTZER 1999, 237-239, and the contribution of S. Schmid to this session. For Palmyra, see for instance WILL 1983; DENTZER, SAUPIN 1996, and the contribution of M. Hamad to this session.

Middle Bronze Age. The wide tell which lies in the western part of the city dates back to this period (fig. 2)⁷. The city reappears in the historical record in the first half of the 2nd c. BC, as the first book of the *Maccabees* reports an expedition of Juda and Jonathan Maccabee against Bosra in the years 164-163⁸. The city was probably annexed by the Nabataean kingdom at the end of the 2nd c. BC, although there is no epigraphic evidence for the presence of Nabataeans until the 1st c. AD⁹. Most of the archaeological remains which are visible today date back to the Roman and Byzantine period. However, the excavations carried out by the French Expedition since 1981 provide new clues as to the probable location of the Hellenistic settlement. New soundings in the western part of the city suggest that the ancient tell was occupied at least until the Iron Age II, and that its western rampart was rebuilt in the late 1st c. BC¹⁰. Conversely, deep soundings conducted in the monumental area, i.e. the central and eastern parts of Bosra, have shown very few traces of occupation prior to the reign of the Nabataean king Rabbel II, in the second half of the 1st c. AD¹¹. These data suggest that the city remained confined to the old fortified tell until a relatively late date. Unfortunately, save for its location, the features of the Hellenistic agglomeration remain so far completely unknown. It is also unclear whether the occupation of the tell was continuous between Iron Age II and the Hellenistic period.

In the South-western part of Hawrân, on the Jedur plateau, the city of *Dion* or *Diospolis* - which until recently was only known through literary references - should most certainly be identified with Tell al-Ash'ari, on the banks of a major affluent of the Yarmuk river¹². The site is being excavated by a Syrian expedition led by Q. al-Mohammed. Although the story of its foundation by Alexander is probably legendary, it was an important urban centre by the beginning of the 1st c. BC, and it belonged to the *Decapolis*¹³. For the time being, no information is available concerning the urban development of the city in the Hellenistic period, as the excavated monuments seem to date back to the 2nd c. AD at the earliest. The date of the foundation of the Hellenistic city, as well as the continuity of occupation between the Iron Age and the Hellenistic period, are still pending issues. However, it is interesting to note that the Hellenistic and Roman city has developed on a 10 ha fortified tell, whose occupation dates back to the Middle Bronze Age.

The Jebel al-'Arab

In the Jebel al-'Arab, the only *polis* attested in the Hellenistic period is Qanawât/*Canatha*, on the western slopes of the mountain. A member of the Decapolis, *Canatha* was founded (or refounded) in the years following Pompey's conquest since it bears the epithet *Gabinia* on some of its coins¹⁴. However, no definite traces of the Hellenistic phases of the city have been uncovered so far. The dating of a number of monuments (temples, nymphaeum, odeon, tombs) in the second half of the 1st c. BC rests on purely typological arguments and finds no consensus among scholars¹⁵. It must therefore be taken with great caution.

The Hellenistic phases are better documented in the neighbouring city of Suweida/*Soada*, which is located some 7 km south of Qanawât, at the interface between the mountains and the plain (fig. 3). Until recently, *Soada* was considered a prosperous village which progressively grew into a city in the Roman period. However, a campaign of excavations and surveys conducted between 1996 and 1999 by M. Kalos and F. Renel has significantly changed this perception¹⁶. The campaign has led to the identification of a 3 ha walled tell in the heart of the old city. This agglomeration has an irregular oval form and is enclosed by two

⁷ DENTZER ET AL. 2002; SEEDEN 1986.

⁸ *I Macc*, 5, 28.

⁹ SARTRE 1985; 2001, 411-424; DENTZER-FEYDY ET AL. 2007.

¹⁰ BRAEMER 2002.

¹¹ The only possibly earlier remains are those of a domestic unit under the western part of the southern baths. They are tentatively dated between the late 1st c. BC and the 1st c. AD, cf. DENTZER ET AL. 2002, 94.

¹² SARTRE 1992; KROPP, MOHAMMED 2006; MOHAMMED Forthcoming.

¹³ See SARTRE 1992 for the historical record on Dion.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive study of the available historical record on Qanawât, see SARTRE 1992.

¹⁵ See for instance FREYBERGER 2004 vs. AUGIER, SARTRE 2001.

¹⁶ KALOS 1999; DENTZER ET AL. 2010.

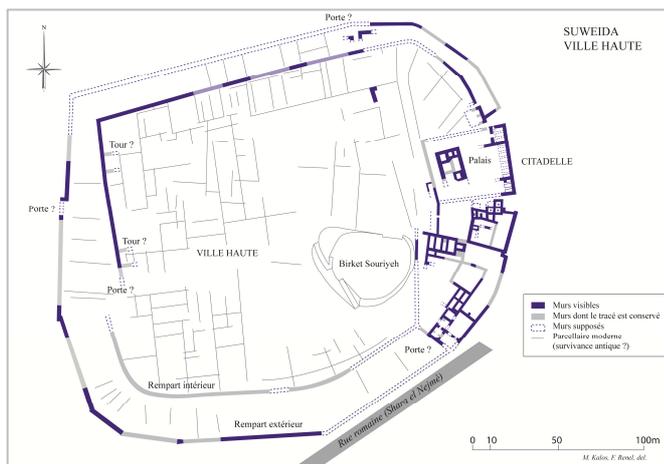


Fig. 3 – The tell of Suweida (after DENTZER ET AL. 2010, fig. 9).

concentric ramparts, in between which buildings (casemates?) may have existed. Photographs taken in the early 20th century attest to the presence, inside the walls, of a wide and deep water tank, which probably reached down to the water table or to an underground spring. On the eastern end of the agglomeration, a citadel or palace with wide warehouses was built on 15 m high casemated substructions. Fragments of mosaics were found in one of the main rooms. Although the fortifications of the tell probably date back to the Iron or Bronze Age, the construction of the citadel took place in the mid-2nd c. BC. It is unclear so far whether the tell was continuously occupied between Iron Age II and the Hellenistic period. It was probably abandoned

in the course of the 1st c. BC, and the Roman city of *Soada/Dionysias* expanded, from the 1st c. AD onwards, at the foot of the ancient tell.

In spite of the archaizing organization of the city, the fragments of mosaics and the largely Hellenized pottery repertoire found in the citadel imply a quite significant penetration of Hellenistic culture and social practices among the ruling class of the city¹⁷. The most ancient tombs excavated in the necropoleis of the city confirm this trend. A mausoleum reported and drawn by de Vogüé at the end of the 19th c. (Hamrath's tomb) reflects a good knowledge of Hellenistic architectural and decorative vocabulary, probably as early as the beginning of the 1st c. BC¹⁸. It is a square monument built on a *krepis*, with engaged Doric columns and an regular Doric entablature. Between the columns are armorial ornaments typical of the Hellenistic tradition: a Macedonian helmet, an oval shield and a cuirass with long flaps. Additionally, excavations of a late 1st c. BC tumuli have provided a couple of ladles with zoomorphic handles (*simpula*), together with table amphorae: these finds are evidence of the practice of funerary banquets in a Hellenized way¹⁹.

The archaizing architecture of the citadel of Suweida finds echoes among the contemporary settlements so far identified in

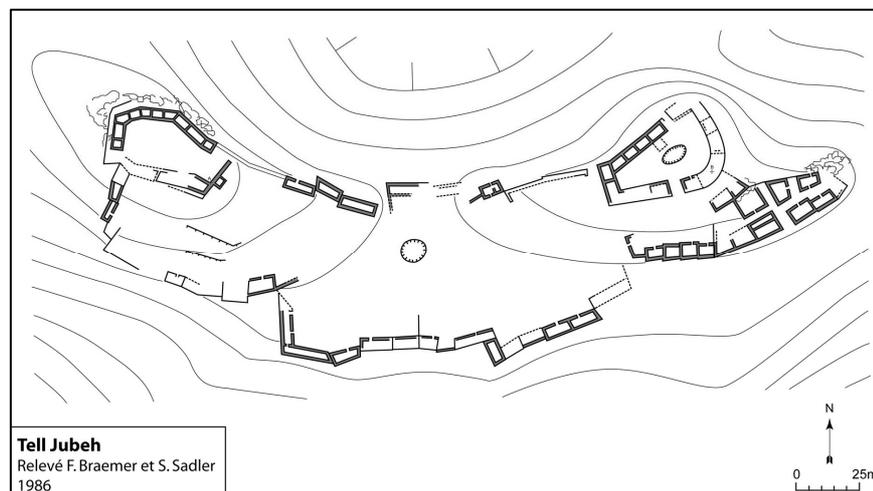


Fig. 4 – Plan of Tell Jubeh (courtesy F. BRAEMER).

settlements so far identified in Jebel al-'Arab. Tell Jubeh, located some 10 km north of Suweida, is a very wide promontory stronghold (280 x 65 m) built on the ridge of an extinct volcano, and consisting of two small citadels linked by an impressive megalithic casemate wall (fig. 4)²⁰. The casemates are adjoining but architecturally independent. They open onto a wide central courtyard, which is devoid of constructions. The only internal structure is a circular *birkeh*

¹⁷ RENEL 2010a.

¹⁸ VOGÜÉ 1865-67, 29; BUTLER ET AL. 1914, vol. 2, 324–326; DENTZER-FEYDY 1986, 263–265.

¹⁹ RENEL 2010b.

²⁰ BRAEMER 1984, 246, fig. 37-38. For preliminary comments on the pottery of this site, see RENEL 2010a.

(open air water tank) in the centre. The courtyard was probably used for keeping herds²¹. Recent surveys conducted on the site have brought new evidence for the date of this settlement. Clandestine excavations made by the locals have brought to light a large amount of sherds coming from complete forms which were probably *in situ* when the casemates were plundered. This material is very homogeneous and allows us to date the construction and occupation of the site to a short period between the mid-2nd c. and the mid-1st c. BC. The absence of pottery finds on the surface in and around the site confirms a *silentio* the hypothesis of a very short-lived occupation. Among the material brought to light by the clandestine excavations, the significant proportion of locally made table amphorae is perhaps to be related to the adoption of Hellenizing social practices (banqueting). At any rate, it indicates the assimilation of a Hellenized repertoire by local potters in the 2nd half of the 2nd c. BC.

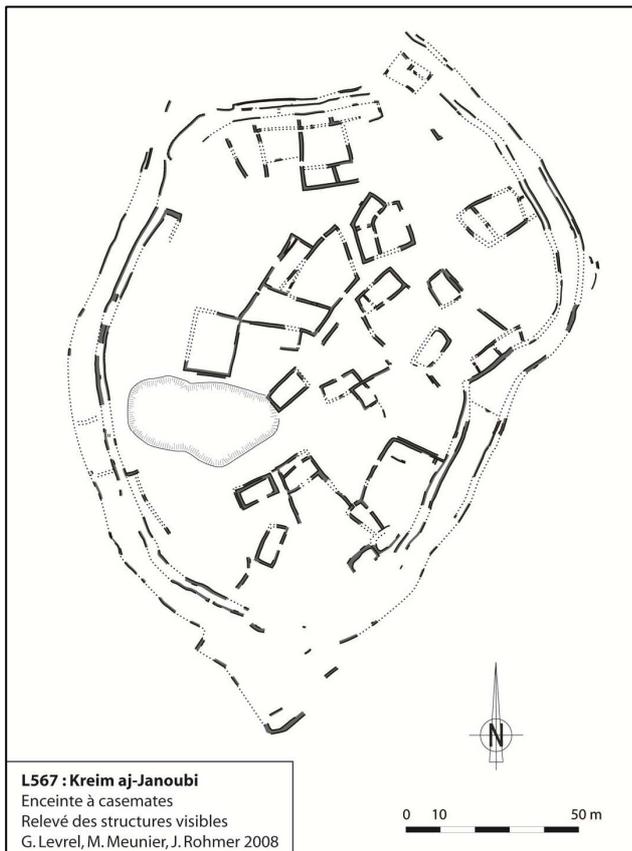


Fig. 5 – Kreim aj-Janoûbi: plan of the visible remains.

difficult to assess the nature and the importance of the Hellenistic occupation on these multi-period sites on the sole basis of survey results. However, recent Syrian excavations at Tell Debeh, one of the major tells of the region, suggest the existence of a late Hellenistic stratum (late 2nd c. BC - 1 c. AD), subsequent to the abandonment of the site at the end of Iron Age II²⁶. Consequently, it is probable that a number of these ancient fortified tells still played a large role during the late Hellenistic period.

Some 3 km south of this site, the village of Sî' has a different but equally archaizing layout²². The site is located on a wide promontory and it covers approximately 5 ha (450 x 130 m). It is surrounded by a 5 to 8,5 m thick curved rampart, parts of which may have had casemates. The inside space is very densely built with relatively orthogonal blocks of houses. The first phase of the rampart and of the excavated houses dates back to the late 1st c. BC²³. Next to the village, on the west end of the promontory, lies a sanctuary including three *temenè*, the first of which (dedicated to Baalshamîn) was probably built in the last third of the 1st c. BC. As shown by J. Dentzer-Feydy, its temple combines a local architectural layout with elements of Hellenized stone decoration²⁴.

Leja (*Trachonitis*)

In the neighbouring volcanic plateau called Leja or *Trachonitis*, a recent survey supervised by F. Braemer has revealed an unexpected number of human settlements of all proto-historic and historical periods²⁵. Among these are some great tells, covering a surface of several hectares, with phases of occupation stretching from the Middle Bronze Age to the Early Roman period. Unfortunately, it is

²¹ See ROUTLEDGE 2000, 59 for a discussion of this feature in similar Iron Age 1 settlements. The function of such central courtyards in the Iron Age Negev "fortresses" has recently been demonstrated by geoarchaeological and isotopic analyses: see SHAHACK-GROSS, FINKELSTEIN 2008.

²² DENTZER ET AL. 1985; VILLENEUVE Forthcoming.

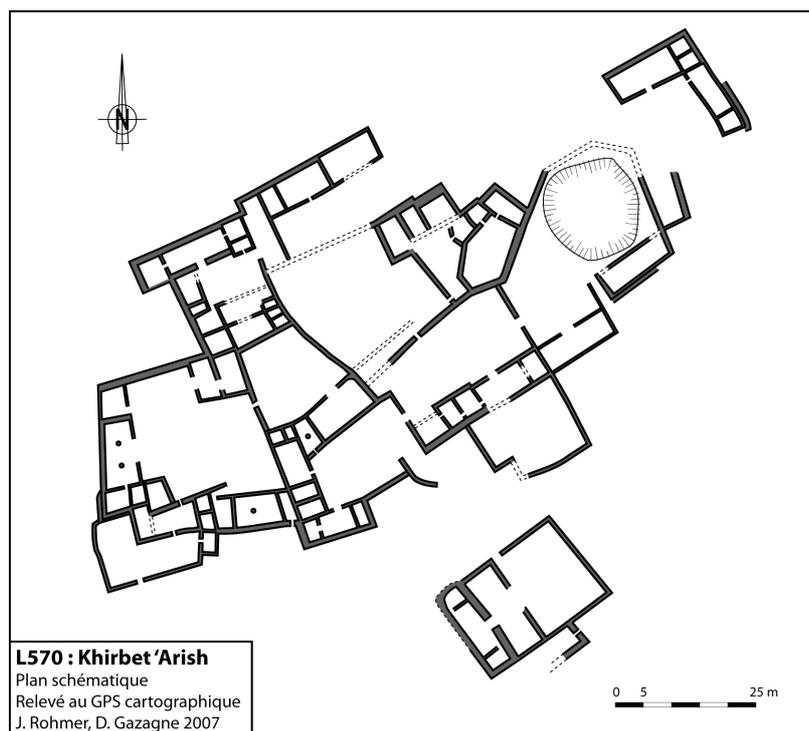
²³ DENTZER ET AL. 1985, 75–80; VILLENEUVE Forthcoming.

²⁴ DENTZER-FEYDY 1986, 265–269.

²⁵ CRIAUD, ROHMER 2010; ROHMER 2010.

²⁶ ABOU ASSAF 2005.

Apart from these major tells, smaller single-period agglomerations provide insight into local trends in town-planning and village architecture at the end of the Hellenistic period. Located on the western border of the Leja, the agglomeration of Kreim aj-Janoûbi probably had a short-lived occupation during the 1st c. BC and maybe the first half of the 1st c. AD (fig. 5)²⁷. It is a 2.5 ha oval settlement (200 x 140 m) located on a basaltic platform, 1 km far from the agricultural plateau of Jedur. It is surrounded by an impressive double wall. The 5 to 7 m wide space between the outer and the inner wall is filled with blocks, which may correspond either to collapsed buildings or to a sloping glacis. Besides, it is uncertain yet whether the inner wall was entirely filled with rubble or whether it had internal casemates at some points of its course. Inside the settlement, a large depression corresponds to an ancient water reservoir, which, according to the locals, was connected to an underground spring before it was blocked up by the Ottoman army. The interior of the agglomeration is occupied by wide houses with courtyards or enclosures. Surface pottery finds included a



Greco-italic amphora of the 1st c. BC and many painted sherds (jugs, jars) which may have been imported from the neighbouring regions of Golan or Galilee²⁸.

The nearby site of Khirbet 'Arish has a different layout (fig. 6). It is located on a basaltic platform in a very rocky environment, 1.5 km away from the nearest agricultural lands. Here, several rectangular pillared rooms with partition walls were built on the edge of the platform. All of them open towards the interior of the settlement, and most of them form several clusters (houses?) organised around common courtyards. The outer walls of the rooms are blind and were connected by segments of walls in order to form a continuous "rampart." The enclosed area covers approximately 0.8 ha (160 X 65 m). Only one house, with a front courtyard, is built outside of this rampart.

Fig. 6 – Khirbet 'Arish: schematic plan of the visible remains.

The surface material contains a large proportion of imported painted pottery, similar to that found in Kreim. It suggests a short-lived occupation in the 1st c. BC and the first half of the 1st c. AD.

The other Hellenistic or "pre-provincial" sites of Trachonitis have been significantly reoccupied in the Roman and Byzantine periods. Consequently, there are very few clues to their initial organization.

Discussion

An Anachronistic Architectural Morphology?

Although they vary in size and shape, the settlements described share some basic common features. All of them are built on heights - promontories, tells or basaltic platforms. They cover the entire

²⁷ ROHMER 2010, 130–131.

²⁸ RENEL 2010a.

available surface. They are delimited by thick continuous ramparts, which follow the orography in order to maximize the defensive advantages offered by the natural site. In most cases (Suweida, Tell Jubeh, Kreim aj-Janoûbi, Si'?), casemates were built inside or along the rampart. Most settlements have a more or less elaborate water management system, sometimes linked with the water table or a spring (Suweida, Kreim aj-Janoûbi), inside the walls.

These common features call for comparisons with the architecture of proto-historic periods. The Hellenistic cities of Bosra and Dion owe their general form to the Middle Bronze Age tells. In Suweida, the continuous double rampart with casemates bears a certain resemblance with Iron Age II cities of Palestine, such as the final stratum of Beersheba²⁹. In these ancient urban centres, the Hellenistic period does not signal a rupture with the original layouts inherited from the Bronze and Iron Ages. Though not unattested in the Near East, this strong urbanistic continuity between protohistoric periods and the Hellenistic phase is quite striking in Hawrân.

More surprising is the fact that newly founded settlements continue to adopt archaic layouts. The structure of Tell Jubeh, with its casemate wall, its wide interior courtyard and its high citadels, is strikingly akin to that of some Iron Age 1 "enclosed settlements" on the plateaus of Transjordan, such as Khirbet al-Mudayna al-'Alya on upper Wadi Mujib³⁰. The oval double wall of Kreim aj-Janoûbi is reminiscent of Bronze and Iron Age double-wall fortification systems³¹. As for Si', the thick megalithic curved wall is also closer to the tradition of proto-historic ramparts than to the design of Hellenistic fortifications³².

To the best of our knowledge, the survival of such archaic layouts until the 1st c. AD is not common in Near Eastern village architecture. In Hellenistic and Roman villages, the prevailing mode of development seems to be characterized by the spontaneous and progressive "agglutination" of housing units with no prior planning³³. When they have fortifications, these were usually built *a posteriori*, i.e. after the full development of the village. A similar model of development has been hypothesized for the "desert cities" previously discussed during this session (Palmyra, Petra): their genesis is thought to result from the "synoikism" of dispersed sub-urban nuclei, initially quite distant from each other and grouped around tribal or familial sanctuaries³⁴.

On the contrary, most of the Late Hellenistic settlements of Hawrân involve some degree of overall planning. Their basic morphological features suggest, for their initial phase, a sudden, deliberate and purposeful settlement of relatively large human groups. Khirbet 'Arish might be the only case of a spontaneous development resulting from the progressive agglutination of domestic units. In the other settlements, the definition of the settlement boundaries, clearly pre-dates the occupation of the interior space. These sites were most probably fortified right from the beginning, either with the construction of an independent rampart (Kreim aj-Janoûbi, Si') or through a specific layout of the external rooms (Tell Jubeh).

Functional interpretation

In light of the specific characters of these sites with regard to contemporaneous Near Eastern urbanism and village architecture, it is more productive to think of their features in functional rather than in "cultural" terms. From this point of view, both the layouts of the cities and of the villages may be considered as a response to a chronically unsafe environment. What appears at first sight is that their inhabitants considered security a primary issue.

²⁹ STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 167–173.

³⁰ ROUTLEDGE 2000, fig. 4.

³¹ Double-wall fortification systems, usually with an inbetween glacis, are well known in Iron Age Palestine and Transjordan, though at much larger sites. See for instance Lachish IV-III (STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 906), Tel Batash III (STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 155), Tel Miqne/Ekron Ib (STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 1052–1057), Tel el-Hesi (STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 632–633), Tell Hamid (STERN *ET AL.* 2008, 1763), Tell el-'Umeiri (STERN *ET AL.* 2008, 1849–1850). Early examples occur in the Middle Bronze Age (see e.g. Shechem: STERN *ET AL.* 1993, 1349).

³² DENTZER *ET AL.* 1985; VILLENEUVE Forthcoming.

³³ DENTZER, VILLENEUVE 1985.

³⁴ For Petra, see among others DENTZER, ZAYADINE 1992; DENTZER 1999. For Palmyra see WILL 1983; DENTZER, SAUPIN 1996.

The Late Hellenistic period was one of great political instability in Hawrân. In the southern Levant, the Seleucid authority was challenged by the emergence of powerful local states. Until the Roman conquest, the cities of southern Hawrân lived under the continuous threat of raids launched by these competing powers: Bosra was sacked by the Maccabees in 164/163 BC, together with other cities of the region, and Dion was violently conquered by Alexander Jannaeus at the beginning of the 1st c. BC³⁵. The northern Jebel al-‘Arab was probably never annexed by these powers, save for a short period of Nabataean expansion towards the north, from 84 BC onwards. A passage of the *Vita Isidori* by Damascius, stating that “Bosra was fortified by the Arab kings against its Dyonisian neighbours”, suggests that before the Roman conquest, Suweida had taken advantage of the political void to act as an autonomous local power³⁶. The construction of the citadel on the fortified tell probably corresponds to these political developments. The contemporary settlement of Tell Jubeh, whatever its relationship with Suweida (allegiance, competition?), must probably be interpreted in the same light. At any rate, the context of instability and conflict which prevailed in the region from the mid-2nd c. BC until the Roman conquest certainly accounts for the need to build heavy continuous fortifications as a prerequisite whenever a settlement was founded (Tell Jubeh). It may also explain why the major cities of Hawrân (Dion, Bosra, Suweida) developed under the protection of their proto-historic fortifications, instead of expanding out of the tells.

In the second half of the 1st c. BC, in spite of the Roman conquest, the region was affected by another kind of instability. Josephus and Strabo describe Trachonitis as a nest of semi-nomadic bandits, living in caves with their flocks and subsisting mainly on robbery of the neighbouring plains³⁷. They report in similar terms the complaints addressed to Augustus by the sedentary inhabitants of the region against these bandits, who took shelter in the rocky enclave of Trachonitis. This area was indeed an ideal refuge for bandits trying to escape retaliation or repression. Its chaotic topology significantly hinders visibility, circulation and orientation. Its “sub-basaltic corridors” (which fit quite well with Josephus’ and Strabo’s description of the bandits’ “dens”) are ideal hiding places for clandestine groups³⁸. The present name of the area, *Leja*, predictably means “refuge” in Arabic. The insecurity favoured by these topographical specificities probably accounts for the existence of heavily fortified sites like Kreim aj-Janoûbi on the border of Trachonitis.

Anthropological clues

Another explanatory factor for the layout of the sites is the nature of the populations involved in the settlement process. In “desert cities” such as Petra or Palmyra, the dispersed mode of development has been generally interpreted as the result of the progressive sedentarization of nomadic tribes³⁹. The specific characters of the settlements under discussion may be the result of different anthropological conditions.

The layout and the environment of the newly created settlements suggests that pastoralism played a prominent part in their economy. In Kreim aj-Janoûbi and Khirbet ‘Arish, the wide courtyards or enclosures associated with the domestic structures are probably to be related with sheep or goat breeding. Both sites are located at a certain distance (more than 1 km) from the nearest agricultural lands. The basaltic zone around Kreim aj-Janoûbi allows at best the practice of small-scale tree cultivation in micro-rifts. The environment of Khirbet ‘Arish is entirely rocky, without any agricultural potential, and the nearest agricultural lands have poor and stony soils. However, the area is marked by the presence of many large depressions which are filled with water in winter and in spring⁴⁰. These depressions provide abundant drinking water for herds. They were apparently used for this purpose until a recent period, since many remains of Bedouin camps are still visible today in the area. All this suggests that the economy of these settlements rested

³⁵ See *supra* n. 8 and 13.

³⁶ Photius, *Bibliotheca*, cod. 242, §196.

³⁷ Josephus, *AJ*, 15.342–354; Strabo, *Geography*, 16.2.20.

³⁸ VILLENEUVE 1985.

³⁹ See *supra* n. 6.

⁴⁰ See BRAEMER Forthcoming for an analysis of this phenomenon.

mainly on pastoralism. Part of their inhabitants may have practiced tree cultivation in the neighbouring area, or cereal culture in small distant parcels, but these were probably secondary activities⁴¹.

Around Tell Jubeh, the slopes of the volcano bear the traces of ancient - though undated - terrace cultivation. Many collapsed terrace walls visible. The bottom of the small valley which the site overlooks comprises today small parcels of olive trees. However, the wide central courtyard, which is devoid of constructions, is hardly understandable if not for keeping livestock. The central *birkeh* was probably dug in order provide water for the herds. Indeed, the water of such open air reservoirs is not suitable for human use. The economy of this settlement probably included an prominent pastoral component, maybe combined with tree cultivation.

Though agropastoral, these newly created settlements do not necessarily result from the sedentarization of nomads. On the fringe of the sedentary zone, many rural communities are mobile, either partially (through a segmentation of the group) or totally (through yearly movements of transhumance)⁴². In Iron Age enclosed settlements of Palestine and Transjordan - which offer the closest parallels to the sites under investigation - the "sedentarizing nomads" model is highly debated⁴³. In the Hellenistic and Roman times, there is virtually no evidence for the presence of real nomads in Hawrân. As stressed by M. MacDonald, only a very marginal number of "Safaitic" inscriptions were found in Hawrân, which suggests that the region did not belong to the transhumance area of the so-called "Safaitic" nomads⁴⁴. Besides, the fact that no such inscriptions have been found inside the ancient villages makes it very unlikely that these nomads ever sedentarized in Hawrân. On the other hand, Zeno's papyri and the book of the *Maccabees* mention Nabataean tribes grazing or trading on the southern plateaus of the region in the 3rd and 2nd c. BC⁴⁵. However, the latter text clearly distinguishes the Nabataeans from the local population, and several pieces of evidence (onomastics, material culture, cults) make it clear that the northern part of the region was neither settled nor politically dominated by the Nabataeans⁴⁶. It is probable that even in the southern part, only Bosra, the regional capital, had a significant Nabataean population⁴⁷. Most semitic inscriptions of northern Jebel al-'Arab are written in local Aramaic, not in Nabataean⁴⁸.

Therefore, it is more cautious to think of these groups as new communities rather as sedentarizing nomadic groups. This may be confirmed by the absence of any obvious kinship-based organisation in Tell Jubeh, probably the best preserved settlement among those discussed here. This site is characterized by a uniform distribution of distinct single casemate-like houses. Most houses have an independent door and open directly on the common central area (fig. 4). There are two clusters of rooms on the high citadels, but given their position they are better interpreted in hierarchical ("palaces") or functional (strongholds, fortified storage areas) terms. Here, the basic organizational unit seems to be that of the house, not that of larger kinship groups. This is quite consistent with the hypothesis of a new community founded through the recruitment of displaced individuals or families.

⁴¹ In some villages of Leja, there are still some semi-nomadic families, who cultivate small parcels of land and practice a six-month transhumance to the fertile plateaus of Jedur in summer (interview with the Sâleh family in Sûr al-Leja, 15/05/2006). See also GUÉRIN 2000.

⁴² See MARFOE 1979 for examples of such phenomena in the plain of Biq' in Lebanon.

⁴³ This model has been proposed by I. Finkelstein for the "enclosed settlements" of the Judean Highlands and the Negev (FINKELSTEIN 1988 and 1995). His argumentation rests on the ecologically marginal location of the sites, and on an architectural parallelism with some Bedouin camps of the early 20th c. in the Negev desert. This model has been challenged by B. Routledge, who favours a dynamic of "recruitment and attachment of displaced individual, families, and/or lineages, regardless of their prior mode of production" (ROUTLEDGE 2000, 60; 2004). Routledge criticizes the equation between pastoralism and nomadic origin, and underlines the fact that most ethnographically attested villages of sedentarized Bedouins are unwallled and dispersed settlements.

⁴⁴ McDONALD 1993.

⁴⁵ DURAND 1997, n° 27.

⁴⁶ VILLENEUVE 1985, 73-75.

⁴⁷ SARTRE 1982.

⁴⁸ STARCKY 1985, 173.

Conclusion

In spite of their diversity, the Hellenistic and “pre-provincial” settlements discussed in this article suggest the existence of a regional trend characterized by the survival of proto-historic organizational features (location on promontories, massive curved ramparts, casemates). They reflect the persistence of a local urbanism and village architecture coexisting with the diffusion of Hellenistic culture and social practices, for which there is evidence in other aspects of the material culture (pottery finds, architectural decoration of tombs and temples). More surprisingly, this regional trend also stands in stark contrast with the morphology of most spontaneous (i.e. not supervised by a superior political authority) settlements of the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the Near East. As opposed to the well documented dispersed or “agglutinating” modes of development, the settlements described here were initially delimited in space, and they were purposefully —though broadly— organized from the moment of their foundation. These specific features may be explained by the chronic insecurity attested in the region in the 2nd and 1st c. BC, which generated specific organizational constraints. They can also be interpreted in anthropological terms, since, as opposed to the prevailing model in the arid and semi-arid zones several of these sites apparently result from the sudden settlement of new communities, rather than from the progressive sedentarization of nomadic groups. On the basis of these preliminary observations, further research and fieldwork will now be needed to investigate more precisely the extent and the dating of this wave of archaizing settlements, and to understand its meaning within the turbulent history of late Hellenistic Southern Syria.

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