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AL-JAYA PALACE AND THE NEW  
SHAWBAK TOWN.  
A MEDIEVAL FRONTIER AND THE  
RETURN OF THE URBANISM  
IN THE SOUTHERN TRANSJORDAN

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**Abstract:** The recent discovery – made during the 2018 campaign of the ‘Medieval Petra’ Mission of the University of Florence – of the residential al-Jaya Palace at the bottom of the hill of Shawbak’s ‘incastellato’ site is of particular relevance both for medieval and Islamic heritage in Jordan (no architecture of a comparable quality from the Ayyubid-Mamluk period has ever been found in the country) and mostly for the archaeological confirmation that underneath al-Jaya, lays the ancient medieval capital city of southern Jordan, founded by Saladin, on the same site of the castle-capital of the previous Crusader Lordship of Transjordan.

This result represents a triple confirmation for the scientific program of the Mission: the productivity of the ‘Light Archaeology’ methodology that characterizes our approach; the real existence of the city whose foundation we had deemed to be able to propose (owing solely to the ‘light’ readings on the walls of the ‘castle’); and the excellence of the formal level of the building – perfectly matching the quality of the political and productive structures documented earlier in the castle – that speaks of a cultured and refined city and of an extraordinary strategic project that can be attributed to Saladin’s political intelligence. A project that gave back a new centrality

to the entire southern Transjordan and started a settlement and political tradition that is the basis of modern Jordan itself (it is not accidental that the first capital of the state was Ma'an).

Once the urban structure that has now appeared is understood, future research will be able to direct the excavations so as to address another great historical question which 2018 investigations have highlighted: we know the birth and begin to read the life of this extraordinary town, but when, how and why did it perish so much so that it was forgotten by history (and to be rediscovered by archaeology)? Perhaps for the first time, we will have an opportunity to study archaeologically an aspect of the historical crisis that, probably during the 15th century, engulfed the Arab-Islamic world, opening the way for the Ottoman conquest.

It is an intriguing perspective to be addressed in tandem with a renewed public archaeology program: conservative restoration, social valorization, broad communication directed both to the local communities and to the international public with the implementation of the master plan 2010-14, and, finally, tourist routes connecting Shawbak with the Petra area.

**Keywords:** Jordan; Mission; Petra; Shawbak; Light Archaeology; incastellamento; Saladin; crusaders

### **The scenario of the Mission**

The thematic framework the mission is comprised within is the Florence University project for Medieval Archaeology, which aims to study comparatively the material structures of feudal territorial Lordships in the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>

The mission focuses on the Lordship of Transjordan, a crusading society studied as a feudal society, that preserves the '*characters originaux*' of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem itself in excellent stratigraphic conservation conditions. I only want to note in passing that the context to be used for a real historical understanding of the Crusader-Islamic Holy Land phenomenon is the entire Mediterranean (Pl. 1: 1): from the Spanish

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<sup>1</sup> 'Strategic Project of the Athenaeum' *The Mediterranean feudal society: archaeological profiles. Apogee and decline, at the origins of modern Europe*, dedicated to the archaeological study of the feudal society – through an analysis of forms of settlement in comparable areas in the Mediterranean region – of a time when it was the protagonist of a prolonged confrontation with the new political realities that were being established throughout the European West up to the Islamic Mediterranean East in the late Middle Ages. It is not, therefore, a project aimed specifically at studying the Crusader society other than as part of a wider reality, even if as a case study with its own peculiarity.

*Reconquista* to Arab-Norman Sicily and Seljuk-Byzantine Anatolia (it gets summarized in Cobb 2016 beyond Runciman 1952).

The recent discovery of the residential al-Jaya Palace at the bottom of the hill of Shawbak's *incastellato* site during the 2018 campaign is of particular relevance both for medieval and Islamic heritage in Jordan: no architecture of a comparable quality has ever been found in the country for the Ayyubid-Mamluk period (Tabbaa 1997). This discovery has provided archaeological proof that underneath al-Jaya, lays the ancient medieval capital city of southern Jordan, founded by Saladin on the same site of the castle-capital of the previous Crusader Lordship of Transjordan (Pl. 1: 2).

A city, one might say, lost in time (not documented in written sources, except in some cases in the light of the reconstructed archaeological picture) and, indeed, covered by archaeology... Let us see briefly how we arrived at this turning point after decades of research.

The adopted methodology (Light Archaeology) was fundamental for 'reading' the territory through a historical lens: understanding crusaders' settlement strategies was achieved by following their traces (as indeed they had done with those of the Romans...) (Crescioli, Niccolucci 1999; Drap *et al.* 2012; Vanni Desideri, Vannini 2016; Nucciotti, Vannini 2019).

Thus, after five centuries, historical structure re-emerged, characterizing the culture of the entire region: the frontier – with an unsuspected role of the Petra valley, which after 500 years, becomes the fulcrum of a new territorial system – interpreted according to its own characteristics of the entire medieval Mediterranean (Vanni Desideri, Vannini 1995; Tonghini, Vannini 1997; Vanni Desideri, Vannini 2017); a frontier that, in a specific cultural context, can recall similar processes in many regions throughout the medieval and European Mediterranean (from Marche to Spain). The 'Royal' Transjordan was established by Baldwin himself a few months after the capture of Jerusalem and control of the fertile predesertic band (Pl. 2: 1).

In terms of method, we proceeded to the critical construction of an archaeological document for a material history of the territory (environment and society): we established thematic atlases of building technologies and undertook targeted excavations in contexts that could be dated stratigraphically (the environment allows procedures of the 'lost village' type), with the constitution of new and precise production series (Drap *et al.* 2006; Vannini 2012) (Pl. 2: 2).

## From archaeology to history

The stratigraphic elaboration of ‘buried’ landscapes, gives rise to a series of interpretations of historical breath that go beyond the regional context alone.

One of the most significant reconstructions that we have been able to make is that of the incredible, classic *incastellamento* of the Petra valley (Vannini 2013). Fulcrum was what we discovered to be a large castle, erected by reusing an old Byzantine fortified monastic site: Wu’ayra, the authentic topographic and military key to Petra, of which it constitutes a sensitive, extraordinary ‘clock’ with regularly ‘registered’ settlements or abandonments (Vanni Desideri 2018) (Pl. 3: 1). An archaeological reading of the castle of Al-Habis which, coupled with Wu’ayra, guaranteed complete control of the valley from within, made it possible to recognize in this strong site the second ‘internal’ fulcrum of the valley that completed a perfect control system and allowed the residential area to benefit from the exploitation of the resources of the valley floor: a true logistical base for the entire Crusader Transjordan; hence, an ‘archaeological’ panorama – re-emerged due to the efforts of the various missions – which was probably still in plain sight in 12th century (Nucciotti, Vannini 2003; Vannini 2011) (Pl. 3: 2). It is an *incastellamento* whose purpose was to serve as a regional logistic base by controlling a fertile valley, at the center of a viability that regained its strategic importance after almost five centuries. This interpretation has been directly and explicitly confirmed by the discovery of a settlement on the valley floor –dated to the 12th century, based on our stratified ceramic series – at Wadi Farasa (by mission of the von Humboldt University in Berlin: Schmid 2012).

What followed was the rooting in the region, with the settlement at Shawbak, which would be joined by Kerak at the time of the autonomous establishment of the Lordship of Transjordan (Pl. 4: 1). At Shawbak, the first discovery was the identification of a lost monumental Severian-Byzantine *castellum*, part of the *limes arabicus*, near *Augustopolis* (Parker 1987; Vannini, Nucciotti 2009; Vannini, Nucciotti 2012); a fact that saves the honor of the Frankish chronicler who told how Baldwin had built the castle in 18 days... (*Alberto di Aquisgrana, Historia Hierosolymitana*) (Pl. 4: 2). It was, thus, possible to document incontestably the role of the ‘feudal capital’ of *Crac de Montréal* of the Crusader Lordship of Transjordan with its fundamental structures; in particular, the excavation of the *Comitale* Palace was conclusively documented (Vannini *et al.* 2007) (Pl. 5: 1).

The collapse of the entire settlement system after Hattin's day, with the abandonment of entire Transjordan (and Jerusalem), gets an extraordinary archaeological reflection in the corresponding stratigraphies of Petra with Wu'ayra crusader period and its end (*post* 1189-*ante* 1212). The Ayyubid laboratory for metal processing in the southern ditch of the *cassero* proves not only a functional abandonment of the entire castle, but due to the subsequent abandonment of the valley by the crusaders, it also proves the definitive functional collapse of the entire settlement system into a rural society, instead of urban, like the Arab-Islamic one of the Ayyubids (Vanni Desideri, Vannini 1995; Vannini 2006) (Pl. 5: 2).

### **The return of urbanism and the role of Shawbak**

In fact, the 'discovered' new Islamic city of Shawbak rose to the status of capital of the same region that had belonged to the Lordship of Transjordan – this happened in the Ayyubid age (with a direct intervention that is chronostratigraphically ascribable to Saladin himself) and early-Mamluk (end of the 12th century-beginning of the 14th century) with, among others, the splendid Government Palace and one of the largest factories ever excavated in the entire medieval Mediterranean – a city of which all memory had been lost; a possible archetype of a wider crisis of Arab Islam, which is still ongoing (Pl. 6: 1).

A complex of topostratigraphic 'light' analyzes with a series of resulting targeted essays made it possible to document the planning of an authentic urban 'generator axis,' the Ayyubid *Via Tecta* (with archaeosismological dating to before 1212), and the consequent urban structures.

In the early Mamluk age (probably in the third quarter of the 13th century), a public palace was erected – it bears an epigraph that recalls the accomplishment of Sultan Lajin who rebuilt the citadel – with a beautiful paving in correspondence with the one that appears on the second road axis orthogonal to the former, in the direction of the great church of Santa Maria (Tonghini, Vanni Desideri, Vannini 2002; Faucherre 2004; Vannini *et al.* 2007; Vannini, Nucciotti 2009).

Some important structural elements unequivocally attest to the urban character of the ancient monumental settlement and testify to a material renewal at the service of an extraordinary political project that managed to combine in a remarkably balanced way the continuity of function inherited from the old Crusader castle with a radical cultural reconversion in keeping with the basic connotations of the urban dimension of

the imperial re-founding of Saladin, in short, the location of the Government Palace in explicit connection with that of the old Crusader palace, whose political legacy it inherits (Rugiadi 2012; Nucciotti, Pruno 2016; Nucciotti, Fragai 2019) (Pl. 6: 2); actually it is about the recovery, albeit in a different framework, of the Crusader regional political season, for the first time as an autonomous territorial entity (Pl. 7: 1).

As it emerged from field surveys, civilian structures were being erected at the same level of excellence as the seats of the new Ayyubid power. The breadth of the ‘superstructures’ (if you like) corresponds perfectly to that of ordinary structures in impressiveness and articulation appropriate for a ‘capital city’: the economic equipment, like the ‘industrial’ soap factory (Pl. 7: 2) and the attested production of sugar and carpets with a Mediterranean commercial diffusion (Marcotulli, Ruschi, Vannini, 2013; Marcotulli, Pruno, 2018). In fact, the discovery of various fragments of peculiar ceramic forms for the production of sugar attests to a production that explains and documents the origins of a product (that the sources precisely call ‘of Shawbak’) that is made and exported from the Kerak region (Nashef 2009; Agnoletti 2009). As it often happens in interpretation of written sources, a new light can be shed by some hints, vague as they are, that pure written sources make available to us: for example, carpets noted as originating ‘from Shawbak’ classified in literature as made in Cairo can in fact be really attributed to this new and important urban center of South Jordan (Little 1986).

One should also add the picture offered in reference to some centuries (from the 13th to the 15th century at least) by another series of clues – collected specifically with the aim of reconsidering written (and iconographic) sources in the light of this new interpretation of an important phase in the history of this extraordinary settlement – about numerous high imperial officials, particularly in the Mamluk age, attributed ‘to Shawbak’ which suggests an administrative school was established here to serve the administration of the state; an institution which could only be located in relevant urban areas in the Arab-Islamic culture of the time. Shawbak thus confirms itself as a real archaeological key for a historical reinterpretation in the ‘long term,’ not only medieval, perspective of the whole southern Transjordan and beyond (Falihat 2012).

Returning for a moment to proper archaeological and material sources, albeit on another political level, the evidence in the layer between the lintel of the audience hall of the Ayyubid Palace as well as on water jugs reveals to us a joint presence with Islamic and Christian symbols alike: archaeological traces of a good cohabitation from the level of government to the everyday life (Cardini 1999) (Pl. 8: 1).

It is not only a city, but a new settlement structure: between confirmation of the frontier role, reinterpreted as a link between Syria and Egypt, and the return of urbanism in this region (Pl. 8: 2).<sup>2</sup> The central role of Shawbak – in the territory of the former Crusader Lordship – continues to be confirmed and manifested up to the end of the 14th century in a progressive integrated ‘zoning’ into residential, productive, service or defense areas.

Archaeology returns a city to history? Displays the last season of greatness of the Arab Islamic world? The return of urbanism in the region south of the Dead Sea after the successful Roman imperial time shows an impressive synchrony with what was happening in the same decades (mid-12th up to 13th centuries and beyond) in the ‘Christian’ Mediterranean and in Europe.<sup>3</sup> This is an interpretative model that finds definitive confirmations: again, in some of the Arabic chronicle sources,<sup>4</sup> but now also on the ground, at the foot of the ‘citadel’ hill with the new function of the old castle renovated urbanistically and conceptually (Pl. 9: 1).

The discovery of the building we began with represents, therefore, the closure of a complex archaeological interpretation of the history of a key regional territory in this part of the Mediterranean and, at the same time, the opening of amazing research perspectives together with a need to expand skills (Pl. 9: 2). This result produces a triple confirmation for the scientific program of the Mission:

– the productivity of the Light Archaeology methodology that characterizes our approach;

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<sup>2</sup> Donato, Tonghini, Vannini 2006; a frontier that, reinterpreted according to internal political logic of the renewed Islamic power, the Ayyubids transmitted almost seamlessly to the Mamluks (see also Walker 2011), but there the happy story ended, with the Ottomans, this would not repeat and the region would significantly return to a marked, relative ‘shadow cone’ of history until the Great Arab Revolt.

<sup>3</sup> A phenomenon that can be generally seen in various regions of the Mediterranean sea and of Europe and is well represented by the case of Florence, which grew from 25,000 to over 110,000 inhabitants in just over 50 years of the 13th century, developing arguably the largest economy of the Middle Ages (Pampaloni 1973; Sznura 1975; Cherubini 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Shaddad said: “He [al-Mu’azzam Sharf al-Din ‘Isa] fortifies and embellishes [Shawbak]. Trees brought from all countries have been planted there and now it equals Damascus in its greenery, abundance of water and purity of air.” This is not an ‘eastern’ rhetorical hyperbole, but a substantial reference to the new reality that was emerging: Shawbak is not compared to Damascus as such, but it is explicitly presented as the new capital city of the region. Here, too, one can see an almost textbook case: a better verified interpretation of a written source since it can be contextualized with a ‘direct’ source par excellence, the archaeological one.



- the real existence of the city whose foundation we had deemed to be able to propose (owing solely to the ‘light’ readings on the walls of the ‘castle’);
- the excellence of the formal level of the building – perfectly matching the quality of the political and productive structures already documented in the old castle-new citadel – that speaks of a cultured and refined city and of an extraordinary strategic project that can be attributed to Saladin’s political intelligence.

This is a project, the Saladin’s project, that gave back a new centrality to the entire southern Transjordan and started a settlement and political tradition that is the basis of modern Jordan itself (it is not accidental that the first capital of the state was Ma’an).<sup>5</sup>

### **An archaeological method for a historical problem**

In fact, the city disappears. The stratigraphic language of this image appears dramatic: a sudden and radical eclipse of a city that gets ‘reduced’ to a rural village (Pl. 10: 1).

Archaeology for a historical problem: Does the abandonment of the building and the collapse of the refined Arab city testify to the twilight of a civilization? What happened between the end of the 14th century and the early 16th century?

Once the urban structure that has now appeared is understood, the results of the research will be able to direct the excavations so as to address another great historical question which the investigations of 2018 have highlighted. Now we know the beginnings and early life of this extraordinary town; but when, how and why did it perish so much so that it was forgotten by history (to be rediscovered only by archaeology)? Perhaps for the first time, we will have an opportunity to study archaeologically an aspect of the historical crisis that, probably during the 14th century, engulfed the Arab-Islamic world, opening the way for the Ottoman conquest.

It is an intriguing perspective to be addressed together with a renewed public archaeology program: conservative restoration, study and enhancement of social values, broad communication directed both to the local communities and to the international public through the implementation

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<sup>5</sup> A fascinating collaboration is now underway with the PAN in Wroclaw and Warsaw with program focus that is being precisely developed together with some original ‘federal’ organizational forms. But I am not going to start here another vast theme such as the need to rethink the very role of international missions, which we have been working on for some time (Vannini 2017; Vannini 2019).



of the master plan 2010-14, and, finally, tourist routes connecting Shawbak with the Petra area (Vannini 1999; Bonacchi, Burtenshaw 2012).

Thus, Shawbak returns to the status of a rural village and Ottoman barracks, which were also occupied by T. E. Lawrence (we even found material traces of this); and yet, the medieval (mid-12th up to 13th centuries) roots remain vital at the origin of the tradition and the community identity that reaches our times with an explicit material documentation of the continuity of function and territorial role of the site up to the thresholds of the current Jordanian state and to the same identity of the current regional and national community.

The methodological itinerary, started with Light Archaeology, has finally reached Public Archaeology and invested the 'products' of research in projects shared with the relevant, predominantly local, communities:

- the first exhibition of Public Archaeology in Italy (and perhaps in continental Europe: Vannini, Nucciotti 2009; Bonacchi 2011);
- an experimental restauration and conservation program (long active: Ruschi, Vannini, 2001; Ruschi, Sodi 2009; Vanni Desideri, Sassu 2014; Andreini *et al.* 2014) and a tourism master plan, part of a complex EU Public Architecture project, that has produced extraordinary results (with the use of funding for mobility only) (Nucciotti, Segnini 2013);
- opening of the first hotel in Shawbak since the Middle Ages;
- 'returning' – thanks to archaeology – a monument such as the Ayyubid Palace to the residents of Shawbak, who have already used it to celebrate some grand events (Vannini 2016);
- finally, a structural meaning can be recognized in a series of activities that have taken place both in the resident community and at the institutional level of the community itself. In short, it can be seen how the progress of the research that aimed (above all, in a systematic way and according to a 'public' approach of archaeological practice) to integrate the advancement of knowledge with sharing it with different entities of the local community has led the residents to perceive a cultural asset like Shawbak as 'their own.'

As a catalytic, one can consider the fact that the old 'Crusader Castle' (called so in all the literature, tourist guides included) has not merely emerged, but emerged as an extraordinary materialization of important chapters of its own history, in which all the elements, historicized, managed to play their own role in widespread communication. Thus, it is certainly a castle, but also a monumental Roman site and, above all, an Arab city founded by a Saladin that everyone knows and identifies with: there are his statues (a reason to knock them down can be found...), stamps with

his image, institutions named after him, etc. A mosaic was recomposed that shows also the time of the great Arab Revolt of Lawrence, pointed to by its archaeological traces as well; a context that has diluted, but on the other hand enhanced, the very period of the Crusader Lordship of Transjordan, with their capital Shawbak, confirmed, precisely, by Saladin.

This is how we arrive (since 2016) at the new headquarters of the present municipal administration, built according to an architectural project that inserts explicit ‘quotations’ taken from the layout of the castle-city (from the circular towers to the *raggera* access staircase) up to the *murales* of the crusader castle (with the figure of Saladin, who became part of the living history of the community), these days, in an Arab country (Pl. 10: 2)!<sup>6</sup>

Finally, this is a documentation of cultural belonging to the same area of the Petra region, where Shawbak can now rightly be considered the ‘medieval heir’ of the ancient Petra, at least for the territory between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea (Vannini 2014).

A newly illuminated street leading (almost) to Shawbak is the dawn of a developing tourism system... to be monitored for the protection of the landscape as splendid as it is subtle.

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<sup>6</sup> See also Nucciotti 2020. A case that shows that it is possible to scratch a deep-rooted prejudice, widely present not only in Arab-Islamic cultures, of substantial extraneousness of the traces of previous cultures on a given territory (except, of course, sensibility and policies of not only cultural structures responsible for or interested in conservation and enhancement of territorial Heritage); an extraneousness that is often strengthened by seeing the interest in these traces of ‘outsiders’ who fail to supplement their ‘missions’ with an activity in the role of ‘mediators’ between the cultures of the past and the people living now on the same territory as its natural owners-custodians (cf. *supra*).

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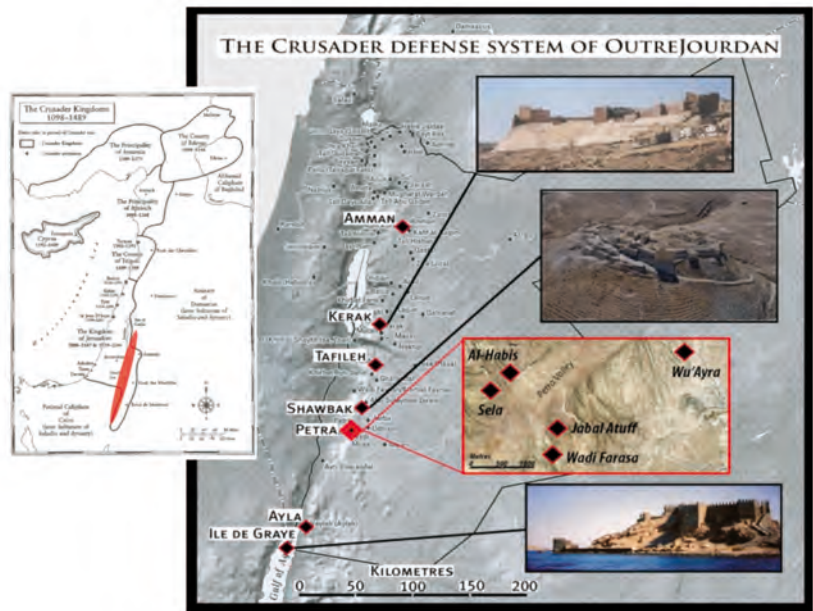


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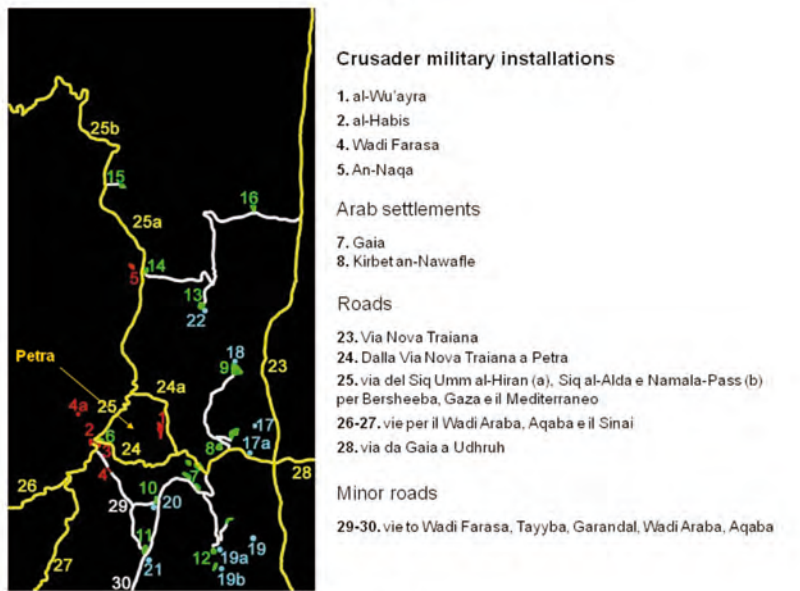


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Pl. 1: 1. Archaeology of the feudal Mediterranean society (Progetto Strategico d’Ateneo)  
Pl. 1: 2. Shawbak-al Jayya. The discovery of the urban palace confirms the foundation  
of the ‘city of Saladin’ and locates it



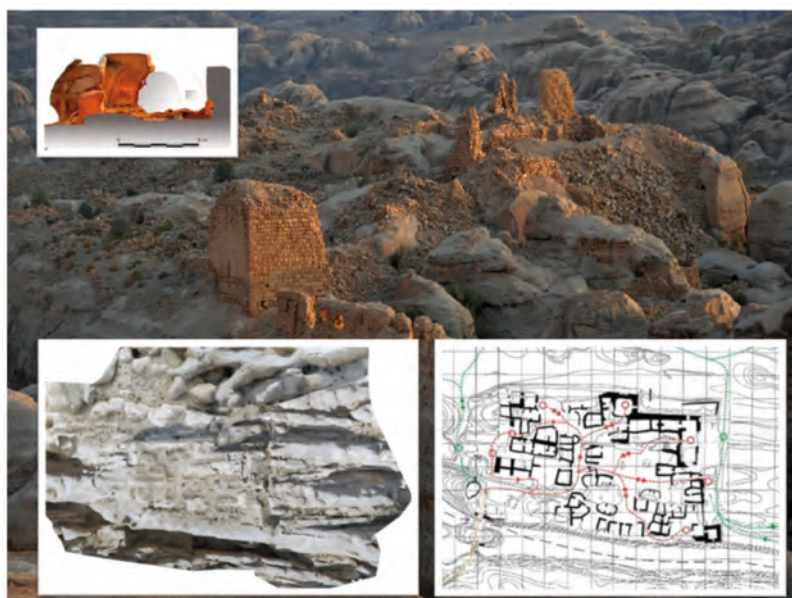
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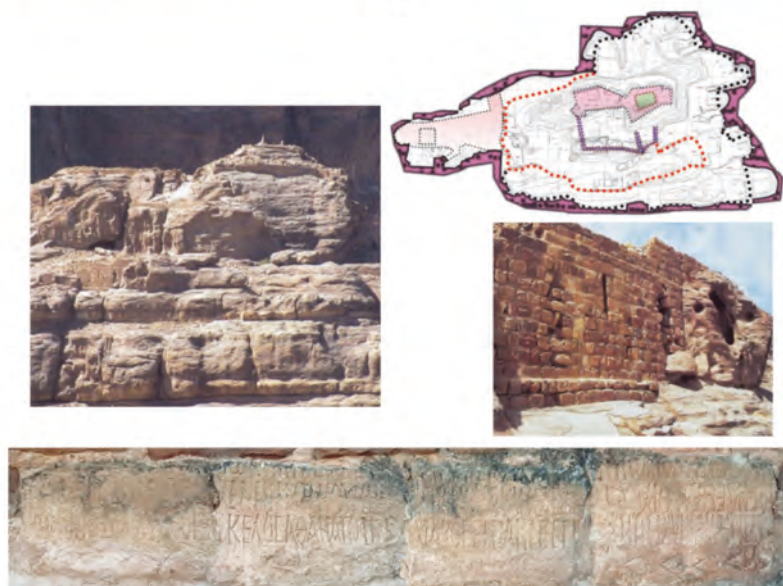
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Pl. 2: 1. The area of investigation. The Crusaders of Transjordan: a feudal lordship 'Outremer.' Royal Transjordan and the formation of a Lordship (1100-1142). Rebirth of a frontier, the role of Petra region (by Lapo Somigli)

Pl. 2: 2. Light archaeology in Medieval Petra valley. Space and time: diachronic settlement structures (from S. Schmid, re-elaborated)



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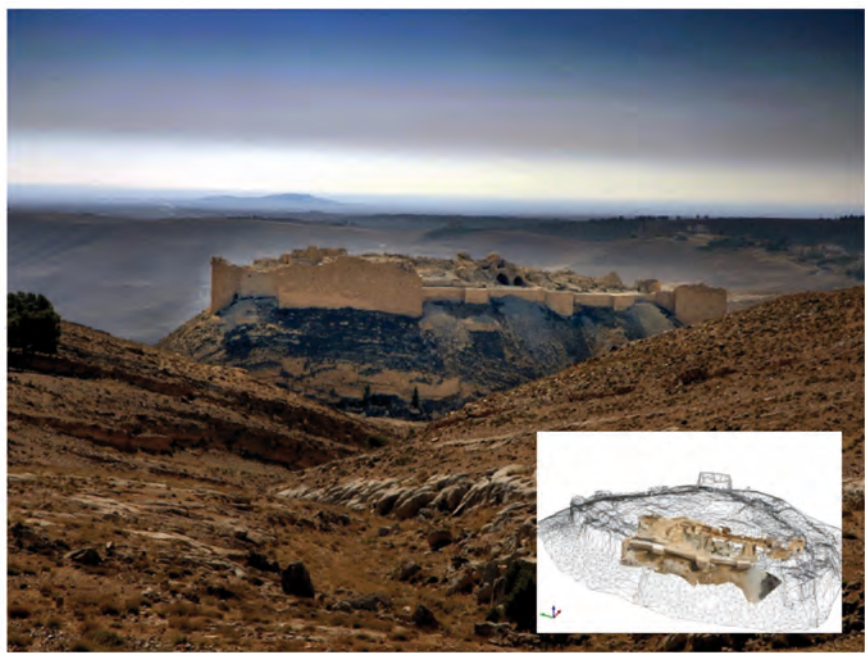


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Pl. 3 Crusaders in Petra (1100-1189), the *Incastellamento* of a valley (and in Wadi Farasa – by S. Schmid, Mission Un. Berlin); archaeological validation of a model of historical interpretation:

- 3: 1. Al-Wu'ayra (*Li Vaux Moises*): a stratigraphic observatory on 'medieval' Petra (Foto Anna Marx)
- 3: 2. Al-Habis castle. Topographic lecture of the site: 1116, construction of the *praesidium novum* in Wadi Musa





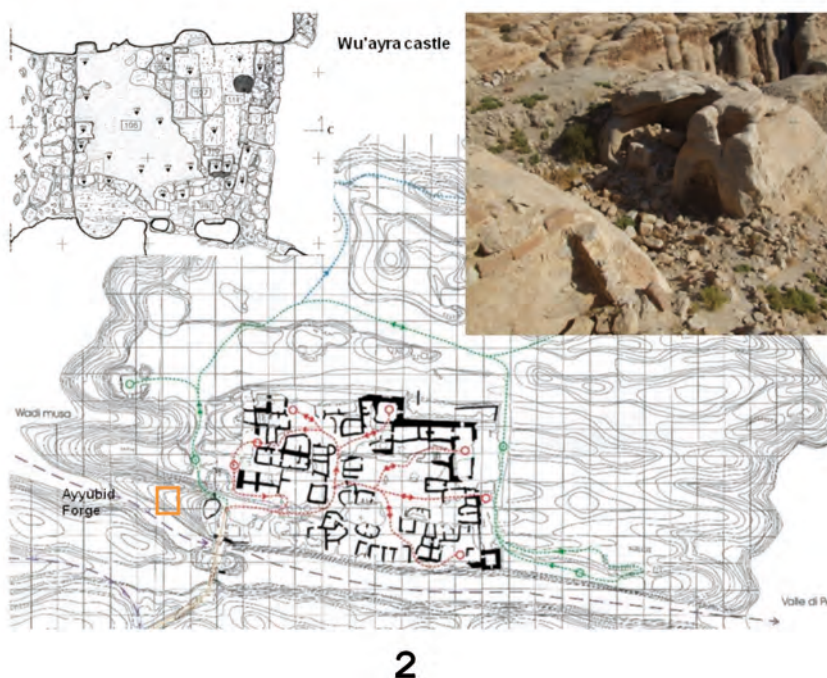
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Pl. 4: 1. Shawbak at the gates of the Arabian desert: the first ‘rural capital’ of the Transjordan Crusader Lordship (by ITABC-CN, Roma; CNRS-Lab. LIS, Marseille; Foto Mario Foli)

Pl. 4: 2. Shawbak excavation areas and buildings with pre-medieval structures



Pl. 5: 1. Archaeological traces of Baldwin I's *Crac de Montreal*  
 Pl. 5: 2. The end of al-Wu'ayra castle and of the Crusader territorial system (*post* 1189-*ante* 1212). The Ayyubid laboratory for metal processing inside the southern ditch of the *cassero* (Survey Stefano Bertocci)



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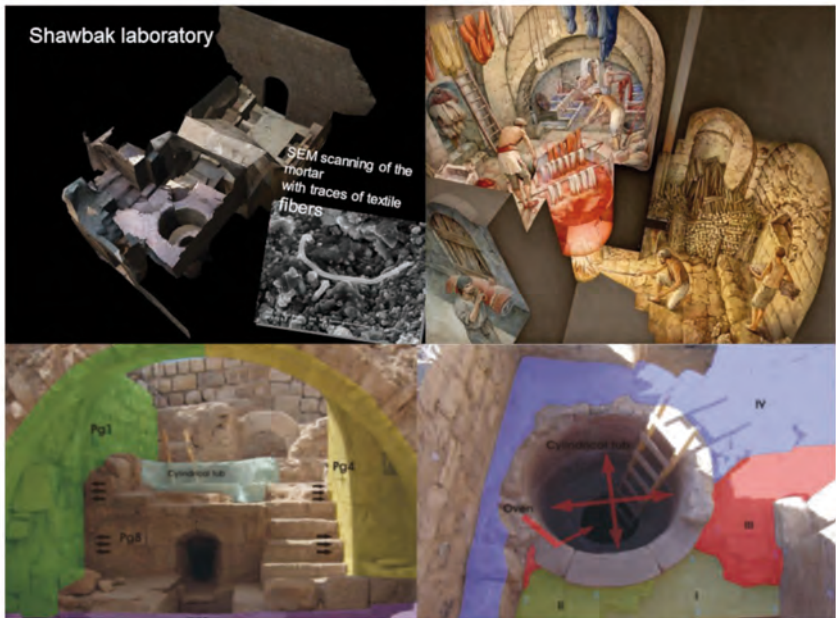
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Pl. 6: 1. Archaeology and political landscaping in medieval Shawbak. The Ayyubid *Via Tecta* (*ante* 1212): the road axis of the urbanistic planning, the first topostratigraphic proof of the existence of the new city founded by Saladin  
 Pl. 6: 2. Shawbak. Reception Hall of the Ayyubid Palace by Saladin and Al-Adil (1190-*ante* 1212). Continuity and innovation of a political territorial power





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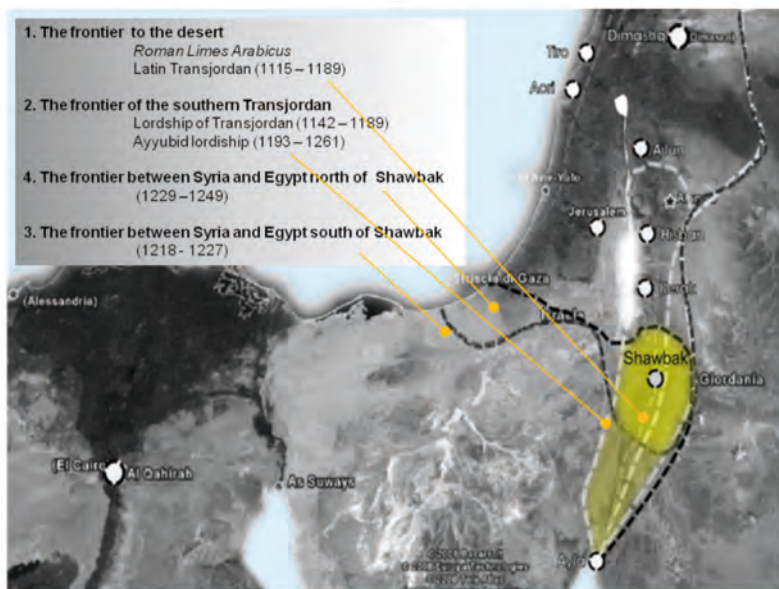


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Pl. 7: 1. Interior of the vaulted hall of the Crusader palace before excavation. Monumental entrance with the Ayyubid stair, which inserts the new government palace of the Ayyubid into the structures of the old Crusader building  
Pl. 7: 2. Shawbak. Archaeological reconstruction of the Mamluk laboratory



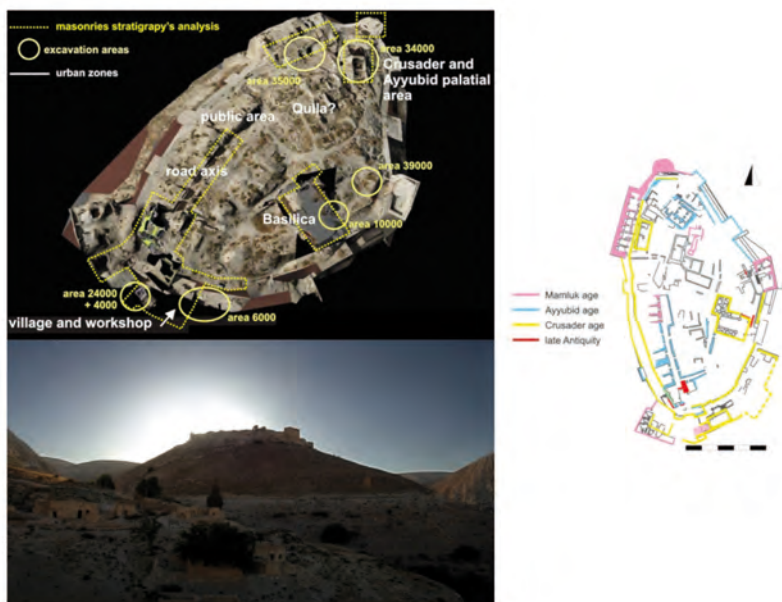
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Pl. 8: 1. Shawbak. Lintel of the Ayyubid palace and a water jug bearing Islamic and Christian symbols: from the level of the government to daily life

Pl. 8: 2. The southern Transjordan in Crusader-Ayyubid age and its 'frontiers' (by Michele Nuccioti)



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Pl. 9: 1. Shawbak and the Ayyubid city. The new town is organized into a citadel (replacement and integration of the structures of the old castle in an urban key) and a developing city at its feet (Foto Mauro Foli)

Pl. 9: 2. After six centuries, a capital city of South Transjordan is born. Shawbak-Jayya: the most beautiful (and ephemeral) city in medieval Jordan?





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Pl. 10: 1. What happened between the end of the 14th and early 16th centuries?  
An archaeological investigation of a historical problem: crisis of a civilization and eclipse  
of a city. Geophysical surveys conducted by the PAN team (under the leadership of Tomasz  
Herbich and Andrzej Buko) in search of the city of Ayyubids...

Unexpected archaeological history: from the Crusaders' Castle (*Crac de Montréal*)  
to the Muslim city (Shawbak), to the Ottoman village

Pl. 10: 2. *Murales* have appeared on Shawbak village's main street since 2015: the  
'castle' is no more 'invisible'