

## QALET HAMRA: A MAMLUK KHAN NORTH OF ZARQA, JORDAN

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*The site of Qalet Hamra was well known in Zarqa but it never attracted archaeologists and surveyors until a few years ago, possibly due to its location on a spur dominating the bifurcations between Wadi az-Zarqa and Wadi Shomar, a sort of shortcut leading straight ward to the west, in direction of the Jordan Valley. Moreover it was nearby a major ford across the river, which both banks were caravan tracks in antiquity. In 2015 and 2018 Sapienza University of Rome and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan surveyed, which allowed to identify it as a small caravanseraï dating back from the Mameluk period, even though earlier pottery finds may suggest that the site was occupied at least from the Late Roman/Early Byzantine times.*

Keywords: Mamluk Sultanate; Zarqa; Qalet Hamra; Haji; khan, Jordan

### 1. HISTORICAL FRAME

After the conquest by the Mamluks of the Ayyubid States in 1263 AD, Transjordan was divided on two provinces, the northern one from Damascus to Wadi Mujib, and Kerak, the southern one, from Wadi Mujib to 'Aqaba (fig. 1). They were secured by means of restoration of Crusader/Ayyubid castles, building roads, and renovating holy places. In facts, Ayyubid administrative and defensive systems were inherited by the Mamluk Sultanate, troubled by the advance of the Mongol power from East.<sup>1</sup>

Ayyubid and Mamluk architectural features range from holy sites to fortified strongholds, typically town-based castles and fort/khans, from agricultural or industrial establishments to rural villages, in a period of reconstruction and renovation after Crusader debacle.<sup>2</sup>

After Crusaders, in facts, social and economic reconstruction of Jordan was concentrated on arboriculture and commercial crops, such as sugar. During Mamluk period (1263-1517 AD), the number of sites increased and a moderate prosperity based on rural economy started, specially thank to the tropical climate of Jordan Valley.<sup>3</sup> According to al-Maqdisi the region of Wadi az-Zarqa was populated by many villages and produced olives, various fruits, grapes, and honey.<sup>4</sup> Between Zarqa and Wadi al-Mujib were villages, farms, grain-fields, mills.<sup>5</sup>

In the modern city of Zarqa, moreover, Middle Islamic architecture is documented by the small fort of Qasr Shebib, dating back to the thirteenth century, an Ayyub foundation, probably on a preceding Roman fort or square tower, well-known in Mamluk period.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walmsley 2001, 521; Walker - Dotti - Nucciotti 2009, 126-127; Walker 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Walmsley 2001, 527; Walker 2008; Walker - Dotti - Nucciotti 2009, 128-129.

<sup>3</sup> Kafafi *et al.* 2000, 706; Munzi *et al.* 2000, 386; Palumbo *et al.* 2002, 144-145.

<sup>4</sup> Le Strange (transl.) 1886, 56; Walmsley 2008, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Walmsley 2001, 515-517, 523, 541.

<sup>6</sup> Petersen 1991; Walmsley 2001, 530.

## 2. THE KHAN

Qalet Hamra was in the southern sector of the Damascus' province and stood in a hinge area, along the border between Cairo and Damascus,<sup>7</sup> in the region named Balqā in the Medieval Islam,<sup>8</sup> between Wadi az-Zarqa and Wadi al-Mujib. Zarqa, a defensive post together with Ajlun, Shawbak and Kerak, was an important stop for pilgrims already in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The building is in the suburb of Shomar, just north to the modern city of Zarqa (32°05'00.7"N 36°03'55.5"E). It rises directly next to the joint between Wadi Shomar and Wadi Zarqa, at roughly 70 m west of it (fig. 2).

That building was reasonably erected in this place due to its vicinity to the cross of Wadi Zarqa and Wadi Shomar tracks, a shortcut used during centuries to reach es-Salt and then the Jordan Valley to the west.<sup>10</sup> So, it is an ideal location for two of main enterprises during the Mamluk period: rural exploitation and agricultural production, along the pilgrimage route.<sup>11</sup> In this perspective, the khan of Qalet Hamra should host traveling pilgrims and manage the cultivated land along the river banks, usually entrusted to military officers as grant tax in this period.<sup>12</sup>

The khan consists of two buildings (fig. 2). The bigger one had a pristine square plan (10 × 10 m) subdivided into two rectangular rooms (4 × 8 m) at the ground floor, covered by two vaults (figs. 3-6), and in more rooms in the first floor. This square structure was set on the top of the spur dominating the ford across the Zarqa river and the joint of it with Wadi Shomar. In front of the original building there was a fenced courtyard, and on the opposite eastern side there was a subsidiary building – one storey high – possibly serving as stable for animals. The original khan was expanded by adding another couple of rectangular rooms to the south, one of the two further subdivided into two square rooms. This structure was partly built on the slope south of the top of the spur where the original building stood. A further rectangular piece was added to the north, so that the whole western side of the square precinct of the caravanserai was occupied by buildings. In the north-eastern corner of the courtyard there was a cistern, while on the northern side of the hill, rock terraces gently sloped down to the river banks.

It is very difficult to establish the chronology of the constructive phases of the khan in absence of proper excavations. An original occupation of the site in the early Islamic period is suggested by some pottery fragments,<sup>13</sup> while the main building can be dated to the Mamluk period with a later addition in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>7</sup> Munzi *et al.* 2000, 386; Walker 2013, 184-187.

<sup>8</sup> Sourdel-Thomine 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Walker 2013, 184-187.

<sup>10</sup> Nigro - Gharib 2016, 59.

<sup>11</sup> Already in the Ayyubid period, in the area of Zarqa, fortress and watchtower performed different functions (Milwright 2006, 9). Moreover, a dual purpose is already certified for some Levantine khan (Lee *et al.* 1992, 57-60).

<sup>12</sup> Walker 2003, 244; Walker - Dotti - Nuccioti 2009, 126-127.

<sup>13</sup> See QH.15.0/1 in fig. 7.

The building probably was destroyed by a seismic swarm that struck the region between the late fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century,<sup>14</sup> and after that abandoned.

Over the centuries the khan has been looted and used as a quarry for building material, and, in recent times, it unfortunately suffered illegal excavations.

The date suggested to the Mamluk period for the khan is based on geographical information (pilgrimage itineraries) and pottery (fig. 7) collected during the survey of 2015, combined with a territorial study of the Middle Islamic period and a comparative analysis with other forts and khans.<sup>15</sup>

As it concerns pottery, the repertoire is represented by unglazed wheel-made ware,<sup>16</sup> used mainly for storing, preparing, transferring and serving food, as jars and jugs. QH.15.0/2 is a wall of a sugar pot, typical of Mamluk period, characterized by a conical body with an outward folded rim, narrow base, rounded or flat base, ribbed on the exterior.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. THE KHAN IN THE HAJI PILGRIMAGE

The pilgrimage route from Damascus to Mecca passed through Zarqa in the way to Amman, which was a major assembly place for pilgrims from Palestine and continued southward (fig. 8).<sup>18</sup> From Damascus the caravan route made two stops before Busra, after travelled to the Pool of az-Ziza and, then, the most suitable track to the south-east was through Zarqa.<sup>19</sup>

A series of khan and fortresses were displaced along such a route were progressively built during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. One of this major forts and towers was, in the Wadi az-Zarqa, Qasr Shebib. Mamluks, in facts, were interested in securing the major roads and the postal network.<sup>20</sup> Caravanserais were erected at major crossing points, especially by fords and rivers, where usually postal stations were established.<sup>21</sup>

Qasr Shebib was a Mamluk fort along the Haji,<sup>22</sup> and, as already pointed out by Petersen it is quoted variously in Ottoman sources. J.L. Burkhardt was the first European to describe the Qasr Shebib, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>23</sup> and he wrote:

<sup>14</sup> Walker 2003, 251.

<sup>15</sup> Sauvaget 1939; 1940; Lee *et al.* 1992; Tavernari 2010. A similar building technique with hewn stones (figs. 3-6) is attested in the residence of the sultan in the citadel of Hisban, the administrative capital of the time (Walker 2003, 251), in the Mamluk mosque at Fahl (Walmsley 1997-1998, fig. 4), and in the Mamluk mosque at Kahf al-Raqim (Walmsley 2008, fig. 8).

<sup>16</sup> Avissar - Stern 2005, 102, 108, figs. 42:4, 6, 45:8; Kletter - Stern 2006, 180, 184-186; Stern 2014, 73, 75, 77; Stern - Toueg - Shapiro 2019, 136-143.

<sup>17</sup> Avissar - Stern 2005, 86, fig. 37:4-6.

<sup>18</sup> Walmsley 2001, 518; 2009, 459.

<sup>19</sup> Walmsley 2001, 543.

<sup>20</sup> El-Majali - Mas'ad 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Walmsley 2001, 555.

<sup>22</sup> El-Majali - Mas'ad 1987, 314; Petersen 2012, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Burkhardt 1822, 657.

«The Hadji rests here one day, during which the Hadjis amuse themselves with hunting wild boars which are found in great numbers on the reedy banks of Wady Zerka. The castle is built in a low wadi which forms in winter-time the bed of a river of considerable size, called Naher Ezzerqa, whose water collect to the south of Djebel Haouran. In the summer the Wadi to the E. of the castle has no water in it, but to west where there are some sources, the river is never completely dried up».

Qasr Shebib stands on a higher spur in respect of Qalet Hamra (fig. 9), and it also is far away from the river banks. Conversely, Qalet Hamra lays about 100 m far from the river banks, being an ideal watering place for caravans. Moreover, the Zarqa River flows to west of Qasr Shebib, and not to the east as it seems to be described by Burkhardt. On the contrary, Qalet Hamra lays east of the river, in a location which fits perfectly Burkhardt's description.

Furthermore, local scholars which describe Qasr Shebib<sup>24</sup> tell that pilgrims during Mamluk period use to camp outside of the qasr in the river valley and this might suggest - along with the above mentioned Burkhardt's description - that the site used to stop was that of Qalet Hamra.

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<sup>24</sup> El-Majali - Mas'ad 1987, 314, Petersen 2012, 61.

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Fig. 1 - Map of Mamluk state (after Walker 2013, fig. 1).

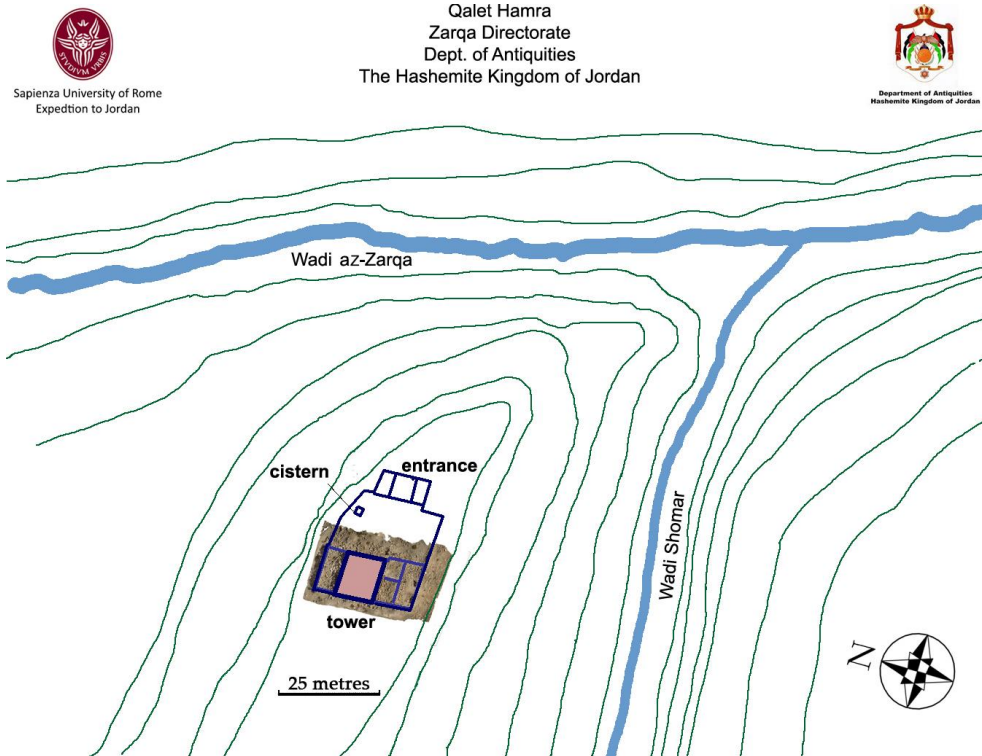


Fig. 2 - Reconstructive plan of the khan of Qalet Hamra superimposed on the orthophoto.



Fig. 3 - The collapsed south-eastern corner and the eastern wall of the khan.





Fig. 4 - The southern wall of the khan.



Fig. 5 - The southern wall and the south-western corner of the khan.



Fig. 6 - The razed remains of the khan and the Zarqa River on the right.

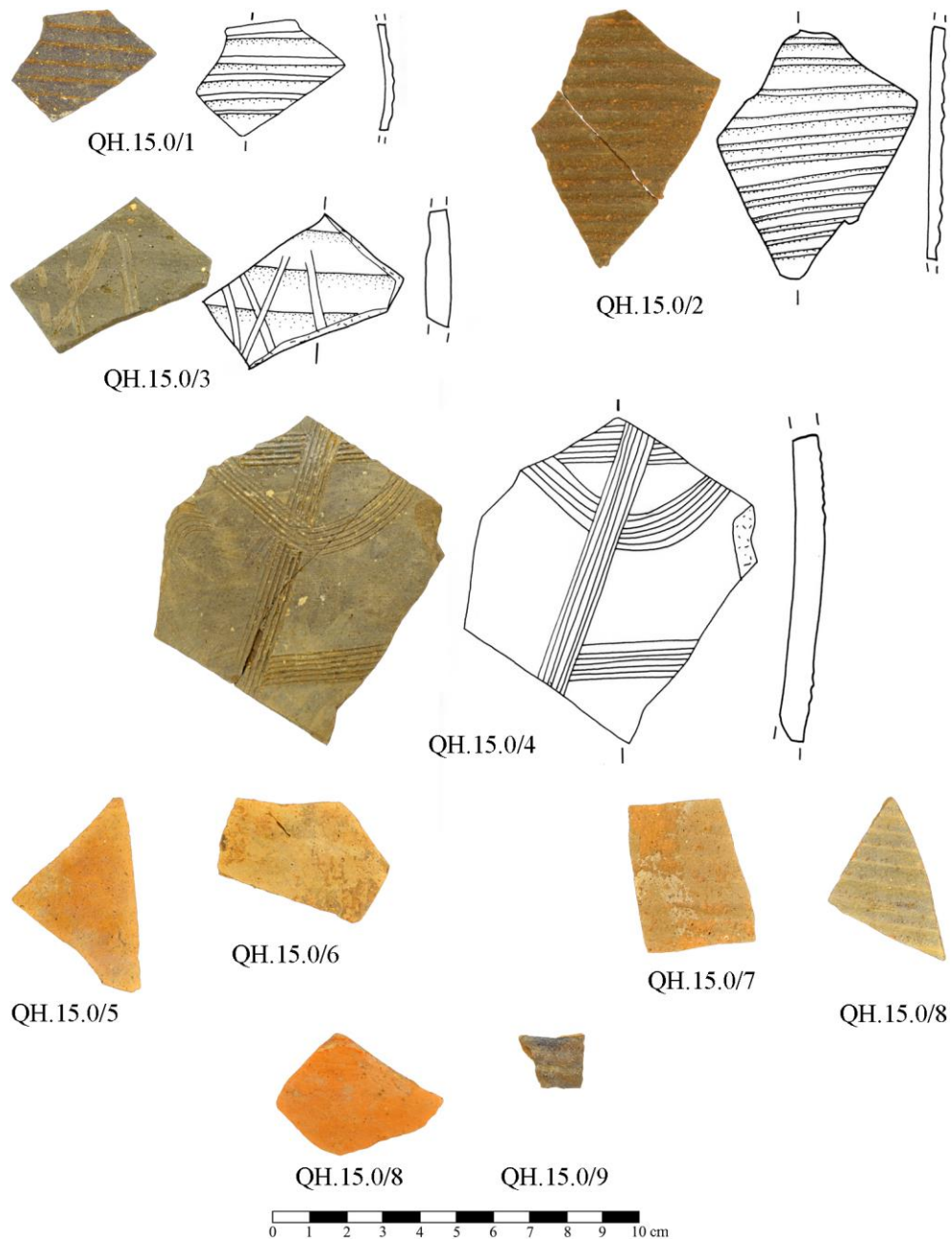


Fig. 7 - A selection of pottery collected in the site of Qalet Hamra during the survey of 2015.

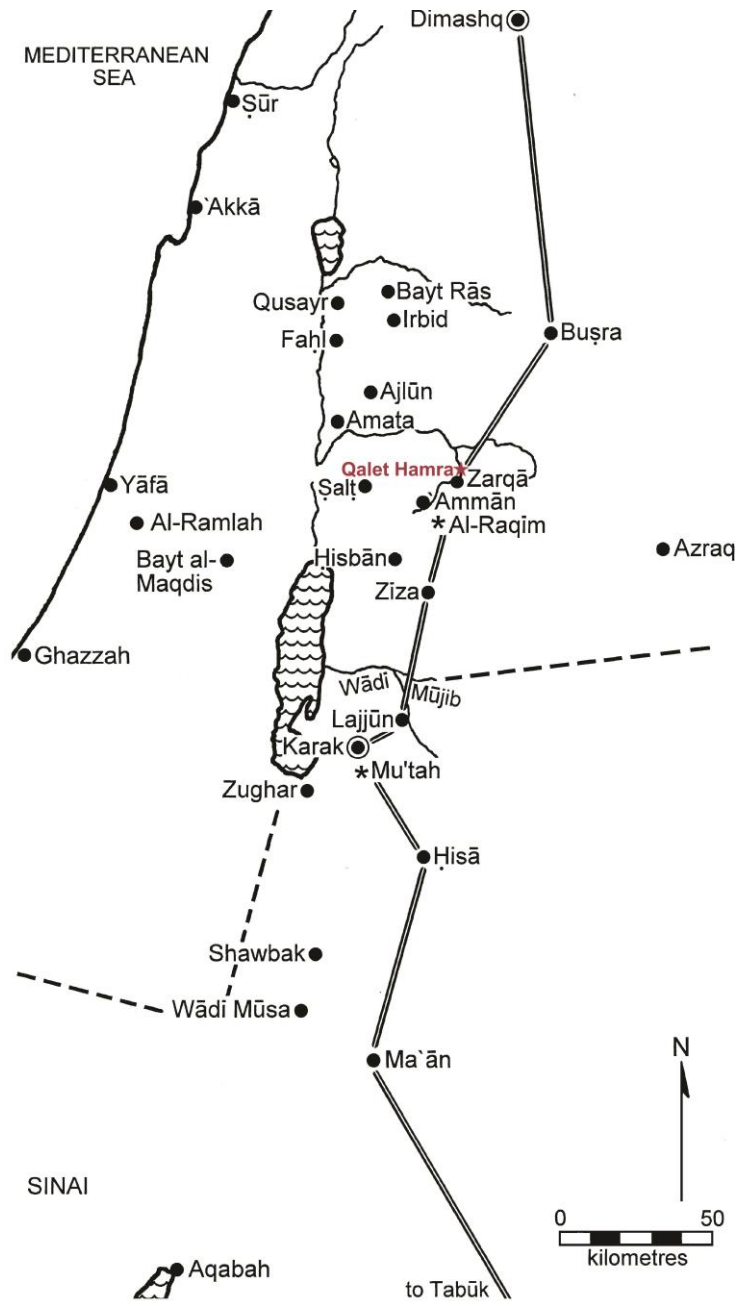


Fig. 8 - Map of Hajj pilgrimage route in Mamluk period (after Walmsley 2001, fig. 15:4).

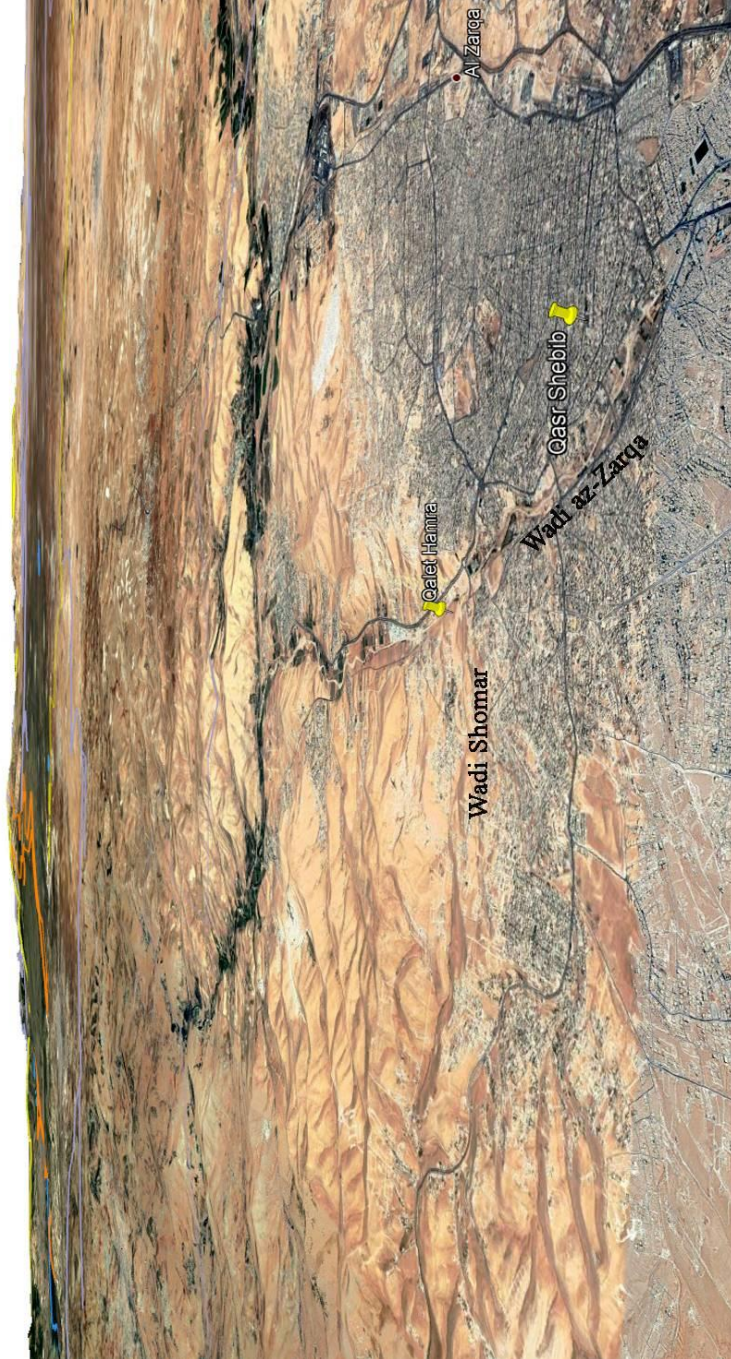


Fig. 9 - Satellite photo of the sites of Qasr Shebib and Qalet Hamra along the Wadi az-Zarqa, looking north.