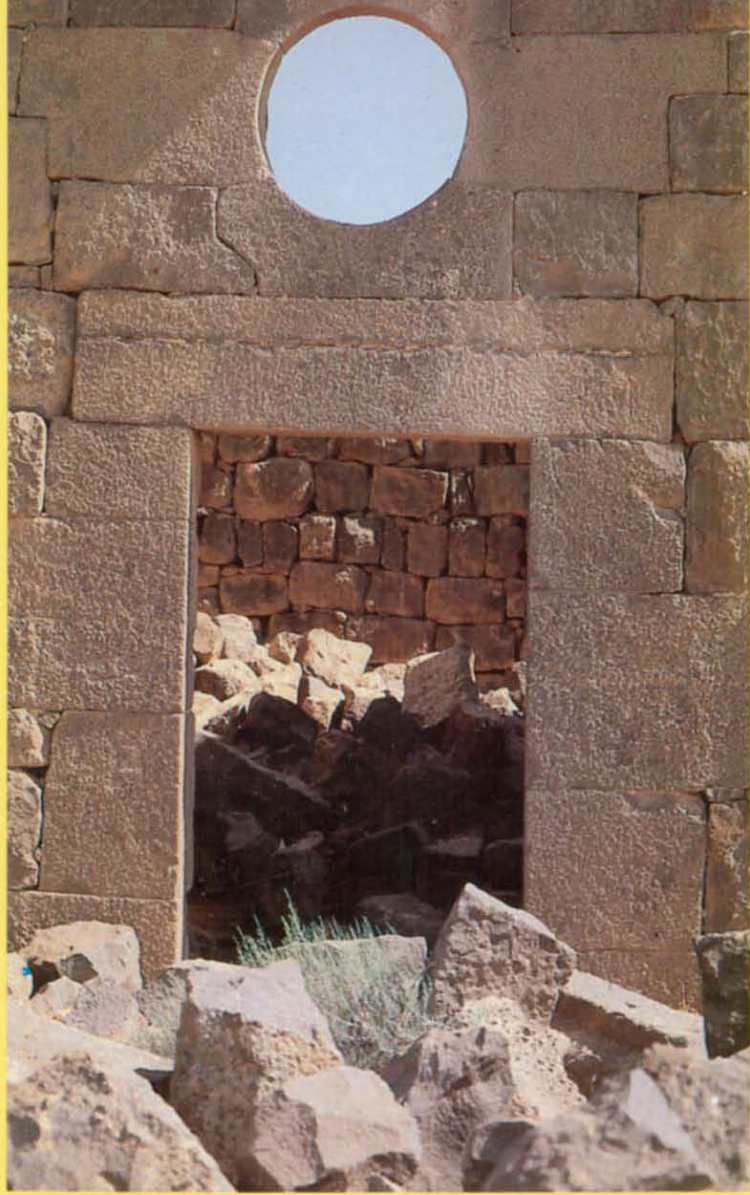


UMM EL-JIMAL



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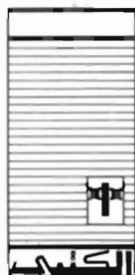
UMM EL-JIMAL

“Gem of the Black Desert”

A brief guide
to the antiquities

By Bert de Vries
with photographs by the author

Al Kutba, Publishers
Amman, Jordan
1990





General view of Umm el-Jimal. Drawn by Randa A. Sayegh.

Cover photo : Doorway with circular window, House III

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Double window of house XVIII

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“Far out in the desert, in the midst of the rolling plain, beside the dry bed of an ancient stream, there is a deserted city. The plain is not a waste of sand, its surface is composed of dry and exhausted soil, overgrown with grey lichen, thinly sprinkled with parched desert plants, and strewn with rounded bits of black basalt, from the size of an egg to the size of a man's head, which are no longer black, as they were when the peasant's plow-share turned them over from time to time; for the desert mosses have covered them with a lace-work of white and grey.... The walls of the ancient deserted city, its half ruined gates, the towers and arches of its churches, the two and three-story walls of its mansions, all of basalt, rise black and forbidding from the grey of the plain. Many of the buildings have fallen into ruins, but many others preserve their ancient form in such wonderful completeness, that to the traveller approaching them from across the plain,... the deserted ruin appears like a living city, all of black, rising from a grey-white sea.”

-- Howard Crosby Butler, 1913



Arch of West Church framing Barracks and Praetorium.

Umm el-Jimal is no longer "far out in the desert," for modern roads have reduced the trip from Amman to one and a quarter hours. And the "grey-white sea" of the plain has been replaced by the green of irrigated fields. Nevertheless, the romantic feeling of surprise and discovery in Butler's words still captures the first viewing of this marvellous site. Besides, the modern accessibility and fertility may reflect more realistically the conditions of late antiquity than the feeling of lifeless desertedness conveyed by Butler. Then as now, Umm el-Jimal was within easy reach of metropolitan centers and the hub of intense agricultural activity.

**Out
in "the
Grey-white
Sea"**

To reach Umm el-Jimal by car, travel north from Amman to Mafrqa, then take the H-4 Road east for 15 km to the first desert police post. There turn north for three kilometers until you reach the site (figure 1, inside back cover). The fastest route is the four-lane road from King Hussein Sports City towards Zerqa to the new Amman-Damascus highway that bypasses both Zerqa and Mafrqa on their east sides. The Mafrqa exit puts one directly onto the H-4 Road. Travel time is one and a quarter hours.

On the Edge of the Basalt Plain

Umm el-Jimal is located in the semi-arid region of north Jordan, on the edge of the basalt plain created by prehistoric volcanic eruptions from the slopes of the Jebel Druze, whose peaks are visible on clear winter days fifty km to the north in southern Syria. This plain, called the

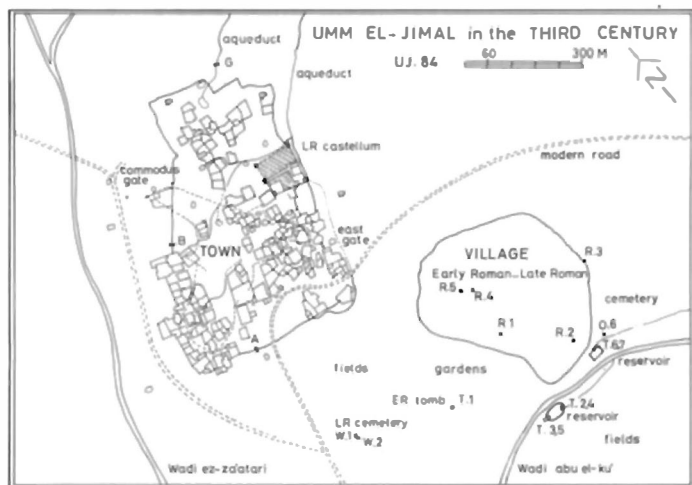


Figure 2: drawn by Bert de Vries and Randa A. Sayegh.

Southern Hauran, is made up of deep basalt bedrock covered with a fertile layer of reddish volcanic soil that receives about 100mm of rainfall per year. By itself, this rainfall is barely sufficient for an occasional wheat crop, but with careful collection and storage of the runoff, it is possible to follow the spring wheat harvest with irrigated crops of produce. Thus it was in the Late Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad periods, when Umm el-Jimal was one of dozens of prosperous rural towns and villages scattered on the plain between Dera'a to the west and Deir el-Kahf to the east.

The great Roman highway, the *Via Nova Traiana* constructed AD 112-14 during Trajan's rule, passes Umm el-Jimal 6 km to the west on its way from Bostra to Philadelphia (Amman). It is best viewed where it crosses the road between Umm el-Jimal and Umm es-Surab, at a point about one km west of Qasr el-Ba'ij, a ten minute drive west of Umm el-Jimal. Umm el-Jimal itself lay on a side road that left the Via Nova at Qasr el-Ba'ij, and went on to Umm el-Quttein and Deir el-Kahf to the east. This side road was part of a network of secondary roads that connected the Southern Hauran's towns and villages with major market centers like Bostra and Suweida, and the desert oasis of Azraq.

On a clear day it is possible to see Qasr Hallabat 25 km to the south, and even the snowcap of the Jebel Sheikh (Mount Hermon) shimmering on the horizon beyond the Golan Heights 125 km to the northwest. To the north and northeast the volcanic cones of the Jebel Druze and its foothills dominate the horizon.

Umm el-Jimal nestles in a fork created by the joining of two wadis (dry riverbeds) that bring the runoff waters from the lower slopes of the Jebel Druze. The earlier village was located on the west bank of the eastern branch, while the standing town lay on the east bank of the west branch (figure 2).

Umm el-Jimal was occupied for 700 years from the 1st Century AD to the 8th Century, and again early in the 20th Century. In its first 700 years Umm el-Jimal had three quite distinct personae.

In the 2nd-3rd centuries it was a rural village that received its impetus from late Nabataean sedentarization, but its prosperity from the incorporation of the region into the Roman Empire after the peaceful transformation of the Nabataean heartland in Jordan into the Provincia Arabia (the Roman Province of Arabia). Thus from Trajan (AD 106) to the end of the Severan Dynasty (AD 235), the village appears to have had an undisturbed and relatively prosperous rural life, with an estimated population of 2,000-3,000 people. We glean that from the hundreds of tombstone inscriptions in Greek and Nabataean, most of which were reused as corbels and stairway treads in the later, still standing town. These inscriptions give us the Arabic and Hellenized names of several generations of villagers: "Asad, (son of) 'Akrab, age 30" (in Greek); "Masikh, son of Zabud" (in Nabataean). All this came to an end in the middle of the 3rd Century, when the village became a victim of the wave of turmoil that ravaged the Roman Mediterranean; a likely hypothesis is that it was ruined during the civil war triggered by Queen Zenobia of Palmyra's rebellion against Rome. Both the tombstones and the masonry of the village were despoiled to provide building materials for the later fortifications and town. The village's remains are visible

Chronological History



Third Century tombstone.
Drawn by Randa A.
Sayegh.

"Masikh also called Suma
of the Rawah. All his years
were 40".

today as a three to four hundred metre diameter oval of moonscape rubble on the gentle slope two hundred meters east of the southeast corner of the still standing town.

The second Umm el-Jimal was a military station on the Limes Arabicus, the 4th-5th Century fortified frontier defensive system created and constructed by the emperors Diocletian and Constantine. Already in the 2nd Century, the Roman imperial authorities had begun construction of a gate and a wall next to the village, on the site of the standing town. This is known from a dedicatory inscription (recorded by Butler from the ruins of the "Commodus Gate") commemorating the construction of a defensive wall during the coregency of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. That was followed by the construction of the great reservoir (figure 3, 9) and the Praetorium. But after the destruction of the village, Diocletian's imperial reorganization caused the construction of a major fortification, the castellum (133-4) on the east side of what later became the town. Now Umm el-Jimal functioned as a stitch in the blanket of total defensive security in which Diocletian had attempted to swaddle his empire. You have to imagine the 4th-5th Century site with the Commodus Gate, the Praetorium, Reservoir 9 and the fort in place, but without the Barracks, the now standing houses and the churches.

This military security may have enabled or forced the civilian resettlement of the site, to set the stage for Umm el-Jimal's third persona, that of a prosperous rural farming and trading town of the 5th to 8th Centuries. The transformation from military station to civilian town was gradual, and is typical of the general transformation from imperial to late antique culture that took place in the East Mediterranean in the 4th Century. This resulted from the failure of Diocletian's system of massive defenses along the eastern frontier and the reaction to the debilitating economic oppression such a system required. Ironically, as imperial military security weakened and decentralized, the prosperity of the eastern frontier increased to reach a peak in the 6th Century.



Figure 3: drawn by Bert de Vries.

At Umm el-Jimal the Tetrarchic (refers to the type of imperial government inaugurated by Diocletian) castellum lost its military function in the early 5th Century, and may have been converted into a market place, to judge from the nature of the artifacts found in the streets between its barracks. At the same time the Barracks (figure 3,1) was constructed as a bivouac for the diminished Early Byzantine garrison inside the now constructed town walls. The last vestige of paganism, a small Roman temple (8), dated to the earlier Nabataean era by Butler, was constructed at this time.

This little temple was soon engulfed in a domestic complex constructed by Christians (House 49), one of 128 such complexes that were in use in the 6th Century. The conversion to Christianity also brought churches; 15 were constructed in the late 5th and 6th Centuries. The Barracks building went through a major remodeling that included the construction of the southeast corner tower. Such towers are a function of the localized defense prevalent during the period of the Ghassanid phylarchy (the Arabic tribal rule on which Byzantine emperors depended to buffer the eastern flank of their empire from the mid-6th Century to the Islamic conquest). Thus the town enjoyed its moment of greatest prosperity at the time that centralized imperial controls were at their weakest. Butler's estimate of 10,000 residents may be high, for he ignored the use of the bottom floors as stables; however, discounting the number to 6,000-8,000 would still give a sizable community.

Undoubtedly, the fortunes of Umm el-Jimal were diminishing during the rather catastrophic decades of the late 6th Century, when the east suffered the twin ravages of plague and Persian wars. Centralized controls returned in somewhat different form after the Muslim conquest under the Umayyad caliphs ruling from Damascus (AD 661-750). Occupation at the site seems to have been uninterrupted to the end of the Umayyad period. The population continued to occupy at least the central structures (the Praetorium and House XVIII), and at



First and second floor doorways.

least one church (22) was remodeled in the Umayyad period. The Praetorium was extensively refloored and decorated with frescoed plaster, and appeared to be a prosperous equivalent of contemporary desert castles like Qusair 'Amra. However, Umayyad controls could not stem the tide of depopulation that had begun in the previous century. When the earthquake of AD 747 hit, neither manpower nor economic energy remained for the sort of rebuilding that had been readily tackled in more prosperous times.

For more than 1100 hundred years the city lay virtually abandoned and untouched. Though buildings experienced the continuous slow crumbling that non-maintenance causes, as well as occasional earthquake jolts, the durable basalt masonry and the high quality construction enabled a remarkable state of preservation. Thus when the Druze were expanding out of their mountain perch to the north, some of them found Umm el-Jimal an attractive place to remodel. Before 1935 a number of buildings had their walls reconstructed, and corbeled roofs newly laid on arches set in the Roman style. When the Druze left to move south to Azraq and Amman, they abandoned a place that appears even more remarkably preserved than when travelers and explorers like Howard Butler and Gertrude Bell visited it earlier in this century.

Since 1950 a sizable Jordanian village has grown around the now protected antiquities of the ancient town. Up to 1975 the villagers continued to depend heavily on the ancient runoff water collection system, especially for their flocks, which used to line up four deep to await their turn at the great Roman

reservoir. In the last decade deep-well drilling has eliminated the dependence on runoff water, and has enabled the redevelopment of the ancient agricultural fields for irrigation-fed crops of produce. Thus the village is once again sending its surplus production to nearby urban markets. Sadly, the renewed plowing has disrupted the ancient canals, so that the old reservoirs no longer fill. This shift to a new water technology has apparently ended a great chapter in the economic and cultural history of the region. However, as Jordan's need for water increases, it is not unlikely that the ancient system of water collection will one day provide a model for a renewal of the runoff technology to supplement the supply of water from the deep-wells.

Umm el-Jimal is no Jerash. No emperor commissioned monumental buildings here. The place is plain, without frills. But this has great significance. Whereas Jerash is monumental, a symbol of the glory of Rome, Umm el-Jimal is ordinary, a symbol of the real life of Rome's subjects. Umm el-Jimal gives us a glimpse of local people, Arabs, Nabataeans, Syrians, living ordinary lives. These people were the backbone of the Roman order and economy. They belonged to the frontier tribes who settled at the urging of Nabataean water technology and force of Roman military order. One could say they benefited from the security Rome brought; one could also say they suffered under the iron fist of Rome's military might. They themselves do not tell us how they felt, but their ruined buildings tell us that they coped rather well at times.

Whereas Jerash has monuments that awe us with their majestic beauty, Umm el-Jimal has ordinary houses that give clues to the habits of their residents. The architecture of these plain houses makes it clear that the residents were chiefly farmers. In most the bottom floors were barns and stables; the enclosed courtyards doubled as living rooms for humans and pens for animals. Outside, the elaborate water collection systems of both the 2nd Century village and the 6th Century town, combined with the terraced fields along the wadis,

indicate extensive cultivation. Both the ruins of the village and the standing buildings of the town indicate enough economic surplus from the export of animals and produce to nearby cities to enable the construction of the no-frills, but sturdy and comfortable houses that are so characteristic of the entire region.

This income may have been bolstered by caravaneering as well. Places like Umm el-Jimal and Umm el-Quttein are convenient stopovers for goods in transit from Arabia and the Gulf via the Wadi Sirhan and Azraq to Bostra and Damascus. To explain the very existence of these places as "Caravan Cities", however, is an exaggeration. The backbone of local economy and sustenance was the agriculture that flourished from the twin benefits of superb water engineering and excellent soil.

Who were these residents? It is tempting to call them Nabataeans, because the site has one of the largest number of Nabataean inscriptions anywhere. However, indications are that Nabataean was an adopted culture. The villagers who wrote the Nabataean used much more Greek, another second



Roofing arches, reservoir of House 83.

language, if poor grammar and spelling are any indication; and practically none of the typically Nabataean pottery was used. The post-3rd Century town people used no Nabataean at all, only Greek.

The best interpretation is that the earlier village was settled by local Arab tribes under Nabataeanizing influence from the nearby capital at Bostra. These villagers probably spoke an Arabic or Aramaic dialect, and super-imposed both Nabataean and Roman cultures on their own desert ways as they became sedentary. The names on their tombstones, though written in Greek, are mostly Arabic/Aramaic in ethnic identity. After the destruction of the Nabataeanized village in the 3rd Century, the builders of the new town were other regional Arabs who adapted and refined the earlier hydraulic and architectural technology, but had no interest in the Nabataean language and religion.

It is also a misnomer to call the people of this later town Roman or Byzantine. True, the pottery they used was mostly typical of the Roman and Byzantine pottery of the Mediterranean. But the architecture and the way of life is indigenous, with only some Greek and Roman influences. The answer to the question, therefore, is that the people of Umm el-Jimal belonged to local Arabic tribes who settled into rural communities in the context of Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad political and cultural expansion and control.

The role that Umm el-Jimal played in these historical developments is difficult to determine, because its ancient name was unknown. Butler and others have associated it with the Thantia of the Roman-Medieval map called the Peutinger Table. This, however, is a tenuous hypothesis at best. Henry MacAdam has recently suggested the name Surattha, an unidentified place name of a north Arabian town from Ptolemy's Geography, as a possibility. The meaning of the modern name, too, is enigmatic. Some insist it means "Mother of Beauty", but most translate it as "Mother of Camels". Anyone who has seen the herd of beautiful, thoroughbred camels belonging to the sheikh of the modern village wintering among the ruins, will agree that the two translations are in fact compatible. Without the help of literary sources, the role of the settlement has to be understood from the ruins themselves.

Mother of Camels

Camels with the Barracks in the background.





Mangers in House 119.

One's first approach to the town is a dramatic experience. As the skyline emerges from the stark plain, it impresses one first as a living city, then as a fire-bombed ghost town and finally as the collection of amazingly well preserved ancient ruins it really is. For the best view of the entire city, stop alongside the modern cemetery. This is the last spot from which to photograph the whole site. Also, to the right of the standing town you will see a grey rubble area just beyond the concrete electric poles nestled onto the gradual slope of a low knoll that peaks about a kilometer due east (figure 2). This is all that remains of the 2nd-3rd Century village. In the foreground, between the village and the road, randomly strewn basalt boulders are the surface remains of the graves of the ordinary village people. The more elaborate family tombs of the wealthier villagers are spread all around the environs of the village and the town. These Roman style tombs were reused by the people of the later town.

Driving into the town, one is plunged

An Overview: Gem of the Black Desert



Gate of house XVIII.
Drawn by Randa A. Sayegh.

into a scene of eerie beauty. Walls run in every direction, without apparent plan or order. Neatly stacked courses of stone appear to grow out of the mad confusion of tumbled upper stories. The blue-gray of basalt everywhere gives a somber and cool sense of shadow that belies the blaze of bright desert sun. Here and there, pinnacles of wall reach up three stories high, their fingers of cantilevered stone silhouetted against the cloudless sky, defying gravity. Doorways and alleys lead from room to room, building to building, to more stone, more walls. The glassy clang of basalt under foot punctuates the desert silence, and radiates the heat of the sun.

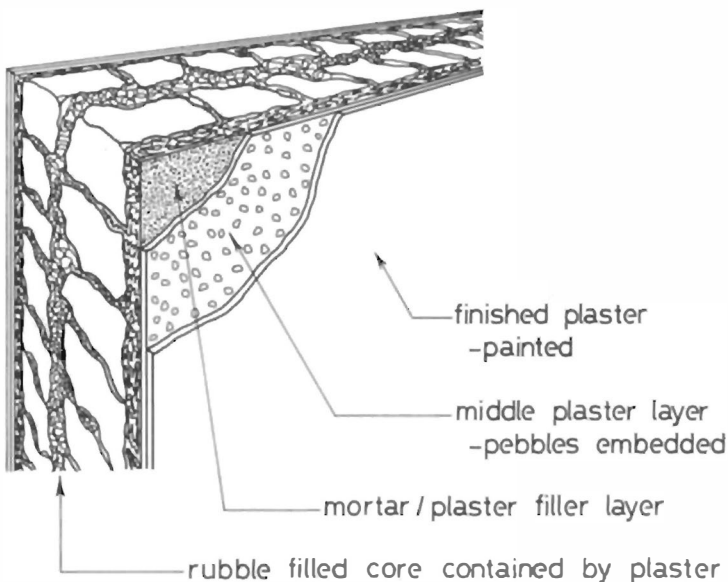
Suddenly, you stumble through a doorway into a room with an intact corbeled ceiling to luxuriate in real shadow, and soothing coolness. An adjacent wall holds a row of mangers. A stone sink hangs in a corner. The mind's eye restores the bits of plaster, adds a coat of paint. You can almost hear the cows tethered at the mangers, and the water splashing in the basin. Inside these four walls your sense of human scale returns. This eerie, dark and desolate place turns into the town it was.

Almost all masonry is textured and only roughly finished, because basalt is very hard and difficult to dress to a smooth finish. Although excellent carving and dressing of basalt is evident in more monumental places like Umm Qais and Bostra, the townspeople of Umm el-Jimal could not afford to pay for the time it took to achieve such finesse, nor did their more moderate rural tastes demand it. Smoothly dressed masonry is used only around doors and windows, where the extra load to be carried required tightly fitting joints. In antiquity at least some wall surfaces were plastered and painted, so the somber effect created by the dark basalt was tempered to a degree.

Their remarkable state of preservation testifies to the fact that most buildings were well built, in spite of the rough finish. The majority of the walls are of a simple rubble-filled type, with the stones dressed only on the exterior face. The two faces were built independently, with the interior space carefully

filled with soil and stone chips as construction progressed course by course. The two faces of such a wall were tied together only by ceiling corbels and stairway treads which extend all the way through both faces. The combination of building blocks and rubble formed a solid mass that was kept intact by the plaster coatings on both faces. These walls remained very strong as long as the plaster joints retained the interior rubble. With the plaster gone, however, the rubble would dribble out over time, leaving the hollow core and the two wall faces standing nearly independently of one another. In this condition, the wall faces are very unstable and tend to pop outward when the equilibrium in the wall is disturbed through earthquake or roof collapse. This process of decay can be halted by refilling the hollow wall cores with cement, as was done for the Barracks perimeter walls in 1977.

This building method is far cheaper than the stronger "header-stretcher" wall, in which completely dressed stones



Wall construction detail. Drawn by Mark Hamstra.

are laid alternately parallel and perpendicular to the face of the wall. The builders knew, however, that with basalt the cheaper method was adequate, even for four to six storey high structures.

The town is 800m long and 500m wide. The plan of figure 3 includes all the town structures still visible above the surface, and is basically that of the late antique town. A catalogue of the more than 150 standing structures can be derived from figure 3. Notice that the town is contained in a thin perimeter wall sufficient for keeping in goats, and for keeping out vagabonds, but not armies. Inside are three clusters of buildings separated by rather large open spaces, in which free-standing buildings like the Barracks (1) and the Cathedral (14) were located.

The striking feature of the town plan is its disorder and lack of preconceived design. Whereas Jerash and any formally planned *polis* is laid out on a rigid "Hippodamic" grid of straight streets which meet at right angles, here there is no plan at all. In fact, there are no streets except the alleys created when various expanding housing complexes grew close to each other. The houses themselves are laid out at all possible angles, with the basic design feature the filling of available space.

One is tempted to see the Jerash grid as the more civilized, and the Umm el-Jimal non-grid as several steps backward in the history of city design. It should be remembered, however, that Jerash was an artificial introduction imposed as a result of military conquest and colonization. Umm el-Jimal, on the other hand, represents the indigenous way of life, in which comfort and familiarity, not clinically arranged order, were desirable. The goal at Umm el-Jimal was not to impress visitors from Rome, but to accommodate people and animals in a compatible and comfortable symbiosis. In this sense, Umm el-Jimal's departure from the Hippodamic plan may be seen as a return to normality, rather than as a regression.

The town is so large that it is impossible to see everything in one visit, especially in the summer heat. The following walking tour includes an excellent sample of all building types, and may be completed in one to three hours. Though this should not prevent anyone from further exploration, be warned that many walls and roofs are unstable and dangerous. The author knows of at least one broken ankle caused by careless climbing -- his own.

As you approach the city on the paved road from the south take the right fork through the south town wall and park in the open space by the Barracks (1).

When you enter the intact stone door of the Barracks, notice that the doorway is pieced into the wall in a secondary remodeling. Above the door is a machicolation,

A Walking Tour of the Town



Corbels in House XVI.



Umm el-Jimal town-scape.

a window cover that enabled defending soldiers to drop unpleasant things on the enemy without getting shot. The single slab door still moves on its hinges for those with some muscle. Opening onto the large courtyard are rows of rooms to house soldiers, and perhaps, horses. Based on a now lost inscription, the building was constructed as a *castellum* under the duke Pelagius in A.D. 412. However, the two very smoothly finished towers and the entry were added in a remodeling of the Late Byzantine period (5th-6th Centuries). The rather crude pathway and platforms in the courtyard are the work of French soldiers who camped here in the transition from World War I to the Mandate.

The well constructed Late Byzantine corner tower has some interesting Greek inscriptions. The four machicolations over the upper windows were each inscribed with a latin cross and the name of one of the four archangels guarding the town in each direction of the compass: Gabriel, Raphael, Michael and Ouriel. The inscriptions in the tower blocks combine Christian symbols, allusions to the psalms and a martial spirit. Here are Littmann's translations of some:

O Lord God, judge those who wrong us, and
make war against them with thy might (cf. Ps.
35:1).

This sign conquers and aids! (next to a cross)

A vow of Numerianos and Joannes: From
(our) mother's womb thou art our god; forsake
us not (cf. Ps. 22:9-11).

Peace unto all! (around the Xi-Rho symbol)

As you exit through the door notice the small Chapel (12) attached to the Barracks on the right. It too was added in the Late Byzantine remodeling. Whether the remodeled complex continued to be military or had some ecclesiastical/monastic function is not clear.

Walk up the path towards House 102. On your left you pass the Numerianos Church (13), built to fulfill a vow by Numerianos, Joannes and Maria - the first two probably the same pair who wrote on the Barracks tower. The now badly ruined church was once quite elaborate, with a mosaic floor, later replaced by a simpler plaster one, and an upper level balcony over the side aisles. On the north side is a cloister with a covered cistern in the courtyard. The whole layout is similar to the main church at Umm es-Surab and the ecclesiastical complex at Qasr el-Ba'ij. It is one of five churches at Umm el-Jimal that stood independently; the other ten are all built into domestic housing clusters.

Cross the barbed wire fence and follow the path between Houses 102 and 116, a path created merely as the divider between two clusters of houses. These clusters represent the main social unit of the town, the extended family. Imagine that a cluster like the one on your left, Houses 102, 3 and 4, began with the construction of House 103, which was occupied by one family. Then in a generation, as the offspring acquired families of their own, expansion resulted in the construction of 102 and 104. Meanwhile, more distant relatives were expanding the adjacent clusters until all the available space in the neighborhood was occupied. On this basis, the entire section of clusters around

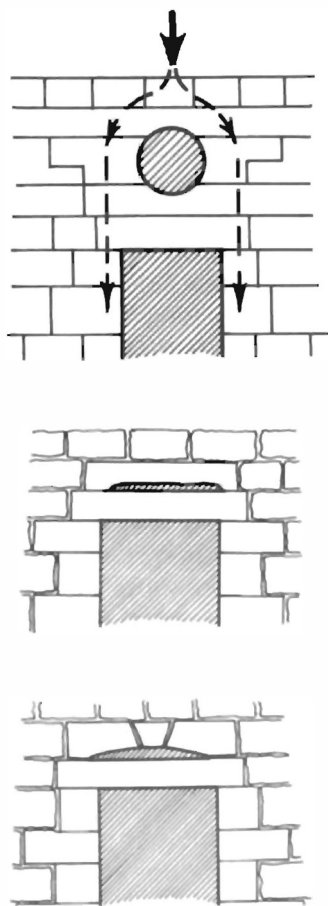


Figure 4: Lintel relieving methods. Drawn by Bert de Vries.

you can be seen as a somewhat separate "village" in the larger town, in which the residents are more closely related to each other than they are to the residents in the other quarters of the town.

Turn left around 104, and enter its gate to get to the entrances of the Double Church (15). The northern one is a well built basilica in which the arches of the partition between the side aisles and the nave rested on columns rather than the more usual piers. This church would have had a sloping wooden trussed roof over the nave, and flat corbeled roofs over the side aisles. The church was paved with a series of fine plaster floors that represent remodelings from the late 5th to the 7th Centuries. The southern hall type church is much more crudely built. It has an unusually large apse and entry door. Because there is no relieving device (figure 4) above the door lintel, it has cracked. To the right of the door an interesting ablution basin protrudes from the wall. This church is a single hall that was covered with a flat corbeled roof supported on transverse arches (figure 5). By looking at the wall joints between the two churches, you can see that this hall church was 'tacked' onto the more elaborate basilica, and is therefore later.

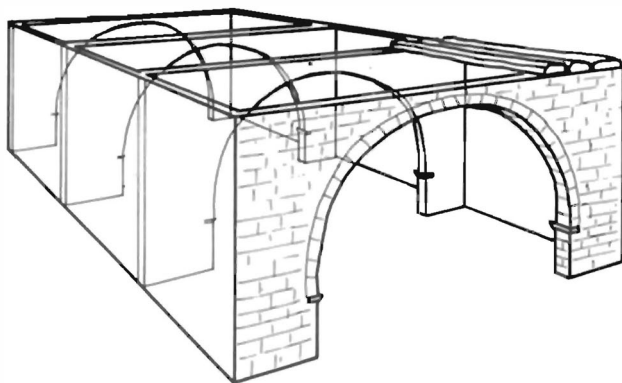


Figure 5: Hall created by combining arched partitions with a corbeled ceiling.
Drawn by Bert de Vries

It is not clear whether this expansion from one to two auditoria represents an increase of worshippers, an act of piety, or a doctrinal split among the families of the neighborhood. What is clear is that these churches were the private domain of the residents of the housing complexes within which they were built. Here is another major change from the imperial cities like Jerash or Pella, where the great temples were public, central and visible. These churches are private and tucked away indistinctly among the houses.

Proceed between Houses 99 and 105 to the entry gate of House XVI, an elaborate gate typical of the more expensively built houses of the town. The exterior doorway was designed for a lockable double door, but the interior way into the courtyard is simply a graceful arched opening. Overhead is one of the finest examples of ceiling corbeling-- the use of cantilevered ceiling and roof supports designed to carry stone beams. Because basalt is strong, these corbels could carry a much larger load than limestone without cracking. This gave a much simpler and cheaper method of roofing than the extensive use of columns, arches and vaults which are necessary where limestone is the common building material. However, because the length of the ceiling beams was limited to about three meters, all rooms roofed in this way tended to be narrow. To create larger interior spaces, such as living rooms or church halls, it was still necessary to use arches to open things up.

Leave the gate and cross over to House XVIII, which can be entered through a breach in the walls of its western rooms. Excavation in the corner of the room through which you are passing determined that the house was used in the Late Byzantine period and remodeled with a cobblestone floor in the Umayyad period. The wall with the opening in the middle of the room is roughly built, but it contains within it the beginnings of an arch at both ends. This arch was being built by the Druze when they abandoned Umm el-Jimal ca. 1935. The rough stones in the middle are merely the temporary supports for the

voussoirs of the arch that were to be removed once the keystone was in place. Above, on the intact wall, is a very fine example of corbeling, indicative of the excellent quality of this house.

In the courtyard, the expectation of the excellent construction is confirmed. The villagers call this the "Sheikh's House" for its superior quality. The courtyard is large. On the left is a cantilevered stairway of finely cut treads (figure 6), and opposite is a high wall with twin stairways making an interesting V pattern. In the wall behind you are two fine examples of lintel relieving (figure 4). The door through which you entered has a little square window above it, and in addition, the window posts have been slotted so that none of their weight rests on the lintel except where it is directly supported by the doorposts. Farther to the right another door has a clever low sprung little arch above its lintel to achieve the same purpose. The slot created by the arch above the lintel was intended to remain open, so that the arch could deflect the weight of the masonry above from the lintel onto the doorposts. On the south side of the court is the charming arch of the single gateway permitting entrance into the courtyard (your own entry was possible due to wall collapse).

This is a fine example of a typical late antique Hauran house. The single entry indicates privacy and security. On the outside these houses are austere and closed off, but once you enter the courtyard you are at the center of private domestic activity. Imagine this courtyard filled with children playing, women cooking, chickens scratching and cows chewing. The stairways take people to their living and bedrooms, the lower doors the animals to their shelters. All the activity centers on this courtyard.

Exit through the cleared gate and go left around the building. Its eastern exterior facade is worth a stop. Three stories up is the arched double window that has become Umm el-Jimal's emblem. Below it to the right is a postern doorway with half of the double stone door still *in situ*. This door gave



Doorway of House XVII with relieving arch.

access to the fine reservoir, whose arches used to support a stone slab roof to prevent evaporation and soiling of the water supply. The filled arch in the main wall indicates that the reservoir once went under the rooms inside. The southern end of this great wall looks much rougher than the part above the reservoir. That is more of the incompleting work of the Druze earlier this century.

The passage between Houses 93 and XVII opens onto a secluded little plaza that must have been a neighborhood beehive. The north face of House XVII is interesting. The doorway had its relieving arch slot

covered with a little porch roof of which the plaster join with the main wall is still visible. To the right of the door is the house's partially standing corner tower. The lower courses of this tower were carefully interlocked to strengthen the masonry and enable the northwest corner to carry the tremendous mass of the tower masonry. Such towers on private houses are indicative of the localizing of the defense as the imperial forces lost their strength. As watchtowers and forts lost their troops, the residents themselves had to keep watch for approaching strangers. The whole domestic scene gives the impression of self-reliant resourcefulness and preoccupation with private rather than public affairs.

The path continues between Houses 89 and 97, and ends at an open area with an oval reservoir. Such a pool was created by quarrying the basalt bedrock for building stones and then sealing the remaining depression so that water could be stored

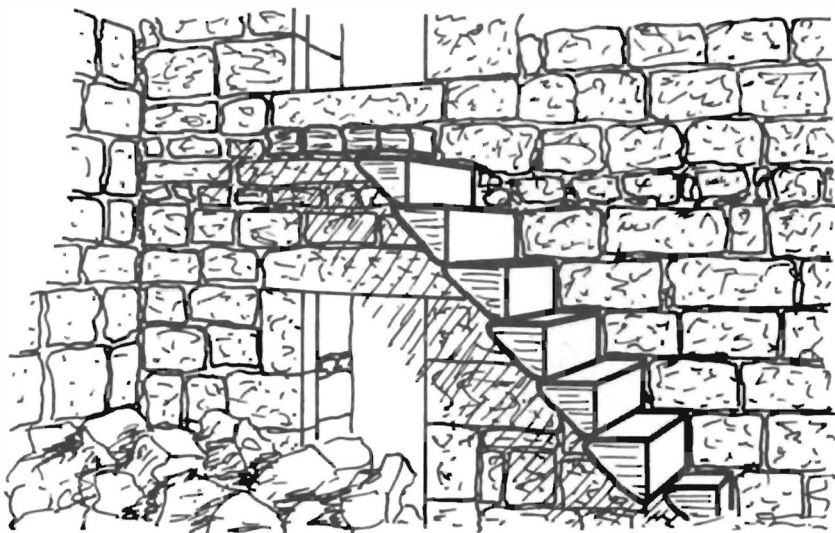


Figure 6: Stairs, northwest wall of court XVIII. Drawn by Bert de Vries.

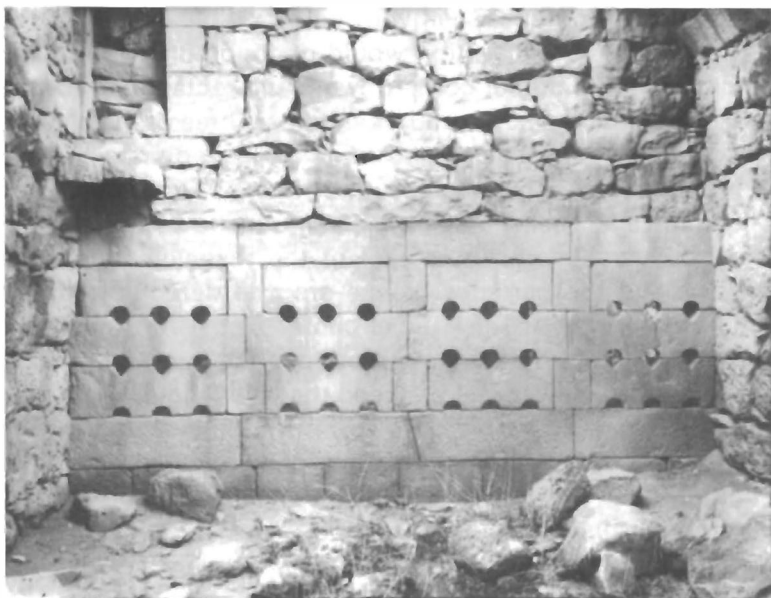
in it. This pool probably received the overflow from the main very large open air *birkeh*, Reservoir 9. It and others received their water from one (10) of two main aqueducts that carried the runoff from the sloping terrain as much as five kilometers to the north. This aqueduct used to fill the reservoir to overflowing until the deep-well drilling of the 1980's brought an agricultural revival that blocked the path of the canal. The reservoir itself was replastered earlier this century. Connected to the north end of House 83 is the best example of a once covered reservoir for domestic potable water. Constant attention to water collection and storage by means of simple but well engineered systems was the key to the successful survival of Umm el-Jimal and its neighbors in this relatively arid environment.

To the northeast of Reservoir 9 is the tetrarchic *castellum* (133-4). Because it was built ca. A.D. 300, and already ruined when the 6th Century town was thriving, the surface remains are not as spectacular as the ruins already visited. The fort has

a 100m square defense wall with gates visible in all but the north wall (where excavation would undoubtedly reveal one), and small square outset corner towers and rectangular towers flanking at least the south and west gates. Three of the corners are square, but the southwest corner tower appears to have been "squeezed" in alongside the edge of Reservoir 9. Its oblique tower corner is discernible at ground level just north of the modern sediment basin east of the reservoir. While the ramparts and the barracks blocks are still detectable in the rubble, the *principia* (the official center of the fort) has been mostly robbed out for the construction of the East Church (23), House 79 and a new street between the west and east gates in the Late Byzantine periods. However, the plaster floor of the *aedes* (the central ceremonial room of the *principia*) was found complete with the hole in which the standard of the military unit stood on display.

Thus this area gives one a good sense of chronology. Reservoir 9 was built before the fort, which dates from the early 4th Century; the fort, after it lost its military function and was used as a market in the 5th Century, became the ruined quarry for the construction of the 6th Century East Church and adjacent House 79.

Now proceed west from Reservoir 9 through the barbwire fence. Go past the reservoir and courtyard of House 83 and climb through the ruins of House 82 into the courtyard of House XIII, and enter the north room. This, with the adjacent room on the west side (currently too dangerous to enter), is a fine example of a typical barn-stable complex. This broad room served to shelter sheep and goats, while the other room, equipped with a row of mangers, accommodated larger livestock like cows or horses tethered in stalls. The west wall of the larger room has a very fine stone screen designed to let fresh air into the adjacent stable. Notice that the large well built arch supporting the corbeled ceiling is built up against the screen wall, partially covering it. A photograph in the publication of



Airvents for mangers in House XIII. Photo, taken in 1905, courtesy of H.C. Butler archive, Princeton University.

the Princeton Survey taken in 1905 shows that at that time the arch was not there although the ceiling corbels were. This is one of the many arches constructed by the Druze (figure 7), who moved in after the Princeton Expedition's visits in 1905 and 1909.

The small doorway in the north wall allowed sheep and goats (and also children) to cross into the adjoining complex. This is a small clue to the interrelationship between residents in adjoining houses of the same cluster. In the northeast corner of the room is a fine example of a latrine, with an adjacent wash basin. There is no evidence of either a water supply or a septic system, however.

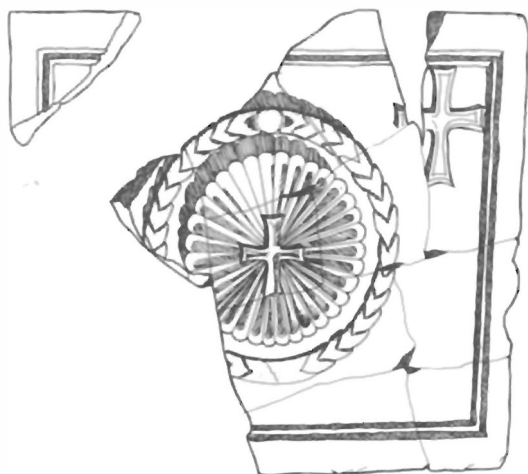
Retrace your steps through House 82 and cross the town to the Commodus Gate (3) in the west wall. This gate was

identified and dated to the co-regency of Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus (AD 177-80), from an inscribed stone found lying in the tumble in 1905. Today the stone is missing.

Past this gate the West Church (18) can be approached from the north. Not particularly well built, the church is spectacular because the southern partition between the nave and the side aisle is still intact, and its four large arches create a dramatic silhouette when seen from a distance, especially against a winter sunset. There are fine Byzantine crosses in the arches and on the doorways next to the apse. The semi-circular apse was partitioned off to create a separate room after the building lost its function as a church. The tomb and sarcophagus immediately outside the added entry narthex may indicate that this was a funerary church. However, probes in the enclosed courtyard failed to reveal additional tombs. The location of the church outside the city wall and its relatively poor construction suggest a rather late building date.

Cut across the west town wall and go past the Cathedral (14), with an inscription mentioning Valens, Valentinian and Gratian, who were co-emperors in AD 371, on a stone reused as a lintel in the right doorway. A pier cap inscription dates the construction of this church to AD 556, fairly late. The 4th Century inscription was added in a later remodeling, when the narthex was "glued" onto the facade of the church, so that the triple entry actually consists of two contiguous but unbonded walls. If the date of this church is correct, the commonly practiced adding of narthexes to the churches of Umm el-Jimal may be dated to the Heraclian (late 6th to the early 7th Century) or Umayyad eras (7th Century).

From the Cathedral cross over to the "Praetorium" (2), so called by Butler because it is the best built structure on the site, and because it has an unusual monumental design. The notion that it was originally an official public building to represent the Roman imperial presence in the 2nd-3rd Centuries is plausible, but in Late Antiquity it became part of a



Chancel screen panel from Northeast Church. Drawn by Randa A. Sayegh.

domestic complex with the addition of the rooms on the west side of the large courtyard. The south facade of the building has a monumental triple set of doors. The central one opens onto an atrium that had four Corinthian columns supporting a partial roof that left the middle open to the air. The room was refloored with plaster on a small cobblestone underlayment in the Umayyad period.

Another triple doorway in the west wall of the atrium leads into a large pre-Christian basilica that had a two storey high pitched ceiling. The opposite door leads into a dramatically constructed cross-shaped room, in which the arms of the cross are roofed with excellent barrel vaults. The central corbeled ceiling, which used to have straight flat beams covering the opening, now has the remnants of cruder beams installed by the Druze. The room was mosaiced and recovered with frescoed plaster in the Umayyad period. Along the back of the

building are five ordinary rooms (offices?), with one ceiling repaired by the Druze. The precisely built surviving arches in these rooms are Roman.

From here, the weary can return to the Barracks, and those with more energy may continue through the densely built southwest quarter of the town. Enter the gate opposite House 54 and into the inner courtyard of House VI, where lies a large inscribed stone Butler identified as a Nabataean altar with a Greek-Nabataean bilingual dedication. The texts were translated as follows by Littmann; Nabataean: "This is the sacred stone which Masik, son of Awidha, made for Dushara;" Greek: "Masechos, son of Aweidanos, to Dousar Aarra." This links Umm el-Jimal's Nabataean worship directly with Bostra, because Aarra is the Dushara (the Nabataeans' leading male deity) of that city, venerated there especially during the reign of the last king, Rabbel II. Built into the west wall of the courtyard is the reused Nabataean half of another famous bilingual inscription. Littman translated this:



Nabataean funerary inscription mentioning Gadhimat.

This is the tomb of Fihr
Son of Shullai, the tutor of Gadhimat,
the king of the Tanukh.

This inscription is important for two reasons. Dated to the middle of the 3rd Century, it is one of the two latest known Nabataean texts, written in a style that shows the transition from Nabataean to Arabic writing. The inscription also links the Tanoukhid tribal federation indirectly to Umm el-Jimal. This link entices speculation that the 3rd Century village may have been embroiled in the wars between Palmyra and Rome, in which Gadhimat sided with Rome against Zenobia, who murdered him at one of her dinner parties.

The last stop on the tour is the so-called "Nabataean Temple" (8), located in the courtyard of House 49. It was named that by Butler, who saw in the triple doorway facade, the columned porch and the style of the column bases, a simple Nabataean temple. However, careful stratigraphic analysis by Laurette De Veaux and S. Thomas Parker has shown that building was founded in the 4th Century, a date that stretches the identification of the building as Nabataean beyond the limits. It is rather to be seen as a late Roman (possible) temple, constructed on the eve of the Christianization of the town.

All that remains visible of the original structure is a portion of the facade, including the three doorways and some of the roof molding. The rest, including the other three walls, the two interior arches and the roof, are Druze reconstruction.

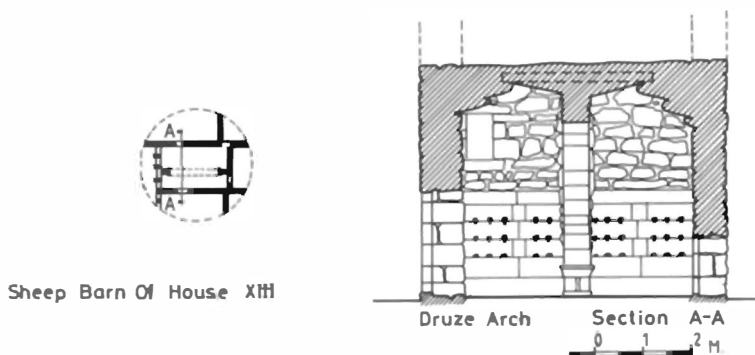


Figure 7: Druze Arch in House XIII. Same view as photo on p. 30. Drawn by B. de Vries and R. A. Sayegh.



Facade of House III from courtyard.

porch is now gone. The building was incorporated into the Christian domestic complex of House 49 about a century after its construction.

From here the tour can be completed with a leisurely stroll through the "street" that leads past the Southwest Church (11) and House I. On your way back to the Barracks, detour into the courtyard of House III for your parting impression. The well preserved north wall has a charming circular window that serves as the relieving device over the lintel of the main doorway.

Acknowledgements and Further Reading

Extensive survey work was done by the Princeton University Expedition to South Syria in 1904-5 directed by H.C. Butler. The result was superb publications of both the architecture and the inscriptions in the Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909 (H. C. Butler, *Ancient Architecture in Syria*, Division II, Section A, Part 3, Umm Idj-Djimal, 1913; E. Littmann et al., *Greek and Latin Inscriptions in Syria*, Division III, Section A, Part 3, Umm idj-Djimal, 1913; E. Littmann, *Semitic Inscriptions*, Division IV, Section A, Nabataean Inscriptions, "Umm idj-Djimal," 1913, pp. 34-56). Nelson Glueck included Umm el-Jimal in his study of the extent of Nabataean influence in Syria in *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*, IV, Part I, 1951, pp. 1-34. In 1956 G.U.S. Corbett did a detailed study of the Julianos Church from which he concluded convincingly that Butler's naming and dating of the church in the 4th Century is based on a reused funerary inscription and therefore incorrect ("Investigations at the 'Julianos' Church at Umm el-Jimal," the *Papers of the British School at Rome*, Vol. XXV, 1957, pp. 39-66). Since 1972 Bert de Vries has been working on the site, completing Butler's mapping of the town in 1972-3 and directing teams of excavators in 1974, 77, 81 and 84. The work of those teams, the Department of Antiquities and ACOR have contributed greatly to the information in this booklet. The author's preliminary reports of the results of this work are: "Research at Umm el-Jimal, Jordan, 1972-77," *Biblical Archaeologist*, winter 1979, pp. 49-55; "The Umm el-Jimal Project, 1972-1977," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, XXVI, 1982, pp. 97-116 and *BASOR*, 244, 1981, pp. 53-72; "Umm el-Jimal in the First Three Centuries AD," pp. 227-41 in the *Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East*, eds. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy, *BAR International Series* 297, Oxford: BAR, 1986; *Umm el-Jimal, a Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad City of the Hauran, Jordan*, is being published in three volumes in the *BAR International Series* beginning in 1990. The fieldwork on the site is expected to continue for two more seasons.

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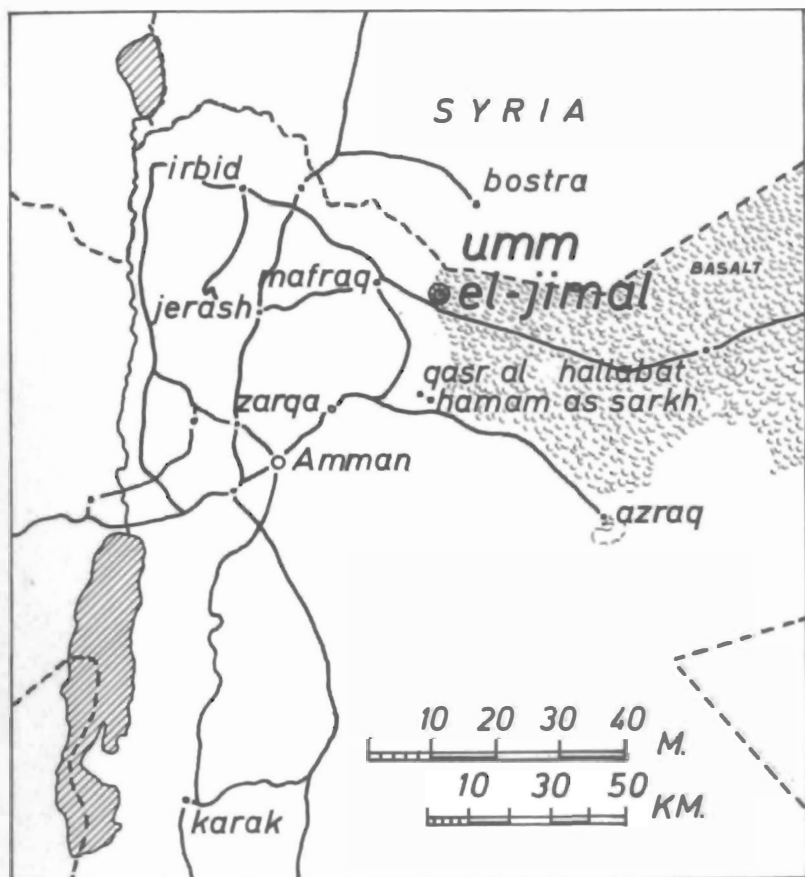


Figure 1: Map of North Jordan. Drawn by Bert de Vries.

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