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Umm el-Jamal

by GEORGE HORSFIELD

FOUR kilometres within the boundary dividing the British Mandated Territory of Transjordan from Syria, 1000 metres above sea level, and on the northern limit of the plain south of the Jabal Druze (Hauran), lie the ruins of Umm el-Jamal. The city is twenty kilometres from Mafrak, where the pipe-line and road from Iraq cut the Hijaz railway on their way to Haifa on the Mediterranean. The Druze Mountain dominates the plain from the north and this monument lies at the foot, the most westerly of a series of ruined basalt-built towns and the most interesting.

The surrounding plain is not a desert of sand. Its ancient fertility is shown by the old field boundary stones, now wasted by wind-erosion and neglect, leaving a dry exhausted soil thinly sprinkled with desert plants and strewn in parts with basalt boulders grey with lichen. Nowadays the rainfall in these parts is negligible and an attempt some years ago to restart cultivation around Mafrak failed ; for the soil was just dust, carried off by the wind in great clouds when ploughing was attempted. Mafrak is now inhabited, water having been found some hundreds of metres down by boring ; and it was the outpost from which men and materials went forward to build the road and pipe-line now stretching down the corridor between Syria and Saudi Arabia to Iraq. Ancient trade routes converged in this neighbourhood and the name 'Mafrak' signifies the 'Junction'. It was in antiquity a strongly fortified site and later a station on the Haj route.

Umm el-Jamal, the mother of camels, known by no other name, has none of the formal lay-out or architecture which distinguished Syrian Graeco-Roman cities of the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D., although contiguous and contemporary with them. Curiously complete in itself, with a continuous life from the 1st century B.C. to the 7th or 8th century A.D. it was then completely abandoned. Of its history we know nothing except what the monuments tell. With the political collapse of the Seleucids and the Ptolemies in the 1st century B.C., Petra, the metropolis of the Nabataeans, spread its influence outwards, backed

PLATE I



UMM EL-JAMAL: PLAN OF LAYOUT FROM THE SOUTH

Among the buildings shown are the :—

- West church outside wall and Gate of Commodus adjoining
- East gate, north of southern block and adjoining Maschecos church by Birket
- Southwest gate in centre of block
- South gate in centre of wall

Plates I-IV, *Royal Air Force Official, Crown copyright reserved*

PLATE II



UMM EL-JAMAL: LOOKING NORTH ON WEST SIDE

West church outside wall, Gate of Commodus, Julianos church right top corner, and below, the Praetorium.
Blocks of houses west and south of the Praetorium

PLATE III

Barracks



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In foreground eastern block of houses ; in the background the west block. Below, the barracks, on right the Numerianos church. Below, the double church and houses. In foreground Maschecos church, east gate and southeast church

PLATE IV



UMM EL-JAMAL.

East block of houses from west. In right foreground the corner of Numerianos church.
Double church centre left. Beyond wall, small church

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by the wealth that flowed into it as the distributor of the Far Eastern trade to the west. In the 1st century A.D. the kingdom of Nabatene extended north from the Red Sea to Damascus, to the boundaries of Idumaea and Palestine on the west and far down into Arabia on the east. The Jabal Druze the Nabataeans held in the 1st century B.C. Finally Trajan annexed their western territory in A.D. 115 and formed Provincia Arabia with its capital at Bosra, a few kilometres north of Umm el-Jamal. Rabel II, the last king of Nabatene, died there in exile.

The Nabataeans had a distinct civilization, a blend of Hellenism and their own native culture, which produced Petra, the towns and fortresses north along the western edge of the desert, and the monuments of the Jabal Druze.

Water was supplied to the town from the western wadi which rises in the northern mountain fed by rain and snow. In it, to the north, was built a barrage from which a covered masonry canal ran obliquely to the northwest corner of the town ; along the north side, outside the wall, and down the eastern side to the southeast corner, with branches leading off it to fill interior reservoirs. As in villages and towns today in the highlands water was collected once a year and that sufficed.

The air plan (PLATE I) shows the town as a rough parallelogram from south to north, about 800 metres long, and from 300 to 500 metres wide, lying on a featureless plain with a dry wadi to the west. Buildings are grouped in compact masses, east, west and north and a scattered group lies like a spine down the middle. Around the buildings the ground is divided into a crazy pattern of enclosures ; some ancient, others made by the Rowallah Bedouin who pass this way each spring on their migration northwards with their herds of breeding camels, and use the whole ruin as a khan, camping alongside whilst water and fodder last.

The external face of each quarter or block of buildings forms a defensive wall. Where buildings did not exist a wall without bastions or towers joins on to the next block and so from block to block forming an irregular enclosure. On the west is the Gate of Commodus, dated A.D. 176 (PLATE II). In the centre of the south wall, between two small towers, is another ; whilst further west, near the corner, is another in the middle of the houses. One has been noted at the north end of the block on the east side and two more to the north. The modern Caucasian villages of Sukhni and Zirka to the south, on the edge of the desert, have or had the same arrangement on a smaller scale ;

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houses packed close together around the perimeter, leaving the centre more or less free and open, thus forming a defensive enclosure against desert raids. The same seems to have been the origin of the defences of this place, to make it proof against surprise but not against military operations. This applies to the walls of the 1st century A.D. at Jerash also, though these are more solid and bastioned.

Many churches, houses and two civil buildings have been noted ; the ' Praetorium ' dated A.D. 371 (see PLATE II) at the northeast angle of the west block of houses ; and the ' Barrack ' dated A.D. 412, a large freestanding building built around a court, with a chapel projecting from the east wall and a tower on the southeast corner (PLATES III and IV).

Basalt was the sole structural material. Girder arches, corbelling and the employment of great slabs for floor and roof, showing all the principal details that were developed in this intractable material and used throughout southern Syria, are exemplified in a hundred different buildings. These peculiar methods of construction, developed from the working character of the material, appear first in the architecture of the Nabataeans. At Petra girder arches were employed in the 1st century B.C. Masonry shows skilled workmanship and a developed technique to suit the material. Carved ornament is absent and no trace of foreign craftsmen can be remarked.

The thrust of arches was taken by interior buttresses, and a peculiar system of corbelling developed, in which two or three rows of corbels project from the walls with long slabs resting on the tips of the upper row to form floors and roofs. Buildings internally and externally were covered with coatings of stucco, finished with a polished surface on wall, ceiling and floor, hiding structural features and turning the ugly stretch of corbelling into an elegant cove. Doors and window shutters were of basalt. The tradition persisted and appears in the medieval castle of Azrak ; whilst other of the structural inventions of the Nabataeans are employed in the body of that castle.

Large tall houses built round courts are in a majority, half the house consisting of two wide high-arched rooms superimposed in two storeys ; and in the rear four storeys of narrow rooms, flat roofed and floored with slabs of stone on the cantilever principle. Ornament was meagre and only in the ' Praetorium ' was an order employed. In plan, this is a combination of a Roman and oriental house. Recognizable are the reused remains of two Nabataean temples and large numbers of inscribed stelae from destroyed Nabataean tombs. The majority of the later inscriptions are in Latin and Greek, but the classic art that

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flourished in the rest of Syria under the Roman Empire had little visible influence. Under later political and Christian religious influences Greek and Roman personal names were adopted.

The fifteen ecclesiastical monuments follow two main types—halls and basilicas—with considerable variety in plan and structure. Some hall-churches are long and narrow with girder arches to carry the flat roofs. Others are nearly square in plan and have a single arch. The bema is sometimes square, sometimes apsidal, with the curve showing outside ; sometimes concealed by two small projecting aisle rooms. The two types of apses appear also in basilicas. If square piers carry the nave arcades then they are more widely spaced than when pillars are employed. If the nave is narrow then all the walls are brought up to one level and roofed with slabs. If a clerestory is used the aisles are roofed with stone and the nave with wood. Apses have semi-domes but none remains standing. Many of the churches are connected with buildings and presumably were monastic.

Two churches only are dated ; that of Julianos, A.D. 345 (PLATE II) is notable as the earliest church in the world with a dated inscription. It is of the hall type, long and narrow in plan, with a projecting apse ; nine transverse girder arches rise from slightly projecting wall piers to carry the flat roof. The apse had a semi-dome. Every alternate bay was pierced by a square window set high up in the wall. On the north side are rooms with three doors opening into the body of the church. On the south is a court surrounded by buildings and a portico runs the length of the south wall, from which three doors open into the church ; there being no direct entry to the church except through buildings. The 4th century church at Jerash has a similar arrangement of doors and it is considered there that they were for the use of the catechumens. The present custom of the Orthodox Church in separating the sexes inside the church is to group the women on the north.

A large church, conveniently called the ' Cathedral ', of the basilican type, lying alone northeast of the ' Praetorium ', is dated 557. It has an apse squared off on the outside by two small aisle rooms. A narrow west porch covers the three doors. It is not remarkable in plan and is a typical basilica without the western atrium that nearly all the churches at Jerash have. There is a time-lag ecclesiastically between the two places in planning. Prothesis and diaconicon appear at Jerash in the 6th century in response to Conciliar doctrinal enactments which were expressed in public worship by an elaboration of ceremonial and brought about alterations in plan and structure.

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The ' West Church ' (see PLATE II), one of the largest and best preserved of the churches of Umm el-Jamal, is just outside the west wall south of and adjoining the west gate (Commodus). It has its own enclosure joined on to the town wall, and is a basilica of four bays, the arcades carried on square piers with an apse and aisle rooms squared off on the outside. At the west end two towers project at the ends of the aisles, joined by an arch to form a porch covering the single door to the nave. The aisles have doors in the second western bays. These are roofed by corbelling and the arcade walls are carried up to form a clerestory, pierced with a square window in each bay, and the roof was of wood. The nave floor was of mosaic in four colours, of a simple pattern.

In plan and elevation this church is foreign to the region and conforms to structures common in the north of Syria. It may have been a monument to the fierce religious conflicts that tore the Church in Syria in the 5th and 6th centuries and so excluded from the body of the town for nonconformity.

The basalt architecture of the Jabal Druze (Hauran) has, owing to the reoccupation of the mountain by the Druzes, largely disappeared. Umm el-Jamal, from the fact of its desertion in the 7th or 8th centuries until today, has escaped occupational disasters and remains a collection of ecclesiastical, civil and domestic monuments of many ages, remarkable for their extraordinary state of preservation.

Howard Crosby Butler in his publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions in Syria in 1904-5 and 1909, (Division II, Ancient Architecture in Syria, section A, Southern Syria, Part III, Umm idj Djimal), has published the fullest account of the ruins and this has largely supplied the basis for the forgoing article.