

The year 2019 marked the beginning of a new fieldwork-based research project at Umm el-Jimal, coinciding with the Calvin University Archaeological Field School. The Comparative Churches Project seeks a better understanding of the role churches played within the site's wider sociocultural context and to document them (e.g., Haddad 2019) before their conservation. A total of sixteen Byzantine churches have been identified at Umm el-Jimal, representing both basilica and hall forms, as well as different architectural relationships between public, religious, and domestic space. Three churches—the west church, southwest church, and Julianos Church—offer a cross section of these architectural forms and spatial relationships, and they are the focus of this new multi-year research project. Small trenches were placed within each of these churches during the 2019 season, and these excavations are informing future work in line with project aims.

The west church, one of the largest at Umm el-Jimal, has a basilica form and stands on its own, free from surrounding domestic structures. Limited previous excavation took place in 1984, 1998, and 2017, while the Department of Antiquities cleared the interior between 2000 and 2008. Radiocarbon dates from charcoal in mosaic and dome mortars have yielded dates between AD 160 and 590, but the foundation date and wider chronology remain uncertain. Two small trenches were excavated in the area of the chancel, corresponding with the locations of looters' pits that had been backfilled prior to this season's fieldwork. Excavation inside the chancel revealed at least two—possibly three—separate surfaces, including two mosaic phases, while outside the chancel only a single surface—sealing against the chancel screen—was identified (Fig. 1). Ceramics of the 5th and 6th centuries were dominant in these trenches.

The Julianos Church, a hall form, was a later insertion into a domestic neighborhood, with the unusual characteristic of being accessible only from the courtyard of an adjacent house (house 60). The eastern end of the nave, including the apse, was cleared in 1984 and partially excavated in 1998. A single trench was re-excavated through backfill and looters' pits in 2019 to clarify stratigraphic relationships and to collect datable material around a possible pre-church wall tentatively identified in 1998. This earlier wall was not visible in re-excavation, but a possible pre-church plaster surface was identified, with associated Hauran ware of late 2nd- to 3rd-century date.

The southwest church is a basilica form inserted into a preexisting neighborhood, specifically Byzantine houses 32 and II. Unlike the Julianos Church, this church is accessible from the street, with three separate entrances

Umm el-Jimal Comparative Churches Project

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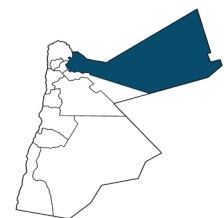




Fig. 1. West church trenches U.08 (foreground) and U.09 (background).
(Photo by Darrell J. Rohl.)

on the north and flanking the eastern apse. A smooth plaster floor features incised designs, which may have been intended as a final decoration or as a preparation for a mosaic that was never installed. The church was cleared between 2000 and 2008 by the Department of Antiquities and was subsequently looted in 2015. Two looters' pits were targeted for re-excavation and expansion in 2019 to seek evidence of the church's foundation date and the nature of how this space was used before the church was constructed. An earlier plaster surface was identified and probably represents the original courtyard of house II (Fig. 2). Ceramic evidence indicates that this church was likely built in the 6th century.

Plans are currently in development for the continuation of this fieldwork as part of the Calvin University Archaeological Field School and continued site conservation and presentation efforts in early summer 2021.

Reference

Haddad, Mais. 2019. "A Paradigm for Local Ecclesiastical Architecture in Jordan, Comparative Study of Three Churches at Umm al-Jimal." MA thesis, University of Jordan.



Fig. 2. Southwest church trench GG.02. (Photo by Darrell J. Rohl.)