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Hisban Cultural Heritage Project (2018–2019)

Bethany J. Walker
University of Bonn

Øystein S. LaBianca
Andrews University, labianca@andrews.edu

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Excavations at Tall Hisban (Hesban) resumed in June and July 2018 for a three-week field season by a joint American-German team. This season marked the fifty-year anniversary of fieldwork at the site, begun by Andrews University in 1968. In addition to ongoing efforts to improve visitor access to the site and conservation of the standing ruins, the 2018 excavation was designed to address questions related to the history and development of the medieval Islamic settlement, continuing work begun in previous seasons in vaulted farmhouse clusters that stand on the western, southern, and northern slopes of the tell.

Excavations this year prioritized the largest of these clusters in field O, to the southwest of the tell, where four adjoining structures of roughly equal dimensions (5 x 7 m) were uncovered. A series of plastered floors, rich deposits of pottery and glass, another chess piece (a pawn, which complements the knight and die discovered at the site in previous seasons), and extensive evidence of cooking activity attest to domestic use of at least of three of them from the 13th to the early 15th centuries. A large, complete cooking pot of the Mamluk period was covered by the uppermost of the plastered floors of the north house, and it was dug into several of the deeper floors (Fig. 1). The pot preserved the remnants of the last meal cooked in the vessel, which was later used for refuse and subsequently

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Bethany J. Walker
University of Bonn
bwalker@uni-bonn.de

Øystein S. LaBianca
Andrews University
labianca@andrews.edu





Fig. 2. Drains and basins in a structure tentatively identified as a pottery workshop.

plastered over. The food remains are undergoing macrobotanical, phytolith, starch, residue, and isotope analyses in order to reconstruct not only what was cooked in the pot but also at what temperature, under what conditions, and with what oils and spices. This work is being supported in Bonn by the study of Arabic cooking manuals from 16th-century Damascus.

Excavations also documented a network of subterranean drains in the north house and a subsidiary structure to its east. In the latter were also found a plastered basin with drain (Fig. 2) and a concentration of what appeared to be processed clay, as well as several hand tools that could be identified with the finishing of ceramic vessels. Recent mineralogical and chemical analyses of glazed pottery from the site, and the recovery of a firing tripod and potential wasters, have confirmed local ceramic production in the Mamluk period. A cannonball in the doorway and iron arrowhead in the living space of the north house, and a musket ball in an adjacent structure, bear witness to some kind of military confrontation in the 16th century.

Excavations also continued in a Byzantine-era structure to the south of the tell (field B), reoccupied in the Mamluk period, as well as in field M (on the tell's north slope), exposing a long, vaulted structure built on top of a wall of monumental size and construction of much earlier date. Excavation above the northwest end of the Iron Age reservoir exposed several thick layers of industrial plaster, which may be related to the Byzantine-era road construction uncovered in the 1970s. The Byzantine-era north church, excavated in 1978, was subjected to cleaning and exploratory probes this season, in preparation for final publications and to prepare the site for the public. The original mosaic of the apse was documented, with plans, in consultation with the Madaba office, to do restorations of it in the future.