UMM AL-JIMĀL SITE PRESENTATION: PRESENTING ANTIQUITIES AND HERITAGE TO SERVE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ECONOMY OF HOUSING AT UMM AL-JIMĀL: SOME PRELIMINARY FINDINGS
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The primary objective of the 1998 ethnographic survey was to explore local residents' perceptions of the proposed development of archaeological features that surround and are integrated into the modern settlement. This project was motivated by the recognition that the people living in the immediate vicinity of the ruins will experience the effects of tourism and development most acutely and should, therefore, have the opportunity to voice viewpoints, concerns and suggestions. The portion of the research presented here focuses on the Umm al-Jimāl residents' interpretations of archaeology as it pertains to the ownership of the past and their negotiations of the ideals of ownership with the present realities of economic struggle[2].

Extensive plans for the preservation and consolidation of standing stone structures that have become destabilized over years of natural and human disturbance (de Vries 1994; de Vries *et al.* 1996) have been developed along with outlines for the design of a walking tour and a museum/visitor center (see de Vries, this volume). Proposed preservation and restoration at the site is based on the notion that archaeologists must attempt to slow both natural and human destabilization processes if the ruins of Umm al-Jimāl are to be maintained for research and tourism. Solving the problem of 'human interference' at the site in the form of vandalism and theft of movable objects such as inscriptions and carved masonry fragments, is, in some ways, more difficult to address.

The proposed means of halting the destruction – the instilling of shared heritage by teaching appreciation and understanding of the antiquities – is based on two assumptions: (1) that an appreciation for the ruins as part of a common heritage does not already exist, and (2) that if this understanding did exist, the inhabitants of Umm al-Jimāl would no longer remove objects from the site. Interviews with Umm al-Jimāl residents, facilitated by a local translator, were designed to test these assumptions. Preliminary study suggests that the actual relationship between the villagers and the ruins is more complex than assumed in the current version of the development proposal. Responses indicate that, from the Umm al-Jimāl residents' perspectives, an appreciation and indeed a deep love for the material remains of the site are not necessarily in conflict with an ethic that allows for removal, alteration and reuse of ancient objects. Interviews revealed three distinct facets or levels of appreciation for the Umm al-Jimāl ruins that I have termed the (1) *Historical,* (2) *Aesthetic / Status* and (3) *Utilitarian Models* of archaeological properties.

The first category of informants' responses revolved around the notion of architectural remains as central to the historical identity of villagers. All of the study participants (n = 10), young and old, shared stories about the tribe's original settlement in the ruins and the process of gradually moving from the goat hair tents

erected in spaces between ruined structures and the use of old buildings as kitchens, storage facilities, and places in which to work during the heat of the day, to the more permanent mud and stone dwellings built outside the limits of the ruins in the 1960's and 70's. In addition, older informants walked with me through the Byzantine town and identified the tumbled structures they had lived in as children. They pointed out that the Arabic words painted over some of the ancient doorways were names of families who had occupied specific buildings (**Fig. 1**). This occupation appears to have been status-based with the most prominent families utilizing the most elaborately constructed and well-preserved of the ancient structures. Painted names and other identifying marks, or the 'vandalism' of remains from the archaeologist's perspective, are, for the residents of Umm al-Jimāl, potent reminders of their tribe's historical connection to Umm al-Jimāl.

A second pattern that I have labeled the *Aesthetic /Status Model* is based on informants' reports, as well as on my observations of the connection between family status in the village and the reuse of decorative fragments as architectural accents in courtyards, gardens, and fences (**Fig. 2**). The integration of antiquities into building designs is pervasive throughout the village; so pervasive, in fact, that in my four summers of field work there, I never visited or walked past a single home that did not boast some fragment of a column, arch, carved lintel or decorative relief. However, the most telling evidence of the significance of these antiquities is in the house of the village Shaykh, Hail el-Serour. The original

1. *Family names of Talal es-Serour and Jamal es-Serour inscribed on painted lintel doorways (historical model).*

2. *Late Ionic capital used as a decorative piece on porch of house built by Shaykh Hail es-Serour (aesthetic/status Model) (photo by Bert de Vries).*

Serour family home was elaborately constructed solely from basalt blocks and decorative fragments removed and re-cut from the ancient town. In more recent years, a concrete addition has been added creating a striking juxtaposition of old and new (**Fig. 3**). Many of the study participants indicated that the Shaykh's house was an important status symbol and source of pride for the community. One resident put it this way:

"Whenever the most important people come to visit our village, they must see the house of the Sheikh. It is the most beautiful of all the buildings. You know this is true. Where did I take you when you first came to Umm al-Jimāl? It is so beautiful. Don't you agree? It is very expensive to build a house like this. The stones are so heavy and you must pay the Egyptian workers to carry them and to cut the stones. It will cost maybe one million JDs".

None of the participants discussed any negative associations with Umm al-Jimāl villagers transferring objects from the ruins. However, when asked why removal and reuse were so prevalent, two informants said it was done to prevent people from al-Mafraq (the nearest town) from taking 'their' stones.

In addition to concepts of history and tribal identity, and aesthetics and social status, informants also distinguished a third interpretation of the meaning of cultural heritage objects that I have called the *Utilitarian Model*. The ruins of the ancient Umm al-Jimāl are, for some of the poorer members of the community, a source of free and accessible building materials. Homes constructed with mud and rubble can be com-

3. *House built by Shaykh Hail es-Serour showing old and new construction (aesthetic/status model). The original basalt house built in the 1960s is on the left and the madhafa addition, which replaced the majlis tent in the 1990s, is on the right. Monumental architectural fragments are visible on the porches (photo by Bert de Vries).*

pleted with minimal economic investment and can be distinguished from the method of reuse seen in the Shaykh's house in at least three ways. In the domestic structures occupied by the poorest segments of the population, stones are not recut and refitted for reuse, the homes are generally much smaller, usually consisting of one or two rooms, and the work is carried out by household members and not paid Egyptian laborers (**Fig. 4**). Participants were quick to distinguish this type of housing reuse from the more aesthetically pleasing construction of the Shaykh's home.

These distinguishable, yet overlapping, models suggest that cultural resources embody a multiplicity of values simultaneously, including those that form links to the past and those that fill immediate material, status, and subsistence needs in the present. From a Western academic perspective, it may be difficult to reconcile these apparently opposed views of the ruins as culturally and historically significant on one hand, and a source of free building material or status items on the other. For example, researchers may discuss this behavior as 'theft',

or at least 'disturbance', of cultural heritage properties. For many archaeologists, a primary goal of research and preservation is to be able to accurately reconstruct and protect ancient structures in as close to their original form as possible. This goal of maintenance or preservation is perceived of as being tied to the ability to assess and interpret the historical and contextual significance of structures. Hence, utilitarian, status / aesthetic, and historical models of archaeological remains may be viewed as contradictory value systems.

Umm al-Jimāl's residents, however, do not interpret or view these models of material culture as inharmonious. In fact, they may view the destruction of *in situ* archaeological remains that inevitably accompanies systematic excavation as contrary to the expressed goals of site interpretation and preservation. From a villager's perspective, reuse of building materials and decorative fragments may simply represent the most recent phase of occupation or period of history at the site, for certainly the ancient inhabitants altered and reused the remains of previous generations.

4. *Older, poorer home to the east of Umm al-Jimāl, now used for storage, constructed of stone rubble and spoiled blocks taken as free building material (utilitarian model) (photo by Janet Brashler).*