

Arab Settlements

Tribal structures and spatial organizations in the Middle East between Hellenistic and Early Islamic periods

Nicolò Pini

Access Archaeology





ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-361-4

ISBN 978-1-78969-362-1 (e-Pdf)

© Nicolò Pini and Archaeopress 2019

Cover image: APAAME_20020929_RHB-0097, Photographer: Robert Bewley, courtesy of APAAME.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owners.

This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website www.archaeopress.com

To my parents – Paola and Daniele – and Silvia

Table of contents

Table of content.....	I
List of figures.....	III
List of plates	VII
Preface.....	IX
Part 1: Methodology and Theory	1
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	3
Chapter 2: Anthropological background and terminology	7
2.1: Nomadism and pastoral societies.....	8
2.2: Tribalism and segmented societies	11
2.3: “Arabs”: the challenge of distinguishing between external labels and self-definitions.....	17
Chapter 3: Typology	26
3.1: The “Settlement” level.....	27
3.2: The “Quarter” level.....	33
3.3: The “Block” level.....	34
3.4: The “house” level.....	36
Part 2: Comparative Analysis.....	43
Chapter 4: The case studies.....	45
4.1: The southern Hauran (Jordan).....	45
4.1.1: Umm el-Jimal.....	46
4.1.2: Umm es-Surab.....	80
4.2: The Central Hauran (Syria).....	96
4.2.1: Sharah.....	96
4.2.2: Mseikeh	104
4.3: The Negev.....	112
4.3.1: Shivta (Sobata/Soubaita).....	114
4.3.2: Mamshit (Mampsis/Kurnub)	130
Chapter 5: Regionalism and Transregional patterns	149
Chapter 6: The “test” case-studies - The Central Jordanian Plateau.....	158
6.1: Tall Hisban	159
6.2: Umm er-Rasas	173

Part 3: Archaeological data in the bigger picture	181
Chapter 7: The regional historical context.....	183
7.1: The Desert and the Sown.....	187
7.2: Brothers in arms	191
7.3: Defended by the saints.....	196
7.4: A “Kaleidoscope of identities”	200
7.5: The “ruralisation” of the spatial model of the urban space	207
Chapter 8: Arab settlements or settlements of the “Arabs”?	214
References	221
Abbreviations.....	221
Primary Sources	221
Secondary Sources	221
Plates	237

List of figures

Figure 1 - Location of the case studies (Satellite image: Google Earth).....	6
Figure 2 - Imru' al-Qays Inscription from Namara, Syria (©bpk / RMN - Grand Palais / Les frères Chuzeville) with transcription (by Dussaud and Macler 1903: 314).....	20
Figure 3 - Shivta, an example of "close" settlement (Satellite image: Google Earth).....	28
Figure 4 - Umm es-Surab, an example of "open" settlement (detail of APAAME_19531031_HAS-58-032, Hunting Air Survey 1953, courtesy of APAAME).....	29
Figure 5 - The large reservoir in Umm el-Jimal, fed by an underground aqueduct, close to the "Diocletian Fort" (APAAME_20091019_DLK-0248. Photographer: David Kennedy, courtesy of APAAME).....	31
Figure 6 - The "Blank space" in front of the so-called "Commodus Gate" in Umm el-Jimal.....	31
Figure 7 - The Acropolis of Avdad, in the Negev (photo by the author).....	32
Figure 8 - The Site of Umm er-Rasas, where the former Roman fort is clearly distinguishable on the right (Jordan) (APAAME_19980520_DLK-0018. Photographer: David Kennedy, courtesy of APAAME).....	32
Figure 9 - A block in Umm el-Jimal, where a small church is clearly visible amid the block (APAAME_20091019_DLK-0232. Photographer: David Kennedy, courtesy of APAAME).....	35
Figure 10 - Possible combination of modular parcels as suggested by Butler (1930, Figure 66 [a], 174 [b] and 88 [c]): a and b have both the larger hall functioning as "reception hall", while c shows the possible destination of the larger room and the accessory spaces of the aisles as stables.....	38
Figure 11 - Example of Simple House, progressively developed into "L" and "U", by adding first the north-eastern aisle and later the north-western (elaboration by the author on Clauss-Balty 2008, 99, Pl. XVIII Figure a).....	40
Figure 12 - The Southern Hauran (Satellite image: Google Earth).....	46
Figure 13 - Inscription nr. 232 from Umm el-Jimal (Littmann, Magie, and Stuart 1930, 131). Transcription: Imp(eratore) Caes(are) M(arco) Aur(elio) Antonino / Aug(usto) Arm(eniaco) Part(hico) Med(ico) Germ(anico) Sarm(atico) / [et Imp(eratore) Caes(are) L(ucio) Aur(elio) Commodo Aug(usto) Germ(anico) / Sarm(atico)] Opus valli perfectum sub ... / ... Severo leg(ato) Aug(ustorum) pr(o) pr(aetore) co(n)s(ule) des(ignato).	48
Figure 14 - Inscription nr. 233 from Umm el-Jimal (Littmann, Magie, and Stuart 1930, 132). Transcription: Salvis d(ominis) n(ostris) Valentiniano, Valente, et Gratiano, / victoriosissimis, semper Aug(ustis), dispositione Iuli, / v(iri) c(larissimi), com(itis), magistri equitum et peditum, fabri- / c(a)tus est burgu[s] ex fundamento mano devo- / tissi[m]orum equitum IX Dalm(atarum), s(ub) c(ura) Vahali trib(uni), / in consulatum d(omini) n(ostri) Gratiani, perpetui Aug(usti) iterum / et Probi, v(iri) c(larissimi).....	48
Figure 15 - The "Commodus Gate" as preserved today (photo by the author).....	49
Figure 16 - The "Commodus Gate" when the Princeton's expedition visited Umm el-Jimal at the beginning of the 20th century (Butler 1930: Figure 134).....	50
Figure 17 - The Large Reservoir of Umm el-Jimal (photo by the author).....	51
Figure 18 - Aerial picture of the main structure of the praetorium of Umm el-Jimal (APAAME_20091019_SES-0145. Photographer: Stafford Smith, courtesy of APAAME).....	52
Figure 19 - The complex of the praetorium (on the left end) (APAAME_20111002_MND-0832. Photographer: Matthew Dalton, courtesy of APAAME).....	52
Figure 20 - Roof decoration in the "Cross-room" of the praetorium (photo by the author).....	53

Figure 21 - The Tetrarchic castellum of Umm el-Jimal (APAAME_19980512_DLK-0056. Photographer: David Kennedy, courtesy of APAAME)	54
Figure 22 - The so-called "Nabatean Temple" of Umm el-Jimal (photo by the author).....	55
Figure 23 - The "Later Barracks" of Umm el-Jimal, looking south (photo by the author)	56
Figure 24 - The inner courtyard of the "Later Barracks" of Umm el-Jimal, looking north (photo by the author).....	56
Figure 25 - The plan of the "Later Barracks" of Umm el-Jimal (de Vries, Umm el-Jimal: 133, Figure 83; courtesy of Prof. B. de Vries and the Umm el-Jimal Archaeological Project).....	57
Figure 26 - Inscription nr. 237 from Umm el-Jimal with transcription (Littmann, Magie, and Stuart 1930: 136). Transcription: Ἐπὶ Φλ(αοῦ) Πελαγίου / Ἀντιπάτρου τοῦ λαμπροτάτου / κόμ(ιτος) καὶ δουκὸς ἐκτί- / σθη ὁ κάστελλος / σπουδῆ Βάσσου / πριμικ	58
Figure 27 - The apsis of the "Cathedral" of Umm el-Jimal (photo by the author)	59
Figure 28 - The entrance and the Nartex of the "Cathedral" in Umm el-Jimal (photo by the author) ...	60
Figure 29 - Plan of House XVII-XVIII (Osinga 2017: 106, Figure 4.2; courtesy of Dr E. Osinga).....	61
Figure 30 - House XVIII of Umm el-Jimal (photo by the author).....	61
Figure 31 - The "south Gate" of House XVIII in Umm el-Jimal (Osinga 2017: 137, Figure 4.14; courtesy of Dr E. Osinga)	62
Figure 32 - General plan of Umm el-Jimal (after de Vries 1998c: 15, Figure 6; courtesy of Prof. B. de Vries and the Umm el-Jimal Archaeological Project)	64
Figure 33 - The so-called "East Gate" (Butler 1930: Figure 135).....	65
Figure 34 - The Western entrance to the settlement (photo by the author).....	66
Figure 35 - Isolated buildings and buildings with direct access to "black spaces" (all pictures courtesy of APAAME).....	67
Figure 36 - Northern Quarter of Umm el-Jimal	69
Figure 37 - The South-Eastern Quarter of Umm el-Jimal.....	70
Figure 38 - The South-Western Quarter of Umm el-Jimal	71
Figure 39 - An example of Cluster Block from the South-Eastern quarter in Umm el-Jimal (APAAME_20181022_RHB-0099. Photographer: Robert Bewley, courtesy of APAAME)	73
Figure 40 - The Nabatean Complex, in the South-Western quarter, is one of the few examples of "insula" type Block in Umm el-Jimal (APAAME_20181022_MND-0067. Photographer: Matthew Dalton, courtesy of APAAME)	74
Figure 41 - House XVII-XVIII	77
Figure 42 - Example of "V-Shaped" stairs in House III in the south-western quarter (photo by the author)	79
Figure 43 - Aerial photo of Umm es-Surab, from West (APAAME_20060911_RHB-0246. Photographer: Robert Bewley, courtesy of APAAME)	81
Figure 44 - Inscription nr. 2 from Umm es-Surab, with transcription and translation (Littmann 1930: 2-3).....	81
Figure 45 - Plan of TU 28 (after Gilento 2014: 7, Figure 12; courtesy of Dr P. Gilento)	82
Figure 46 - The Church of Sergius and Bacchus in Umm es-Surab.....	84
Figure 47 - Details of the church of Sergius and Bacchus	85
Figure 48 - TU 24 in Umm es-Surab	88
Figure 49 - Example of re-roofing of the Druze period in TU 24 in Umm es-Surab (photo by the author)	89

Figure 50 - The North-Eastern room in TU 24 of Umm es-Surab (photo by the author).....	89
Figure 51 - Plan of Umm es-Surab (2018, courtesy of Dr P. Gilento and Dr S. Peñalver Martin, ACTECH Project).....	91
Figure 52 - Examples of quarters in Umm es-Surab.....	94
Figure 53 - Views of TU 24's courtyard.....	95
Figure 54 - The Leja region in the Syrian Hauran (Satellite image: Google Earth)	97
Figure 55 - General plan of Sharah (after Clauss-Balty 2010: 207; courtesy of Dr Clauss-Balty) [FULL PAGE]	99
Figure 56 - Sharah: The South-Western area, with the large Roman religious complex (in yellow) and the South-Eastern concentration of dwellings (in blue) (Elaboration by the author on Google Earth satellite image).....	101
Figure 57 - General plans of Mseikeh	105
Figure 58 - Inscription nr. 795 (with transcription) from the Northern entrance of the village of Mseikeh, close to Building nr. 25 in the French survey (Littmann, Magie, and Stuart 1930: 420)	110
Figure 59 - Development of Maison 1 and Maison 2 in Mseikeh.....	111
Figure 60 - The Negev Highlands region (Satellite image: Google Earth)	113
Figure 61 - Block of the Governor's House and the Central Church in Shivta.....	115
Figure 62 - The facade of the Pool House in Shivta, where the central structure resembles the Governor's House's Tower (photo by the author)	118
Figure 63 - The Mosque of Shivta (photo by the author).....	119
Figure 64 - One of the blocked doors in Shivta (photo by the author)	119
Figure 65 - Shivta: settlement organisation.....	121
Figure 66 - Shivta: possible public buildings.....	122
Figure 67 - Shivta: quarters' types	125
Figure 68 - Shivta: Pool House and Stable House	128
Figure 69 - Plan of the Middle and Late Nabatean remains of Mamphis (after Negev 1988a: 30, Figure 2; Plan reproduced with the permission of the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem).....	131
Figure 70 - Mamphis: buildings with Nabatean phases.....	133
Figure 71 - Mamphis: Building XII	137
Figure 72 - Mamphis: Building XI	138
Figure 73 - Mamphis: settlement's organisation.....	141
Figure 74 - The courtyard of Building I in Mamphis (photo by the author).....	146
Figure 75 - Localisation of Tall Hisban and Umm er-Rasas in Central Jordan (Google Earth)	158
Figure 76 - Aerial picture of the archaeological site of Tall Hisban (drone photos by I. LaBianca; courtesy of Prof. Dr B.J. Walker).....	160
Figure 77 - The acropolis of Tall Hisban, with the rest of the Church on the left and the Mamluk citadel on the right (photo by the author).....	166
Figure 78 - Tall Hisban: general plan and forms of occupation of the slopes.....	168
Figure 79 - Nabulsi Qasr, from the summit of Tall Hisban, looking South-West (photo by the author).....	169
Figure 80 - Reused building materials in Nabulsi Qasr (photo by the author)	169
Figure 81 - Tall Hisban: Field O.....	170
Figure 82 - Aerial picture of the fort and the later village of Umm er-Rasas (APAAME_20170920_RHB-0090. Photographer: Robert Bewley, courtesy of APAAME)	173

Figure 83 - Plan of the St. Stephen complex and chronologic sequence of the religious buildings (elaboration by the author on Michel 2001: 382, Figure 358).....	175
Figure 84 - Plan of Umm er-Rasas fort (elaboration by the author on Wirth 2002: Figure 17).....	178
Figure 85 - The northern wall of the Roman fort, facing the Byzantine village; looking west (photo by the author).....	178
Figure 86 - Major religious complexes in the Byzantine village of Umm er-Rasas (elaboration by the author on APAAME_20170920_RHB-0090. Photographer: Robert Bewley, courtesy of APAAME).....	180
Figure 87 - Left: Inscription nr. 238 (Greek, with transcription) (Littmann, Magie, and Stuart 1930: 138); Right: Inscription nr. 41 (Semitic, with transcription) (Littmann 1930: 38).....	201
Figure 88 - The Tetrakionia in Jerash with the Mosque (highlighted in blue) (satellite image: Google Earth).....	210

Pictures by APAAME (Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East) available on <http://www.apaame.org> and <http://www.flickr.com/apaame/collections>.

List of plates

Plate 1 – Size comparison of the case studies (drawing by the author)

Plate 2a – “Cluster-Quarter” in Umm el-Jimal (drawing by the author)

Plate 2b – “Cluster-Quarter” in Umm el-Jimal (drawing by the author)

Plate 3 – External “Cluster-Quarter” in Umm el-Jimal (drawing by the author)

Plate 4 – Above: Quarter developed by a former Roman fort (Umm er-Rasas). Below: enclosed quarter (Mampsis) (drawings by the author)

Plate 5 – “Cluster-block” in Umm el-Jimal, with direct access to each unit (drawing by the author)

Plate 6 – “Cluster-block” in Umm el-Jimal, with “buffer” zones to access to each unit (drawing by the author)

Plate 7 – “Insulae” in Shivta, in the Negev (drawing by the author)

Plate 8 – Two examples of “Simple” houses (drawing by the author)

Plate 9a – Example of “Complex” house (drawing by the author)

Plate 9b – Example of “Complex” house (drawing by the author)

Plate 10a – Example of “Courtyard” house (drawing by the author)

Plate 10b – Example of “Courtyard” house (drawing by the author)

Preface

What can the built environment tell about the society living in the settlement? This is the main question of the present work. In the final years of my studies at the University of Siena, I became intrigued by the relationship between frequent patterns of organisation in the urban space and specific social structures that are normally described as “tribal”. Furthermore, the second aspect of interest was the perdurance of such patterns from the Byzantine into Early Islamic times, and possibly even later into the Middle Islamic period. Following these two broad topics and revisiting some of the several questions left unanswered by my Master’s dissertation, my doctoral research investigated the possible social triggers for specific forms of the built environment and its development from Hellenism to the Early medieval (1st – 8th centuries AD).

Archaeological disciplines have demonstrated an increasing interest in “non-material” aspects of ancient societies, especially following the well-known debate between processualists and post-processualists. Inevitably a discipline such as archaeology, which heavily relies on tangible materials to formulate their interpretations, poses several difficulties once the topic of interests falls also into the immaterial side of material culture. Being that the topic of the present work incorporates such sort of inquiries, one pre-requirement urgently needed to be fulfilled: that is taking some important anthropological notions into consideration, such as “tribalism” (or more precisely segmented societies) and “nomadism” (i.e. pastoralism). They are indeed central in the interpretation of the archaeological data and architectural remains for the study region and time range. Nonetheless, their use in the current historical and archaeological scholarly discourse is often misleading, if not (potentially) misused (see Chapter 2). In fact, despite an increased attention to these theoretical concepts during the last years, in most cases a fully coherent and consistent use of such terms is still lacking, and heavily affects the reliability of some reconstructions.

Therefore, the present work will provide a theoretical overview on the anthropological debate covering the two issues of segmented societies and pastoralism. It will also briefly outline the debate on the term “Arab”, where its very definition is closely interconnected historically and socially with these two central concepts. Finally in this discussion, I justify my preference for the term the “Arab settlement”, rather than other more commonly used terms, such as the “Islamic settlement” and the “Oriental settlement”.

Two subsequent parts of the research are built upon this theoretical and anthropological basis. In the first section (Chapters 4-6) the data are yielded and gathered from different disciplines and then are progressively put together into a general analysis of settlements in the Near East. This is accomplished through thoroughly comparing eight case studies coming from different regions in the Levant (the Negev, the central region of today Jordan, and the central and southern part of the Hauran). Despite the strong regionalism and diversity in some aspects of their historical development, the feature that ultimately allows for comparison between them is that they are situated on the border between the desert and the “settled” areas. The comparative analysis of these eight sites ultimately aims to identify

a set of common elements in the built environments and at the same time highlight and explain the regional peculiarities, wherever possible.

The last section (Chapters 7-8) brings together the theoretical framework of the study and the results of the comparative analysis, while also taking the general historical context into consideration. By showing some patterns and behaviours related to the built environment in the *longue durée*, it will be argued that society, especially family groups and the (potential) presence of nomadic pastoralists, played a central role in the organisation and continuity of settlements, especially between the 5th and 8th centuries. Investigating the relationship between social dynamics and phenomena and architectural forms is indeed crucial in order to understand the creation, maintenance or change, and finally the abandonment of determined spatial behaviour. Furthermore, it allows us to consider the following questions: What was the social structure determining them? To what extent were the identity patterns reflected by the built environment? Which role did the sedentarisation of nomads play? This role might ultimately partially explain the recurrence of some ways of organising the built environment in such a broad geographical area.

Another aim of this work is addressing the long-debated topic of the “Oriental” or “Islamic city” from the archaeological perspective. Preferring to use the term “Arab”, while also carefully considering its potential constraints, is an attempt to bypass some limitations of the previous two terms. In my opinion the concept of the “Oriental city” as described by Eugen Wirth, among others, is preferable to the “Islamic city”, which evokes a discontinuity in urban forms that cannot be supported by evidence from the archaeological record. At the same time, the “Arab city” is preferable to the “Oriental city” because it frames the analysis into a more specific chronological, geographical, and possibly social context. These two terms, however, are not to be seen as antithetical, the first being simply a specific case in the wide spectrum of possible Oriental settlements.

It should be noted that although the present work is not focused on properly “urban” case studies; namely, none of the settlements considered in this study was a proper Hellenistic polis. In fact, the so-called “rural settlements” can explain some of the phenomena that take place in the larger cities of the former Roman Near East. Furthermore, creating a typology of the settlements by using the available administrative terminology presents its own challenges, especially for the Late Antique period.

While it is beyond the scope of the present study to offer a definitive or universal model of the spatial organisation of settlements, applying this new methodology to the range of case studies and material evidence revealed some significant trends for the study region, including the role of family groups in shaping and maintaining the built environment. It is the hope of this study to offer this new methodology for future archaeological studies, encouraging others to approach architecture and urban planning in ancient settlements in the Near East alongside the many possible social factors that contributed to turning them into a built reality. In this case the contribution of multiple disciplines can indeed result in a more complex and realistic explanation of such a fascinating phenomenon that is the built environment; it might also possibly allow us to glean some of the non-material features determining it, like identity.

I would like to extend my gratitude and sincere thanks to many people, professors, colleagues, friends and most importantly my family, for their help in the realisation of my doctoral thesis, which has culminated in the publication of this book. Even though it is not possible to list them all here, I would like to mention those who most directly helped me through the various stages of my work and by different means: my supervisors Prof. Dr Michael Heinzelmann (University of Cologne, Germany), Prof.

Dr Bethany J. Walker (University of Bonn, Germany) and Prof. Dr Hugh N. Kennedy (SOAS, London, UK); Prof. Roberto Parenti (University of Siena, Italy) and Prof. Emanuele Papi (University of Siena, Italy and SAIA, Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene); Prof. Dr Bert de Vries, Prof. Dr Øystein LaBianca, Dr Elisabeth Osinga, and Dr Piero Gilento; Dr Barbara A. Porter and the team of the American Center of Oriental Studies in Amman. I am also particularly grateful to Annette Hansen for her suggestions and for reviewing and editing the text.

I would also like to thank the Deutscher Akademische Austausch Dienst (DAAD) and the Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg at the University of Bonn for their financial support through the three-year “Research Grants for Doctoral Candidates and Young Academics and Scientists” and the one-year “Post-doctoral Junior Fellowship”, which helped make my doctoral and post-doctoral research possible, as well as the a.r.t.e.s Doctoral School at the University of Cologne for the administrative help.

Chronology for the region (based on David Kennedy, *The Roman Army in Jordan*, Council for British Research in the Levant, London 2004)

Hellenistic	332 – 64 BC
Nabatean	300 BC – AD 106
Roman	64 BC – AD 324
Early Roman	64 BC – AD 135
Late Roman	135 – 324
Byzantine	324 – 640
Early Byzantine	324 – 491
Late Byzantine	491 – 640
Early Islamic	640 – 1174
Umayyad	640 – 750
Abbasid	750 – 969
Fatimid	969 – 1071
Seljuk-Zenjid	1071 – 1174
Middle Islamic (see “Late” in Kennedy 2004)	1174 – 1516
Ayyubid	1174 – 1263
Mamluk	1263 – 1516

Part 1: Methodology and Theory

Chapter 1: Introduction

The transition between the Byzantine and the Early Islamic periods is an intriguing phase in the history of the Middle East. Recent studies (for instance Magness 2003 and Avni 2014) have finally challenged, and arguably surpassed, the old tradition associating the arrival of Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula with a complete destruction of the classical Greco-Roman heritage (the idea of the “Arab conquest”, Donner 1981). In fact, more features of continuity between the two periods have been progressively recognised in many aspects of political, social and economic life.¹ This new attitude and awareness has been applied to studies on the Late Antique period across the Mediterranean in general and is to a large extent due to both the broadening of the spectrum of sources used by scholars for their interpretations, which are no longer limited to historical sources, and to a considerable refinement of archaeological methodology and dating tools. The evolving settlement pattern is one of the first topics that underwent a critical analysis: in contrast with the previous idea of a complete abandonment of several villages, towns and even cities across the Middle East following the Arab invasion, archaeological surveys clearly demonstrated that life continued, often with no macroscopic changes. The very fate of the urban phenomenon: cities did not come to an end with the Arab conquest. On the contrary, several Hellenistic urban features survived and were reused despite the evident changes in the morphology of the cities from the Classical through the Byzantine into the Early Islamic periods (Sauvaget 1934; Sauvaget 1941; Kennedy 1985; Di Segni 1995; Di Segni 1999; Wirth 2000; Walmsley 2011; and Avni 2014 among others).

Here lies one major problem: the detailed analysis of the built environment, in its diachronic dimension, concentrated almost exclusively on the urban context, namely the former classical *poleis*. However, at the same time, the settlements dotting the countryside did not attract the same attention, and they were mainly documented in order to determine whether they survived the Byzantine period. Though as a result of intensive surveys, a considerable number were dated to the 5th and 6th centuries (Avni 2014), which necessitates not only the reconsideration of the chronology of the settlement patterns in this region but also a deeper understanding of this unprecedented development.

The present work aims to shed some light on the countryside and its respective chronology of settlement patterns and the built environment, and more specifically attempts to trace the development of eight case studies spread throughout the Roman and Byzantine Near East, dating from the 1st to the 8th/9th AD. Although, I will particularly focus on the latter phases of this period, which constitute the so-called Late Byzantine-Early Islamic transition. There are several reasons for zooming in on this transitional phase. First of all, the overwhelming predominance of material remains date to these later centuries and have heavily affected our knowledge of the initial developments of most sites. Secondly, the apex in the development of these rural settlements takes place during this phase, starting from the 4th century and increasing until at least the 7th century, not only in terms of the number of sites and their increased dimensions, but also, and more interestingly, the expanded diversity of functions that can be associated with such rural settlements. This is a phase in which the dichotomy between city and countryside becomes blurrier, with the development of an intermediate level of settlement that if maintaining a rural connotation, seem to function as an “urban hub”. This can clearly

¹ For instance, the unearthing of a series of papyri from Nessana, in the Negev, and Petra, in modern day Jordan, opened an important window into the societies and the administration during this transitional period, showing a strong continuity from the Byzantine well into the Early Islamic period in social and administrative aspects, including fiscal practices, family structure, and religion (see Chapter 7.4).

connect with general political and economic changes taking place in this phase and more even more closely with the evolution in the morphology and role of the cities in the region. It is therefore difficult to consider these two phenomena as independent from one another.

The former Roman provinces of *Siria*, *Arabia* and *Palaestina* have always been peculiar in terms of settlement dynamics: the presence of diverse environments encouraged humans to develop various adaptation strategies already from the earliest phases when they inhabited the region. In particular, living on a “boundary” line between the desert extending to the East, and also to the South in the case of *Palaestina*, and lands always cultivable more or less year-round, led to the co-existence of a plurality of groups with different socio-economic orientations and mobility or settlement patterns. Not all regions were alike, both environmentally and culturally speaking, and historical evidence attests that each region had its own peculiarities. Despite this, when considering several sites across the Near East, a recurring pattern in the general spatial organisation of hamlets, villages and towns is recognisable: blocks and quarters are often occurring as clusters of farmhouses that are entirely closed to the outside, extremely compact in their inner structure, and almost completely self-sufficient as far as water management is concerned. Furthermore, domestic architecture within settlements shows an even more marked homogeneity. Why do these features occur as such? Which factors determine the development and organisation of the built environment of these rural and “semi-urban” settlements, especially during their Byzantine expansion? In my opinion, one of the key influential factors may be the social structures, and in particular different settings of family-groups.² Their perdurance through different historical phases, most notably after the arrival of the new Islamic administration, might also offer an explanation for the continuity in the processes behind the built environment.

A settlement can be approached from different scales and in different levels of detail. While a settlement could be approached through its regional context, scholars up until now have mainly studied settlements from two opposite extremes in terms of scale: the “macro” scale, namely the spatial organisation of the entire settlement and, though less frequently used, the “micro” scale, meaning the spatial organisation and evolution within the domestic space. This is particularly true for the study of cities or larger settlements. Likewise, the application of the “macro” and the “micro” scale analyses normally does not take the parallel settlement development dynamics occurring in the countryside into account. With that in mind, little attention had been paid to the structures of quarters in both cities and in settlements in the countryside, focusing mainly on monumental complexes or the more general layout of the site, with only a few exceptions.³

The present work attempts to fill these two methodological gaps in the analysis of rural settlements. On the one hand, it aims to provide a descriptive and diachronic investigation on three different levels, from the “macro” to the “micro”: the settlement in its entirety, the intermediate level of the quarter/block, and the house. On the other hand, it aims to elucidate some of the possible factors determining the spatial organisation of these different levels of analysis, while paying particular attention to their (potential) social significance. This analytical approach allows the researcher

² A study on the so-called Iron Age “Four-room house” (Faust and Bunimovitz 2003) represents a good reference for its social interpretation of the built environment, relating specifically different typologies of houses with different types of family structures and identity patterns.

³ Particularly noticeable are the studies on the Southwest and Northwest quarters in Jerash (Lichtenberger and Raja 2015; Blanke 2018; Lichtenberger and Raja 2018; Kalaitzoglou 2018).

simultaneously to disentangle and clarify the multiple connections between built environment and social structures, possibly at different scales.

In order to test this approach, this study considers four different regions on the margins of the desert across the Near East. A set of eight case studies was chosen, because of their level of preservation and the availability of archaeological data from excavations or architectural surveys (Figure 1):

- Mseikeh and Sharah in the central Hauran, in modern Syria;
- Umm es-Surab and Umm el-Jimal in the southern Hauran, on the border between modern Jordan and Syria;
- Umm er-Rasas and Tell Hisban in the central Jordanian Plateau;⁴
- Mamphis and Shivta in the Negev desert in modern Israel.

Alongside the multi-scalar approach to the settlement, I consider social implications of material evidence, which by itself presents its own set of methodological challenges. Investigations on the social stratification and composition of a site are quite common in several archaeological projects (among others: Faust and Bunimovitz 2003; Desreumaux et al. 2011; Walker 2013; Walker et al. 2014) and their reliability mainly depends on the accuracy of the excavation data and materials. However, connecting material evidence to “immaterial” elements, like identity and ethnicity, is extremely complicated, especially since the nature and criteria to define such terms is a hotly debated topic unto itself in archaeology and in other fields, most noteworthy between the contraposing Primordialists and Instrumentalists.⁵ Generally speaking, dealing with issues that go beyond the materiality of the archaeological documentation has long been a challenge for archaeologists, with noteworthy examples being the emergence of New Archaeology in the 1970s and the following movements of the post-processualism (Renfrew and Bahn 2004: 23–27), and the extent which immaterial aspects can be described and explained is a recurring topic in debates.

While archaeological and architectural data represent the core dataset of the study, the contribution of data and methods from other disciplines is central for the interpretation of the former dataset to help answer the questions set out in this study. For the purposes of this study, the dataset was gathered from the available publications on the sites, and to a certain extent also from autoptic observations made in the field by the author, with the only two exceptions being the Syrian sites that could not be visited due to the current political climate. The epigraphical record represents particularly important source material, especially for the social organisations of segmented societies explored in this study. Mentions of family ties and “tribal” affiliations are widespread across the regions examined and cover a wide chronological spectrum. If not coming directly from a specific site like Umm el-Jimal, the evidence comes from immediate surroundings of these sites or nearby settlements. It is clear that the nature and destination of the inscriptions is also extremely diversified, from funerary to dedicatory, from carved blocks to stone-graffiti. It consists of a variety of evidence that offers multiple perspectives on social aspects of the local communities, which would have been otherwise missed by other types of evidence. This is especially true for the rural context, where other historical sources might be not as helpful, since contemporary sources tend to consider the urban perspective more frequently, also when writing on

⁴ These two case studies will be considered separately at the end of the chapter because of the nature of their poor conservation. Not all three levels of analysis could be easily applied to these sites; nonetheless they will provide good case studies to test the method I propose here for non-optimal material contexts.

⁵ For an overview, see: Hall 1997; Jones 1997. A sort of compromise between these two positions is Bourdieu’s “theory of Practice” (Bourdieu 1977).



Figure 1 - Location of the case studies (Satellite image: Google Earth)

the “countryside”. This is not to deny any possible use of historical sources within the research; though, this is simply to suggest that extra care in how this information is applied to the rural context. Lastly, difficulties are also often reflected in problematic terminology, whether they are used by ancient sources or applied by modern scholars. Here, cultural anthropology and ethnoanthropological comparisons play a fundamental role, despite the challenges involved in creating parallels between ancient societies and contemporary (or at least more recent) ones. Therefore, the anthropological debate greatly contributes in helping to establish the theoretical background on which the interpretations of the archaeological data are built within this study.