

Tall Hisban

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



Fig. 1. Aerial photo of Tall Hisban in October 2021, view east. (Photo courtesy of Bob Bewley, Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East.)

The Islamic Archaeology Research Unit of the University of Bonn resumed excavations at Tall Hisban (Fig. 1) for a three-week season in October 2021, directed by the author and funded by the Gerda Henkel and Max van Berchem Foundations and the University of Bonn. The international team of twenty included PhD students from Bonn; specialists and technicians from Jordan, Germany, Belgium, and the U.S.; and eleven workmen from Hisban, trained by the Jordanian NGO AIRaqeem. In preparation for final publications on the Islamic strata, the 2021 season was designed to address specific questions related to occupational history. These included the timing and circumstances behind the rapid resettlement of ruins largely abandoned since the late Abbasid period and dating the initial construction of the farmhouse clusters at the base of the tall. Foundation levels were reached in two fields this season, confirming the early 13th-century reoccupation of Byzantine ruins across the site. Some buildings were preserved for as many as ten courses, measuring 3.5 meters from the bedrock foundations to the stone vault springers.

Excavation and photogrammetry of a complex of four conjoining vaulted structures at the southwest base of the tall (field O) were completed this season, with important results. The discovery of a *tannur* house (Fig. 2), complementing the recovery of a complete subterranean cookpot excavated in 2018, has led to its tentative identification as





Fig. 2. *Tannur* room in square O9. (Photo courtesy of Sherihan Inalo, University of Bonn.)



Fig. 3. Vaulted structure of S1, on bedrock. (Photo courtesy of Sherihan Inalo, University of Bonn.)

a public kitchen dating to the 13th century. As part of our larger study of medieval Islamic kitchen culture, extensive sampling of soils continued this season. Botanical remains will be processed for macrobotanical, phytolith, and starch analysis in Germany and the U.S. in 2022. A wide range of glazed imports from the 13th century was recovered from reoccupation levels in all structures in this field.

A vaulted structure with a partially preserved vault (Fig. 3) on the upper west slope (S1)—uncovered by looters during the pandemic—yielded a rich variety of late-Mamluk table wares, storage and cooking vessels, and household metal implements. As a whole, the ceramic corpus produced a wider range of handmade forms and imported glazed wares of this period than is normally found at any single site in Jordan. This structure was excavated in its entirety to bedrock.

Excavations in the North Church focused on the intrusive medieval burials. Five cist graves laid outside the south aisle of the Byzantine church were targeted, to investigate who may have resettled Hisban in the middle Islamic period. Initial osteological study documented the gender and age of the individuals buried there. A late Ayyubid coin found in soil immediately covering one grave provided evidence for an early 13th-century use of the cemetery, which, along with the associated pottery, suggests that this was the communal cemetery of Ayyubid and Mamluk Hisban. Isotope and histological analysis of the skeletal remains is planned in 2022, in support of our larger study of human migration and health.

The industrial and economic importance of the site also came into greater focus this season. More evidence of local ceramic production emerged with the recovery of a ceramic mold, a stone potter's wheel, and finishing tools from Mamluk levels of three vaulted structures. Ongoing mineralogical and chemical analyses of pottery in Bonn is demonstrating the extent of local production of diverse wares. The discovery of small stone weights and a copper scale attests to the presence of a market at Hisban in the same period.

To complete a comprehensive site plan, and to document changes in urban structure over time, photogrammetry was combined this season with ground-penetrating radar.