

# MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Vol. 13, 2000

OFFPRINT



AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL FOR THE  
ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

**MEDITERRANEAN ARCHAEOLOGY**  
**Australian and New Zealand Journal for the Archaeology**  
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Manuscripts and inquiries about the journal should be addressed to:

The Editor

*Mediterranean Archaeology*

Box 243 Holme Building

The University of Sydney

Sydney 2006 Australia

phone: +61 2 9351 2079; fax: +61 2 9351 2079

e-mail: meditarch@archaeology.usyd.edu.au

*Mediterranean Archaeology* is produced and distributed by

MEDITARCH, P.O. Box 243, Holme Building, The University of Sydney, NSW 2006 Australia

phone/fax: +61 2 9351 2079

**Price per volume:**

Aus\$ 62.00 (institutional)

Aus\$ 48.00 (personal)

Aus\$ 38.00 (student)

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ISSN 1030-8482

# CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE URBAN CHARACTER OF THE SOUTHERN HAURAN FROM THE 5TH TO THE 9TH CENTURY: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AT UMM AL-JIMAL

Bert de Vries

## Summary

Pre-Islamic Umm al-Jimal was less affected by Roman grid-planning than many settlements in Jordan and hence never had the appearance of cities such as Jerash. Umm al-Jimal grew rapidly in the 5th century, reaching its optimum size in the 6th, and received a serious refurbishing in the 7th. This remodelling involved the thorough removal of pre-Islamic occupational layers, which significantly transformed the internal material culture without, however, changing the general architectural frame of the town. This late 6th/early 7th-century remodelling can be seen as a clear example of regional early Islamic (Umayyad/Abbasid) culture, because it remains mostly unaltered by the post-9th-century phases. Moreover, it may be viewed as the proximate context of the contemporary 'desert castles'.

## UMM AL-JIMAL BEFORE THE 5TH CENTURY

The least-understood phase of Umm al-Jimal's archaeological history is its earliest, from the 1st to the 4th century.<sup>1</sup> The most extensive remains of this period are at al-Herri, the rough-strewn area of ruins to the SE of the surviving Byzantine/Islamic site (fig. 1). There, founding levels go back to the 1st century, contemporary with the Nabataean hegemony at Bostra. These are succeeded by a 2nd-century phase, contemporary with the coming of the Romans, a 3rd/4th-century abandonment, and a 4th-century use as a dumping site. The building remains examined so far indicate simple structures built of mostly undressed basalt cobbles and boulders, predominantly domestic in character.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary with that apparently local settlement, more formal Roman construction took place at the beginning in the 2nd century (e.g. the gate dedicated to M. Aurelius and Commodus), and continued with the construction of the so-called Praetorium and the large reservoir (fig. 2). While these three structures have survived, other Roman-period monuments have not. Evidence for relatively monumental imperial-style structures appears only in a number of decorative fragments used in later constructions as spoils, taken from buildings once located near the Commodus Gate and the Praetorium.

Thus, the monumental character of the Roman imperial era was largely lost in the subsequent extensive building phases of the 4th and 5th–8th centuries. It is safe to say that at

<sup>1</sup> All dates are AD.

Note the following additional abbreviations:

de Vries, *First Three Centuries*

B. de Vries, 'Umm el-Jimal in the First Three Centuries A.D.', in: P. Freeman-D. Kennedy (eds.), *The Defense of the Roman and Byzantine East* (BAR International Series 297, 1986) 227–41

de Vries, *Jordan's Churches*

B. de Vries, 'Jordan's Churches: Their Urban Context in Late Antiquity', *Biblical Archaeologist* 51, 1988, 222–6

de Vries, *UJ 1981–1992*

B. de Vries, 'The Umm el-Jimal Project, 1981–1992', *AAJ* 37, 1993, 433–60

de Vries, *UJ 1993–1994*

B. de Vries, 'The Umm el-Jimal Project, 1993 and 1994 Field Seasons', *AAJ* 39, 1995, 421–35

de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal*

B. de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal. A Frontier Town and its Landscape in Northern Jordan, Volume 1. Fieldwork 1972–1981* (JRA Suppl. 26, 1998)

<sup>2</sup> de Vries, *First Three Centuries* 227–41; de Vries, *UJ 1981–1992*, 443–4, 450–1; A. Momani-M. Horstmanshof, 'Umm el-Jimal Area R, 1994 Field Season', *AAJ* 39, 1995, 469–76.

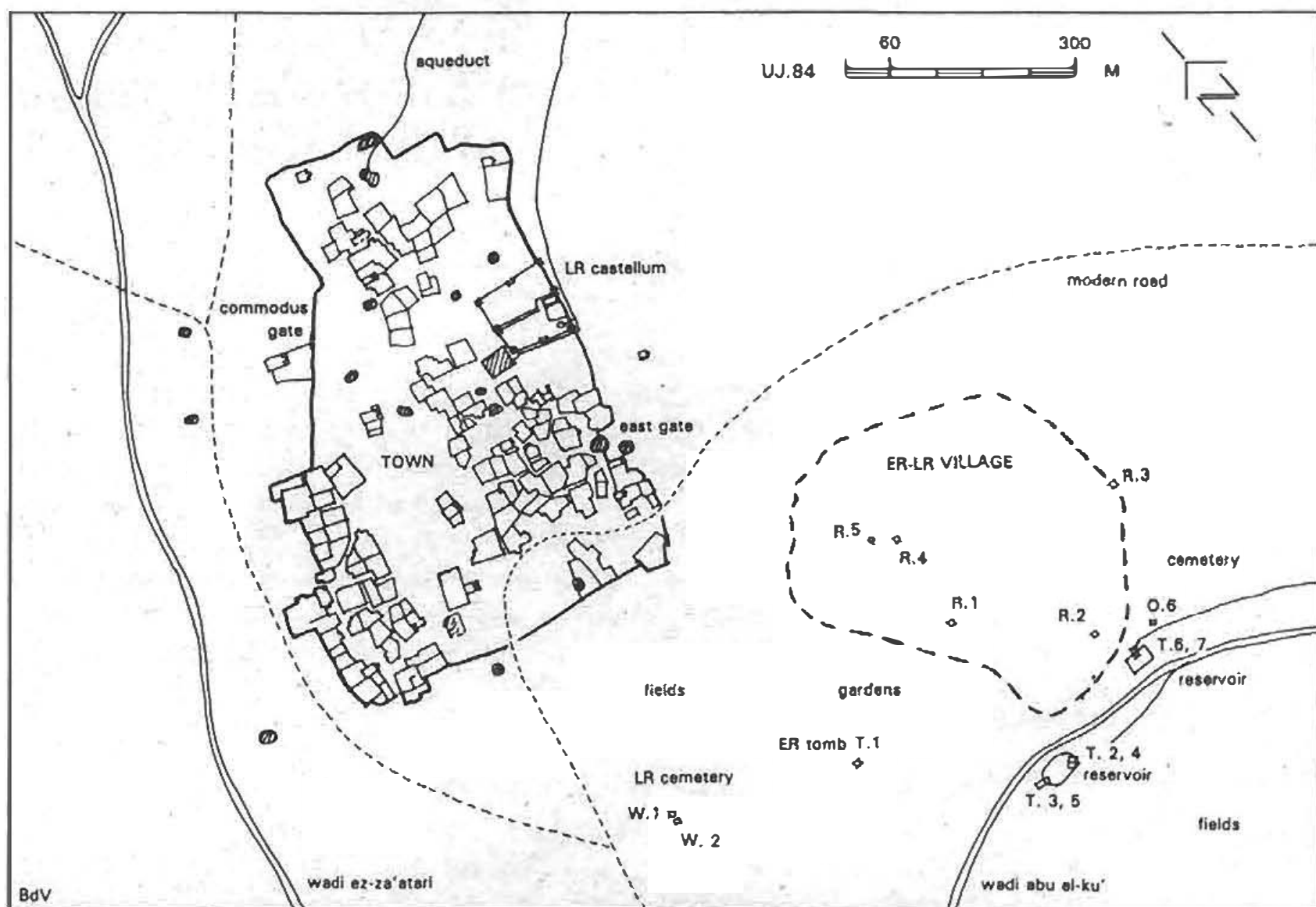


Figure 1. General plan of Umm al-Jimal, showing the relation between the late antique and the 1st-4th-centuries settlement (after de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* [1998] 6 fig. 2a).

Umm al-Jimal classical monumental Roman and Nabataean precedents, having disappeared by the 4th century, played virtually no role in the architectural shaping of the Umayyad and Abbasid phase of the settlement. A strong exception to this is the Praetorium, which received a 7th/8th-century refurbishing.<sup>3</sup> Though of complex design, this building's exterior was austere, the only classical 'touch' being the four late antique Ionic capitals of the atrium columns.

Even the earlier, Tetrarchic, *castellum* of the early 4th century, though a deliberate Roman imperial construction on the model of legionary camps,<sup>4</sup> included spoiled decorative architectural elements from the earlier building phase, retooled as construction blocks without regard to decorative value. Locally, the precedent for the late antique austere style was the functional, undecorated Barracks (the later *castellum*),<sup>5</sup> with its forbidding, blank exterior walls, single entry, and strictly utilitarian rooms surrounding the large interior courtyard (pls. 2: 3; 3: 1). This, rather than the more elaborate Praetorium, served as the inspiration for Umm al-Jimal's late antique houses, the 'rustic villas' of the 5th-8th centuries. What survived this metamorphosis from Roman to late antique was the tradition of careful and structurally sound design, for which the basis must be the accumulated experience of imported Nabataean, Roman, and local construction traditions visible in late antique structures throughout the region.

<sup>3</sup> R. Brown in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 161-93.

<sup>4</sup> de Vries, *First Three Centuries*; de Vries, *UJ* 1981-1992, 435-6.

<sup>5</sup> B. de Vries, 'The Umm el-Jimal Project, 1972-77', *AAJ* 26, 1982, 111-12; S. T. Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier* (1986) 26-9; id. in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 131-42.

## I. THE BYZANTINE TOWN, 5TH–7TH CENTURIES

The construction surge of the 5th and 6th centuries, which gave Umm al-Jimal its characteristic shape, benefited from Roman construction techniques, but was already far removed from Roman monumental design and gridded town planning.<sup>6</sup> The rapid growth proceeded according to a non-gridded plan, in which clusters (or *insulae*) were laid out with rectangular courtyard houses at the core (fig. 2). Such houses, which may have their heritage in both the traditional East Mediterranean house of earlier periods and the Roman rustic villa, were plainly constructed, with austere exteriors and simple but warmly secure interiors.

The clusters consisted of several such houses attached to each other, with those on the perimeter sometimes of irregular, trapezoidal plan necessitated by the available space to the property line. Dividing lines between such clusters form the streets and alleys of irregular width which twist and turn and sometimes open onto small open areas between houses reminiscent of the *hosh* of early modern Jordanian villages.

Field walls defining animal corrals and possibly garden plots partitioned much of the open space left between the several groups of these clusters. The net effect is that shared or public spaces were limited to the area east of the Commodus Gate (with the Klaudianos Church at the northern end and the Cathedral at the southern end). Such spaces would not have served the public function of the open streets and squares of the Roman cities, but could have been the camping locale for caravans, if Umm al-Jimal played a role in regional and interregional trade and transport in the 6th and 7th centuries.<sup>7</sup> This town was also devoid of public buildings in the classical sense. The Praetorium was by now privatized, that is, incorporated into a newly constructed domestic complex.<sup>8</sup> The same happened to the so-called Nabataean Temple (constructed in the 4th century, on the eve of Umm al-Jimal's adoption of Christianity).<sup>9</sup> The Barracks (or 'later *castellum*') appears to have lost its military role in a remodelling that included the addition of the tower with its famous Christian inscriptions. Whether it continued in a military function, became monastic, or served some other purpose is not clear.<sup>10</sup> But if the open spaces were used for caravans, this building is the only available candidate for the role of hostel or caravanserai.

A major investment in public construction was the repair of the town wall and gate system.<sup>11</sup> Along with the new lookout-tower of the Barracks, these walls provided local protection, abetted by the possible use of the new Barracks tower as a lookout, at the time that the imperial army had relinquished its policing role to the mobile army of the Arab phylarch.

The fifteen churches were the only other public structures (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> However, eight of these were built into private complexes, some of which, like that of the Double Church, were domestic.<sup>13</sup> Four of these had their entries from the enclosed courtyard of the complexes, so that they appear to be entirely private from an architectural point of view. The other four, as well as the remaining seven, had entrances accessible from the street. Most of these, however, are not centrally located and give the feel of accessibility to the residents of the housing clusters into which they are built. Of the three free-standing churches—the Numerianos

<sup>6</sup> B. de Vries, 'Urbanisation in the Basalt Region of North Jordan in Late Antiquity: The Case of Umm el-Jimal', in: A. Hadidi (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, Volume 2 (1985) 249–56; de Vries, *Jordan's Churches*; de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 91–127.

<sup>7</sup> de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 236–9.

<sup>8</sup> Brown loc. cit. (n. 3).

<sup>9</sup> S. T. Parker–L. de Veaux in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal*

149–60.

<sup>10</sup> Parker op. cit. (n. 5) 29; id. in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 140.

<sup>11</sup> Parker in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 143–7.

<sup>12</sup> R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule* (1995) 469–72.

<sup>13</sup> de Vries, *Jordan's Churches*.

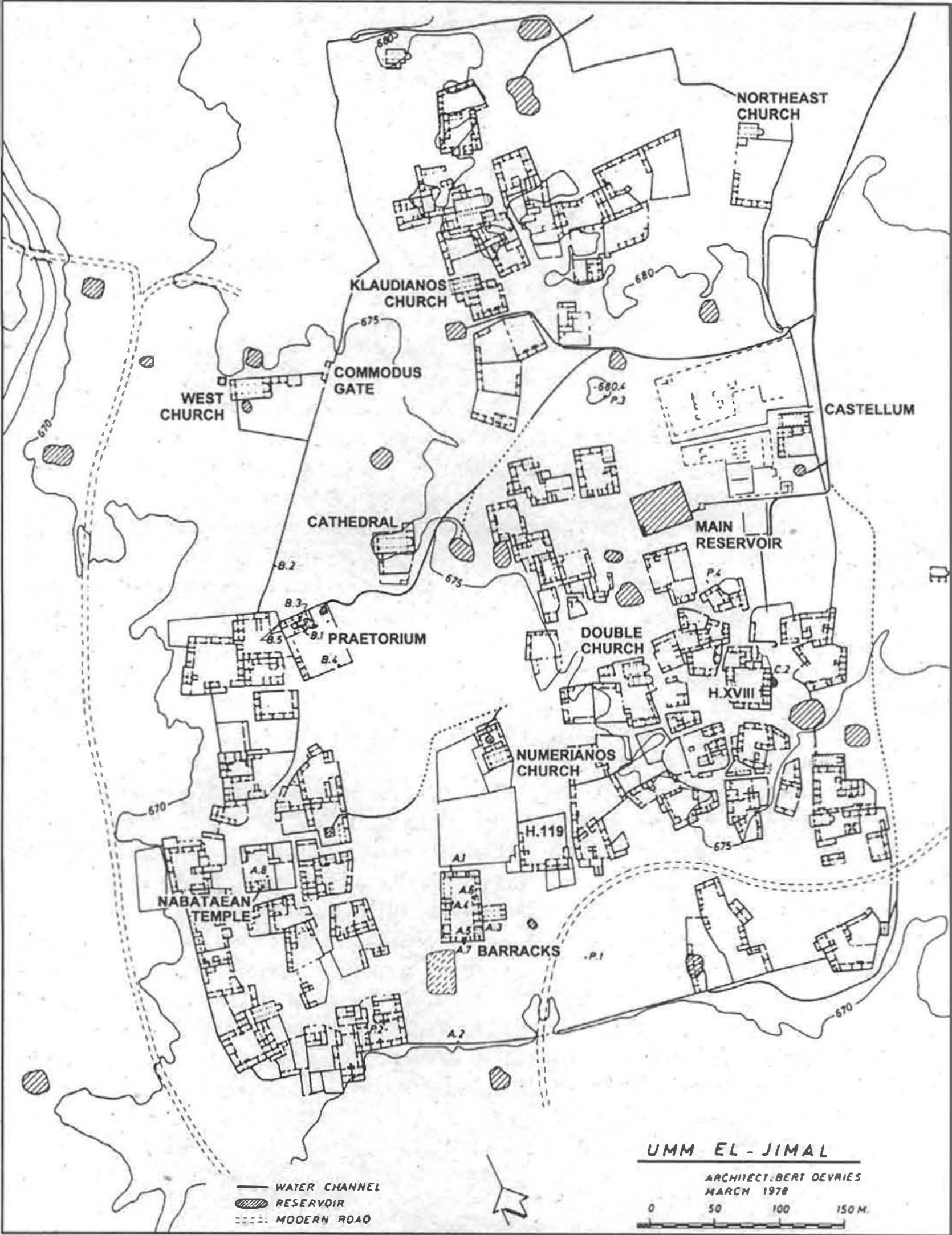


Figure 2. Plan of late antique Umm al-Jimal (adapted from de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* [1988] 94 fig. 44).



Church, the West Church, and the Cathedral—the first was built by private donors, and had its entrance accessible from the attached cloister. The West Church, so prominent in the landscape today (pl. 3: 2), stands in a large walled courtyard, accessible through an impressive but lockable gate, which pierces the earlier town wall just south of the Commodus Gate. This leaves the Cathedral, with its central location in the main open area of the town and with street access to its triple-doored narthex, as the only clear candidate for a truly public church that would have been readily accessible to visitors and residents alike.

Such was the shape of Umm al-Jimal on the eve of Islam: a sturdily built and elaborately laid out community with both building design and town plan very different from the imperially sponsored Roman cities built in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The classical stress on public spaces had been replaced by an equivalent stress on private space. Evidence for participation in public life remained in the maintenance of the perimeter wall, the shared use of *intra muros* open spaces, and the openness to the general populace of at least some of the churches.

## II. ISLAMIC UMM AL-JIMAL

### A. CONTINUITY

Architecturally, the basic shell of the Byzantine town described above became the ‘container’ for the Umayyad and Abbasid settlement.<sup>14</sup> Comparison of the town map as it was around 550 to that of about 700 would reveal essentially the same plan. Though other aspects of material culture shifted (pottery, for example), the architectural aspect of society remained virtually the same. There is no indication of a drastic interruption, nor of a population turnover. On the whole, the population appears to remain the same, and the major change is a gradual decrease in its size, down to the end of occupation of the site c.900. Religiously, also, Umm al-Jimal’s society remained mostly Christian, though there is also some evidence for the introduction of Islam (see below). Thus, the architectural shape of Islamic Umm al-Jimal, and by extension, of similar communities in the southern Hauran may be termed as continuous with that of the basically un-Roman 6th/7th-century Byzantine-period town.

### B. CHANGE

Evidence of deterioration in the 7th century comes from the presence of Umayyad occupation levels over the collapse debris of rooms immediately west of the Barracks corner tower. Though no repair was carried out here, such deterioration elsewhere may have led to major refurbishing of much of the town late in the 7th and early in the 8th century. In both the Praetorium complex and House XVIII (that of the double windows), excellent plaster-on-cobble floors in all rooms furnish evidence for such thorough refurbishing.<sup>15</sup> In at least one case, House 119 (east of the Barracks), an entirely new house was constructed on Byzantine foundations, its stables including characteristically Umayyad manger rows (like those in the burned stable at Pella).<sup>16</sup> The water system was maintained and extended to the reservoir at the SE corner of the town. The NE Church may have been constructed *de novo*, with the apse area left unfinished, but the chancel area paved with characteristic plaster-cobble flooring, painted with red, white, and black ‘tile squares’—an alternative to the earlier use of mosaic flooring (e.g. in the Numerianos Church). Other churches (e.g. the north half of the Double Church) were remodelled.

<sup>14</sup> de Vries art. cit. (n. 5) 70–1; id., UJ 1981–1992, 448–9; UJ 1993–1994, 430–1; Umm el-Jimal 231–2.

<sup>15</sup> Brown in: de Vries, Umm el-Jimal 178–84, 195–202.

<sup>16</sup> de Vries, UJ 1981–1992, 428–31.

At least two churches, the Numerianos and the West churches, appear to have been converted to mosques.<sup>17</sup> Such conversion consisted of the construction of a blocking wall across the apse, using spoiled masonry made available by the nearby construction activities (e.g. at House 119), and, possibly, the creation of a *qiblah* by removing some masonry blocks from the interior face of the south wall. Though Christian symbols are prevalent throughout the churches and houses, no Islamic symbols have been found at the site. In the Numerianos Church, however, it appears that the conversion included the careful removal of Byzantine occupation debris from the latest pre-Islamic plaster floor by heaving it over the blocking wall into the now abandoned apse.

This specific instance points to a very interesting feature of the Umayyad refurbishing, which may be called the 'clean-up phenomenon'. Before the construction of the solid Umayyad floors in the Praetorium and in House XVIII, all earlier occupation debris was carefully removed down to preoccupation levels, so that the Umayyad floors were actually installed at levels lower than the earlier ones. In case of House 119, the Byzantine structure was dismantled and all occupation debris removed, so that all that was left was a single cobble-and-cement Byzantine pavement, which was so hard that it would have required the equivalent of a jack-hammer to remove it. At House 119, this scrape-down produced a two-meter thick dump fan of numerous alternating ash and soil lenses, in which the latest pottery was 6th- and 7th-century Byzantine from top to bottom.<sup>18</sup> Similar dumps remain as distinctive mounds spaced throughout the site to indicate that such cleaning took place everywhere. Two others were tested, the thick mound NE of the Roman Reservoir and the huge fan outside the West Gate, and both revealed the same single-period stratigraphy.<sup>19</sup>

Such a radical cleanup may be indicative of a break with past culture, but it is probably motivated by hygienic necessity. Ancient communities that lasted for centuries tended to 'drown' in their own accumulated debris.<sup>20</sup> At Umm al-Jimal an earlier instance is the general cleanup in the 4th century of the debris that had accumulated since the 1st century and its removal to the neighbouring ruined remains of al-Herri.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in the Umayyad case, the cleanup involved the removal of debris accumulated from dense occupation stretching over at least three centuries. That the debris was stored in the form of dumps on the site itself, may indicate a less serious demand for space in the 7th and 8th centuries than seems to have been the case in the 4th. One might like to think that such radical cleansing was a specifically targeted health measure, but there is no literary evidence for the association of the bubonic pandemic, which ravaged Umayyad society so severely, with community hygiene.<sup>22</sup> Rather, the residents may have been faced with a practical choice: either abandon the refuse-laden site for a new location (as was done in late antique Egypt) or clean it up in order to take

<sup>17</sup> This was first surmised by the Geoffrey King survey team and corroborated by Robert Schick's preliminary analysis of the Numerianos Church stratigraphy, for which see G. R. D. King, 'Preliminary Report on a Survey of Byzantine and Islamic Sites in Jordan 1980', *AAJ* 26, 1982, 85-95; id., 'Two Byzantine Churches in Northern Jordan and their re-use in the Islamic Period', *DaM* 1, 1983, 111-36; id., 'Some Churches of the Byzantine Period in the Jordanian Hawran', *DaM* 3, 1988, 35-75; G. R. D. King-C. J. Lenzen-G. O. Rollefson, 'Survey of Byzantine and Islamic sites in Jordan, Second Season Report, 1981', *AAJ* 27, 1983, 385-436; Schick op. cit. (n. 12) 470-1. Re-examination by C. J. Lenzen during the 1998 field season, immediately after this paper was presented, confirmed the conclusion for the

Numerianos Church, but preliminary results indicate that the apse blocking in the West Church can be attributed to 20th-century domestic remodelling.

<sup>18</sup> de Vries, *UJ* 1993-1994, 428-31.

<sup>19</sup> J. Sauer-B. de Vries in: de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 129-30.

<sup>20</sup> See R. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (1993) 111-12 for the equivalent case of Upper Nile villages.

<sup>21</sup> Momani-Horstmannshof art. cit. (n. 2).

<sup>22</sup> de Vries, *Umm el-Jimal* 240; see L. Conrad, *The Plague in the Early Medieval Near East* (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1981).



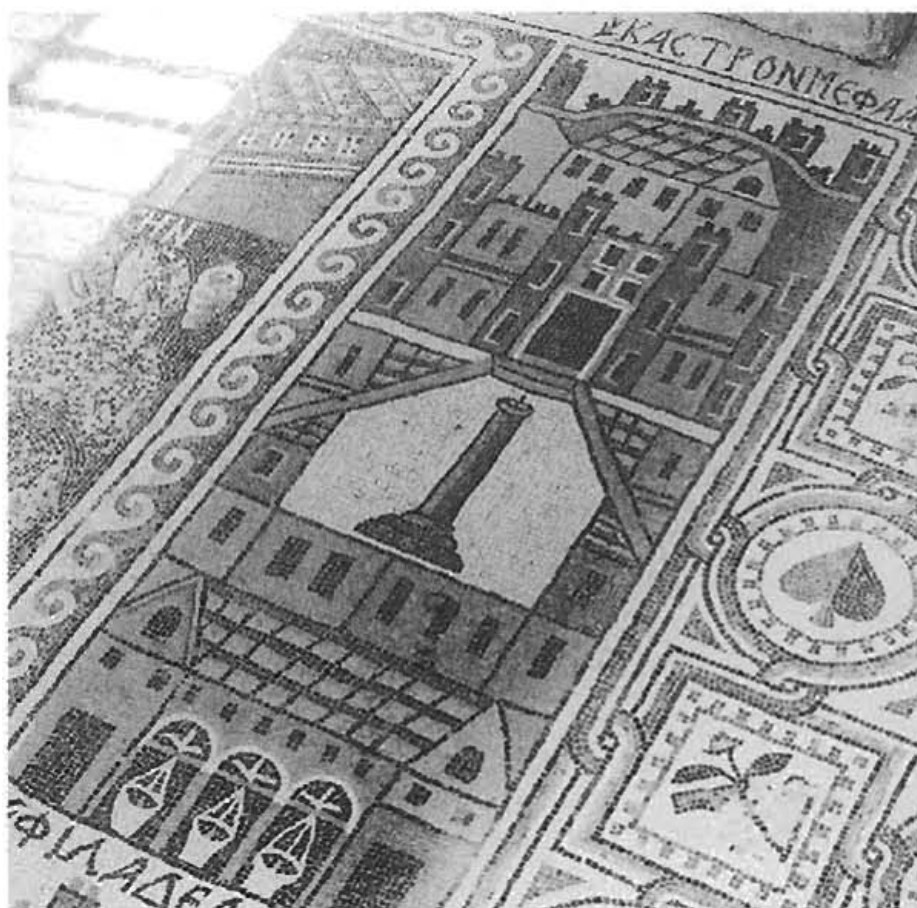
advantage of the already existing facilities. The existing buildings and the available water system made it worth staying.

## CONCLUSION

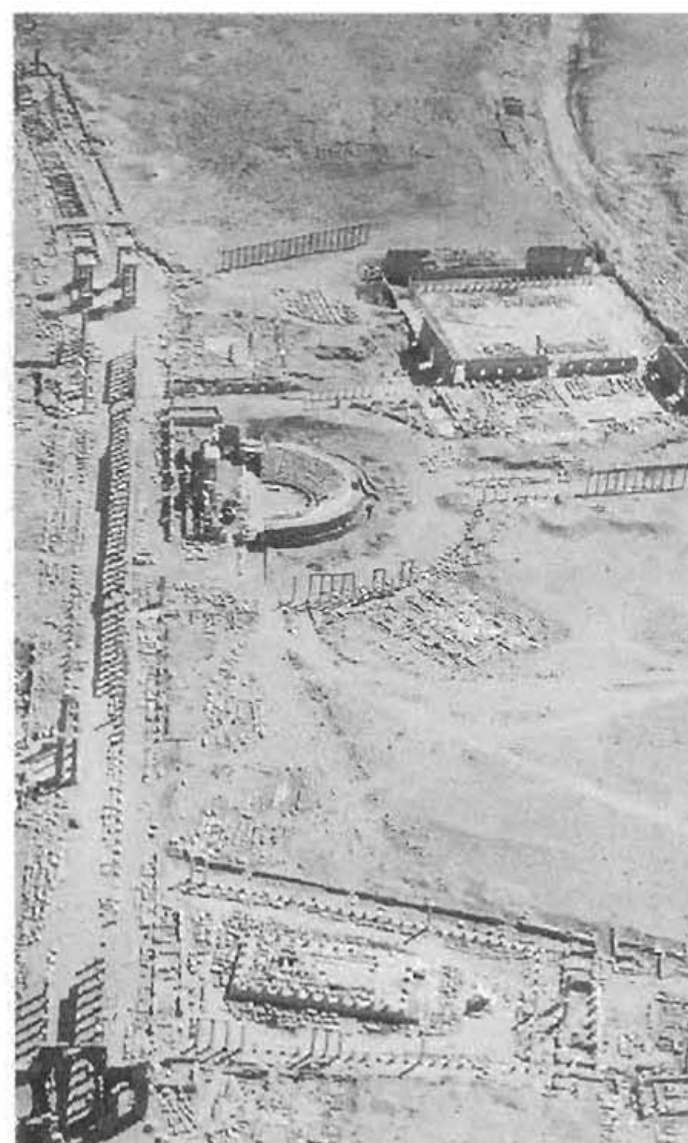
1. The transition from Byzantine to Umayyad Umm al-Jimal appears to have been less radical than the transition from Roman to Byzantine Umm al-Jimal.
2. The non-Hippodaman character of Umm al-Jimal's town plan was determined in the Byzantine era, and inherited by the Islamic. The relatively austere lack of decoration and monumentality is also continuous from the Byzantine to the Islamic.
3. The changes from Byzantine to early Islamic culture at Umm al-Jimal include significant non-religious and non-political factors, among them gradual population decline, and the major cleanup and refurbishing to preserve site viability. However, both the sponsorship of the extensive remodelling and the conversion of churches to mosques may be directly associated with the activities of the Islamic Imperial centre at Damascus.<sup>23</sup>
4. The flourishing of Umm al-Jimal in the 7th and 8th centuries should be seen in the context of the construction and early use of the Umayyad 'desert castles'. The refurbished Praetorium, though not a bath, would not have felt unlike Hammam al-Sarakh or Qusayr Amra. The frescoes of Amra could derive from the same artistic milieu responsible for the church frescoes at Umm al-Jimal and contemporary communities like it. The artisans doing the remodelling at Umm al-Jimal could have belonged to the same pool of builders and artists responsible for the *qusur*.
5. Umayyad and Abbasid Umm al-Jimal represents a stratum of early Islamic culture that by virtue of the town's 8th-century collapse and 9th-century abandonment remained unaltered by subsequent occupation and building phases, except for the rather easily distinguishable late Ottoman (Druze) occupation of the early 20th century. Its study can therefore give good insight into the domestic architectural character of early Islamic towns in Bilad al-Sham, outside the major centres (Bostra, Damascus, Jerusalem), where subsequent occupation added the deep layers of Medieval Islamic culture. Thus, early Islamic Umm al-Jimal's houses still stand to inspire Jordan's lively architectural creativity in the late 20th century.

<sup>23</sup> Other members of the panel discussed economic factors; see also de Vries, Umm el-Jimal 236–9. Both the Christian and Islamic characters of Umm al-Jimal are included in the

preparation of 'Umm el-Jimal. A Frontier Town and its Landscape in Northern Jordan, Volume 2. Religion and Society at Umm al-Jimal' by C. J. Lenzen and B. de Vries.



1. Kastron Mefa'a, as depicted in the Church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas/Kastron Mefa'a. Walls, gates, towers, churches (especially St. Stephen itself, foreground), and open spaces (marked by a pillar) predominate, and this schematic representation complies accurately with the known layout of the site. Photo A. Walmsley.



2. Tadmur/Palmyra: the Umayyad suq, west of the tetrapylon (top right). After A. Bounni and K. al-As'ad, *Palmyra* (2nd ed., 1988) 69.



3. Umm al-Jimal: general view of the Barracks. Photo A. Walmsley.

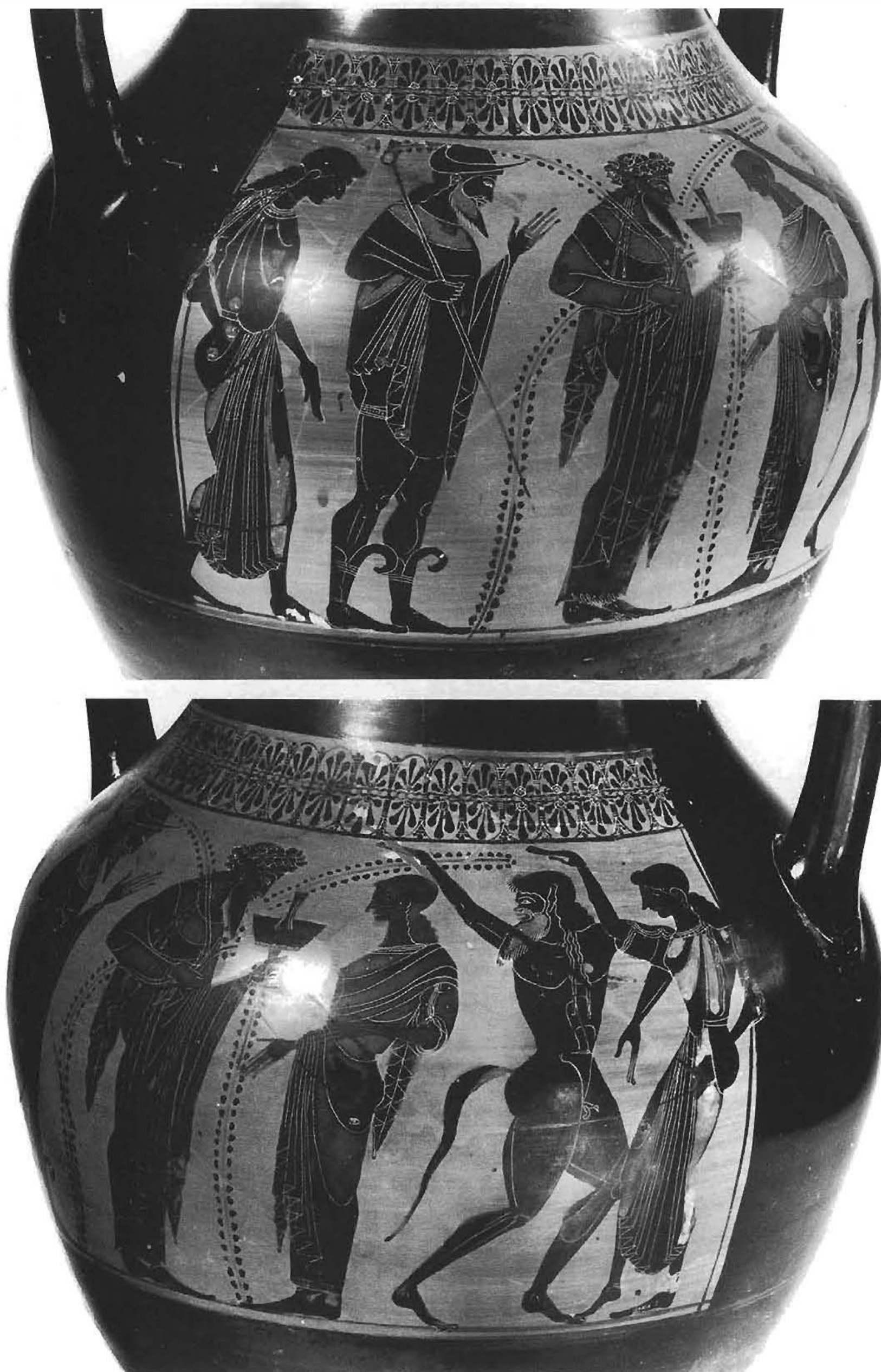


1. Umm al-Jimal: detail of the west façade of the Barracks. Photo A. Walmsley.



2. The central colonnade of the West Church of Umm al-Jimal. Photo A. Walmsley.





1-2. Attic black-figured amphora. Sydney Nicholson Museum 77.01.  
Photos courtesy Nicholson Museum.