

Ex Oriente Lux

Studies in Honour of Jolanta Młynarczyk



edited by

Krzysztof Jakubiak and Adam Łajtar



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KHIRBAT SARA (JORDAN), 1983

ABSTRACT

Khirbat Sara is an important multiperiod archaeological site west of Amman, where Jolanta Mlynarczyk started a project in 2018. The author surveyed it 35 years earlier, after exploration by archaeologists in 1881, 1904 and 1937. This paper includes a description of the ruins, their environment, their architecture and the surface pottery. Three main phases are suggested: a late Ammonite (sixth/fifth century BC or later) agricultural estate around a strong square tower ("Qasr al-Sar"); a Roman sanctuary with significant decoration; an extensive Ayyubid / Mamlouk village.

Keywords: Jordan, Sar, Ammonite, tower, Roman period, sanctuary, Ayyubid, Mamluk, village, arcade, *arcosolia*, sarcophagi

From May 23rd till 25th 1983, then on October 25th 1983, within the framework of a detailed archaeological survey of the area surrounding Iraq al-Amir, west of Amman conducted by the French Archaeological Institute IFAPO (a predecessor of the current IFPO), I visited the site of Khirbat Sâra, or Sâr, better Hîrbat Šārah/Šâr, with archaeologist Chantal Crétaz and topographer Marie-Andrée Meyer. That place was later registered as JADIS 2215017 / MEGA-Jordan 3007. In 2018, Jolanta Mlynarczyk started an archaeological project there, and thus I find it convenient to offer her these 35-years old unpublished observations and figures together with my current hypotheses about the place.

The location is on the western edge of the Amman plateau, 10km in a straight line west of the centre of Amman citadel. In 1983, Sara, registered as 96 in our final numbering (67 in the field numbering) of the Survey of Iraq al-Amir area, was in the southern vicinity of the quickly growing modern suburb of Bayader (then already encroaching on the ancient site) and overlooked the still small town of Wadi al-Sir [Fig. 1]. As this map shows, Sar is part of an almost uninterrupted line of small-medium sites on the very edge of the plateau including 109, 103, 100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 94, 93, 92, etc. Many of them were probably fortified farms of the Iron Age II period or even from the Persian period. The coordinates, on the Palestine grid, are 228600/150300, and the altitude is 950m. Sara overlooks the deeply incised valleys of Wadi al-Sir and Wadi al-Shita, tributaries of Wadi Kufrayn, itself a tributary of the Jordan. At the date of our survey, the major part of the site was already fenced by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

Publications earlier than our survey were: Merrill 1881: 404–405, 484 (suggesting the identification with ancient Jazer, *Nb.* 32.1); Conder 1889: 153–154 (visit in October 1881); Butler *et al.* 1919: 33; 1930: 6 (visit in October 1904) and Glueck 1937–1939: 153–155 (visit in October 1937).

A possible ancient reference to the site is in Eusebius', *Onomasticon*, s.v. "Azor", A201: 10 (Roman) miles to the west of Philadelphia (Amman), 15 miles to the north of Esbus (Hisban). Both the distances and the place name are compatible with Sara / Sar.

This site mostly consisted of heavily ruined dwellings on a plateau, extending over *ca.* 100 m, to the north, and mainly south and east (not west), of a large east-west oriented monumental complex, including three main elements which probably pertains to at least two periods. The site (the ruins of the dwellings) was considerably larger one century earlier, since Conder writes of an extension over "some 500 yards in either direction" (450m).

There is abundant surface pottery, of which important selections were collected (200 sherds). Of these 105 sherds were kept and 43 drawn. In addition, there was one flint tool, two fragments of glass, and white and grey *tessellae* of mosaics.

The pottery includes [Fig. 2–6]:

- some Late Iron Age II / Persian: 67.19–20 [Fig. 2], 67.40–41 [Fig. 6];

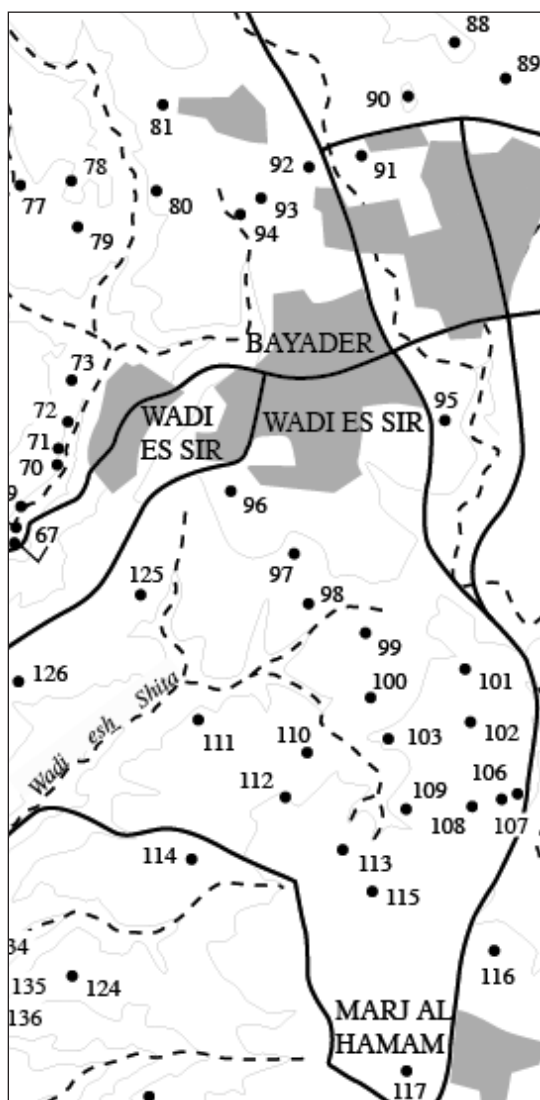


Fig. 1. Sara location map, 1983 (M.-A. Meyer). Numbers = archaeological sites (96 = Sara). Grey = 1983 inhabited areas. Black lines = modern roads. Dashed lines = wadis.

- a lot of very Late Hellenistic and Roman material, up to the third century AD: 67.01–03, 65.05 [Fig. 2], 67.08 (eastern Sigillata A), 67.09, 67.10 (?), 67.12–15, 67.18 [Fig. 3], 67–27 [Fig. 4], 67.42 (eastern Sigillata A), 67.43 [Fig. 6];
- relatively abundant Late Byzantine and Umayyad material: 67.04, 67.06, 67.11, 67.16–17, 67.21 [Fig. 2], 67.37–38 [Fig. 6];
- a lot of Ayyubid / Mamlouk pottery: 67.25–26, 67.29 [Fig. 3], 67.07, 67.22–24, 67.29–30, 67.34, 67.36 [Fig. 4], 67.31–33, 67.35 [Fig. 5];
- a few Late Ottoman sherds: 67.39 [Fig. 6].

Ancient Sara benefitted both from the flat surfaces of the western very end of the Amman plateau, with relatively good soils, and from moderate slopes further west and (mainly) south. One of the most interesting features still visible then (1983) in the immediate vicinity, today totally disappeared, were the huge linear heaps of stones resulting from the clearing of stones for establishing fields in Antiquity: both agricultural terraces and (mainly) strips parallel to the slopes [Fig. 7]. As far as water is concerned, the good rainfall resulting from the altitude and the position on the edge of the plateau allowed storage in cisterns: we observed on the site a very probable open air (?) reservoir, 10 by 5 m in plan, delimited by walls 1.70 m thick, located *ca.* 30 m to the south of the monumental complex.

The most common ruins of buildings in Sara, quite close to each other, were certainly dwellings; their walls, badly ruined, were *ca.* 1.20 m thick, built of both brown flint and irregular blocks of white limestone, with no obvious traces of cutting. The rooms were small and rectangular. It is worth mentioning that recent bulldozer cuts to the south of the ruins of dwellings, just outside the archaeological site fence, revealed a minimum thickness of 2 meters of archaeological soil deposits [Fig. 8]: it is quite probable that these represent part of the ancient dumps of the settlement.

The uppermost part of the site, almost in the middle of its western edge, is occupied by a group of monumental ruins

[Fig. 9]. This location has an excellent view south-westwards towards the western valleys of Wadi al-Shita and Wadi al-Sir and eastwards towards the Amman plateau.

To the west, walls A-B-C-D, form a strong square building (19.50 x 19.70 m, east-west, north-south oriented), the *Qasr*, as it is called locally, with no visible remains inside. The very thick walls (2.60 m), were built of huge rough blocks of “flint” (actually a brown conglomerate including many flints), without any visible traces of cutting, the length of which were typically between 1.50 m and 2 m (up to 2.45 m), and heights between 0.30 and 0.60 m (0.50 m for the first courses at bottom). There was no mortar. The building system, stones laid in courses, seems to alternate stretchers and some headers. The preserved height of walls A and C varies from 3 to 5 m, while it reaches almost 6.10 m (10 courses) for wall B [Fig. 10]. The eastern Wall D was more heavily destroyed, though its angles with walls A and C were well preserved in height; the rest of the remains of the wall were two metres lower than the level of the angles, which suggests that it was methodically dismantled [Fig. 11]. No gate can be seen, which probably means that the gate was in wall D (although we do not know the thickness of the destruction strata along the bottom of walls A, B, C, which could have obliterated a low gate in one of these walls).

Immediately adjacent to the *Qasr* towards the east were walls E, F and G (F being visible on Fig. 12). They form a small, roughly rectangular addition, 6.40 m east-west by 19.50 m north-south. In many aspects, these walls differ from those of the *Qasr* (although, as in the *Qasr* itself, there were no clear traces of working of the stones used). Their top level was regular, but a little lower than the level of the dismantled wall D of the *Qasr* (at the level of the top of

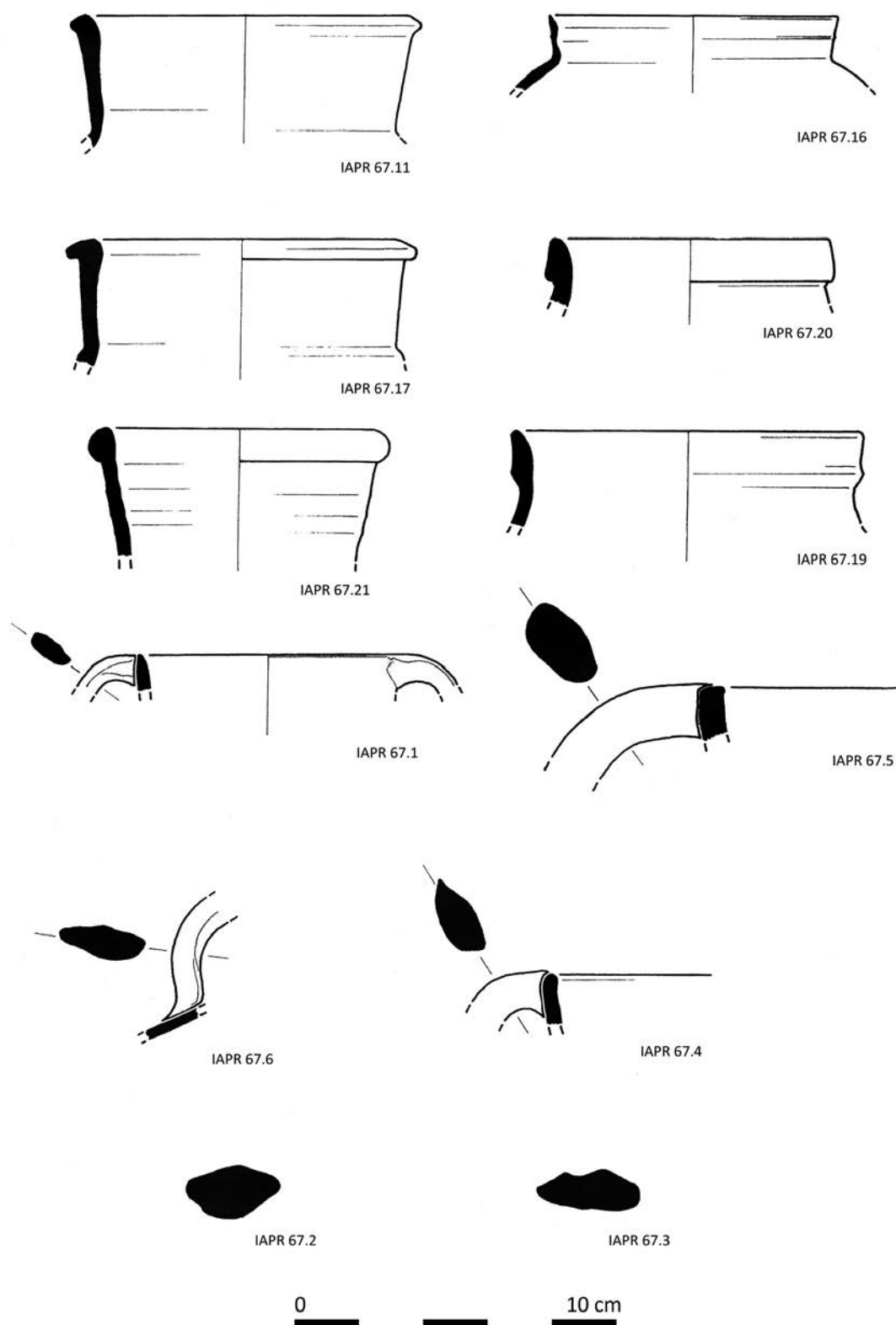


Fig. 2. Sara surface pottery, 1983, selection. Drawing by J. Humbert.

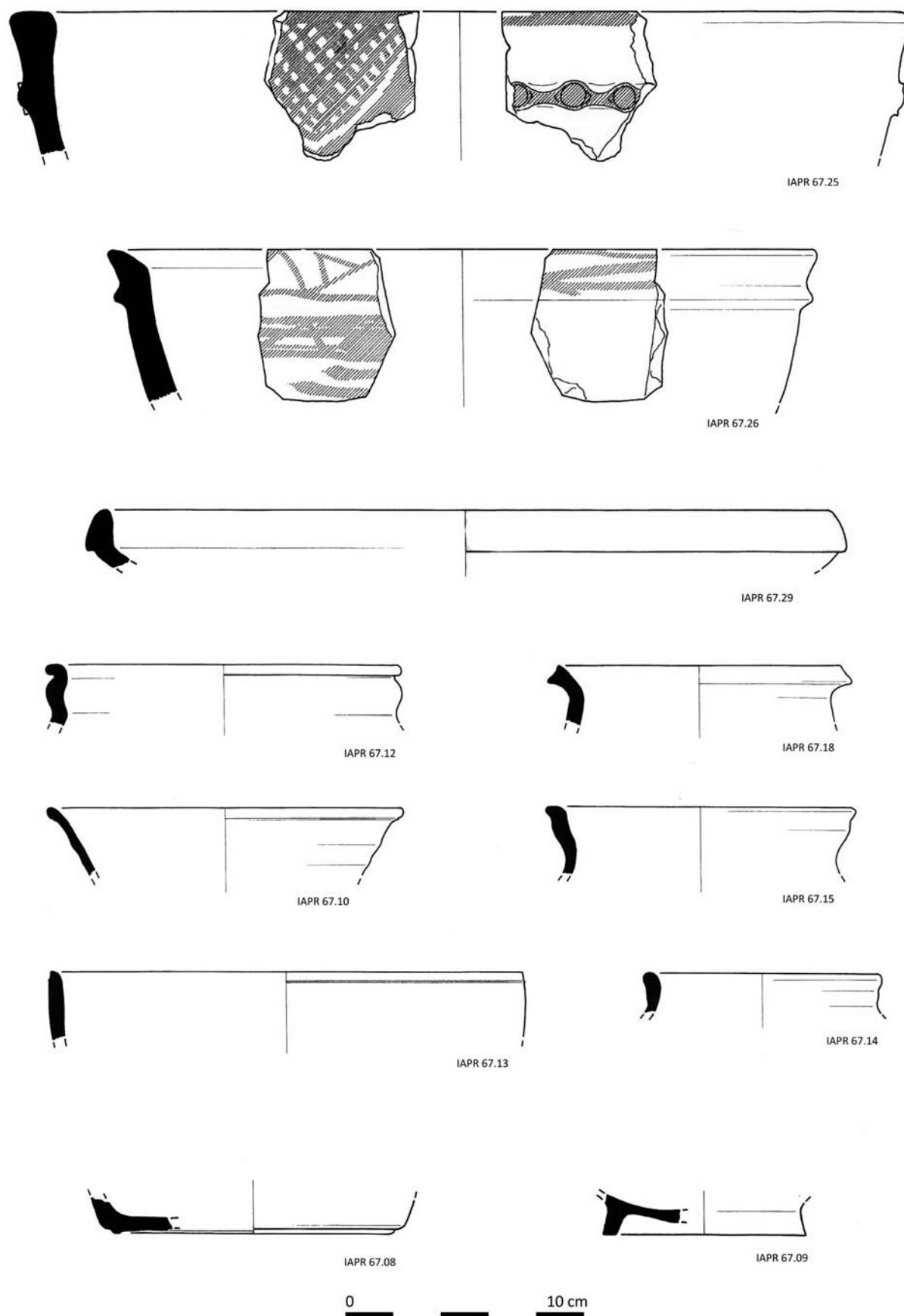


Fig. 3. Sara surface pottery, 1983, selection. Drawing by J. Humbert.

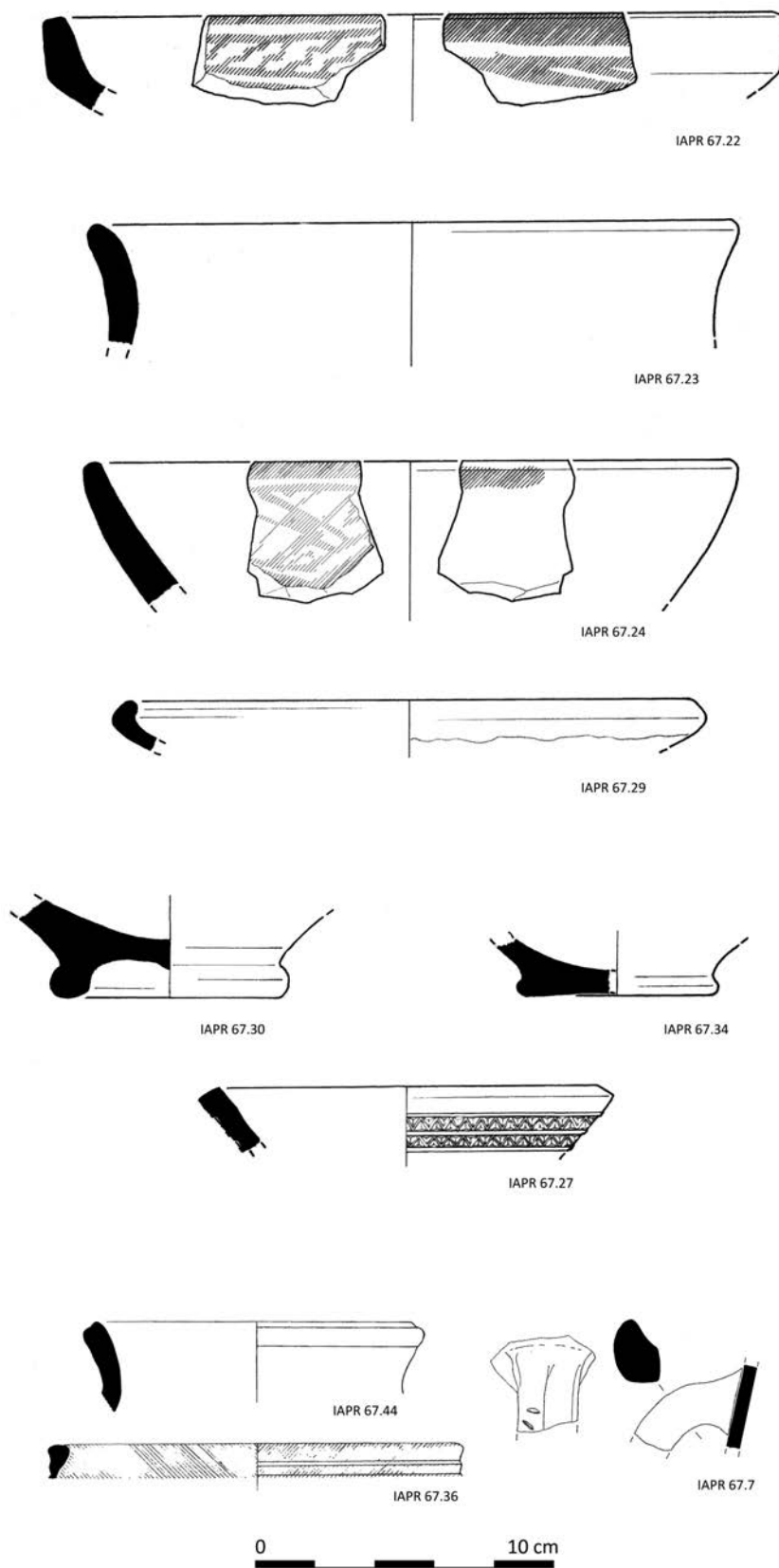


Fig. 4. Sara surface pottery, 1983, selection. Drawing by J. Humbert.

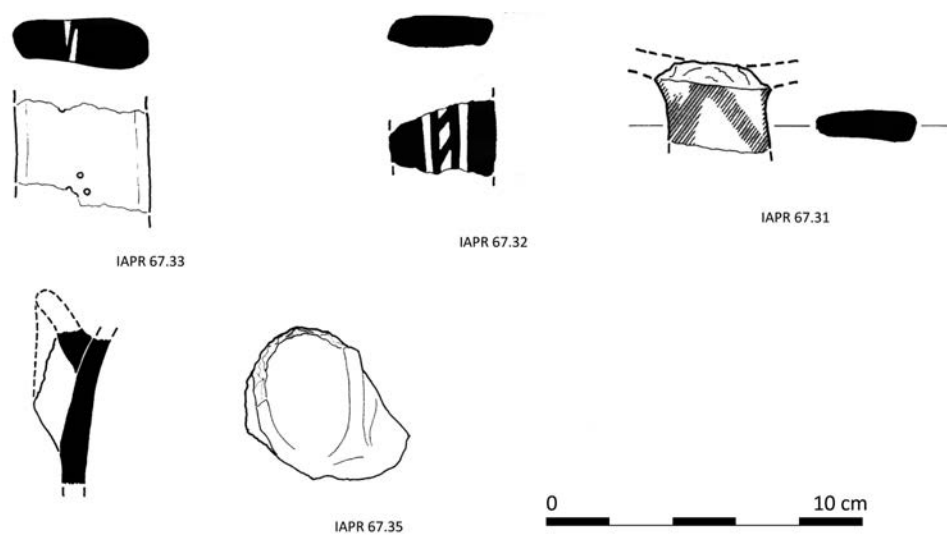


Fig. 5. Sara surface pottery, 1983, selection. Drawing by J. Humbert.

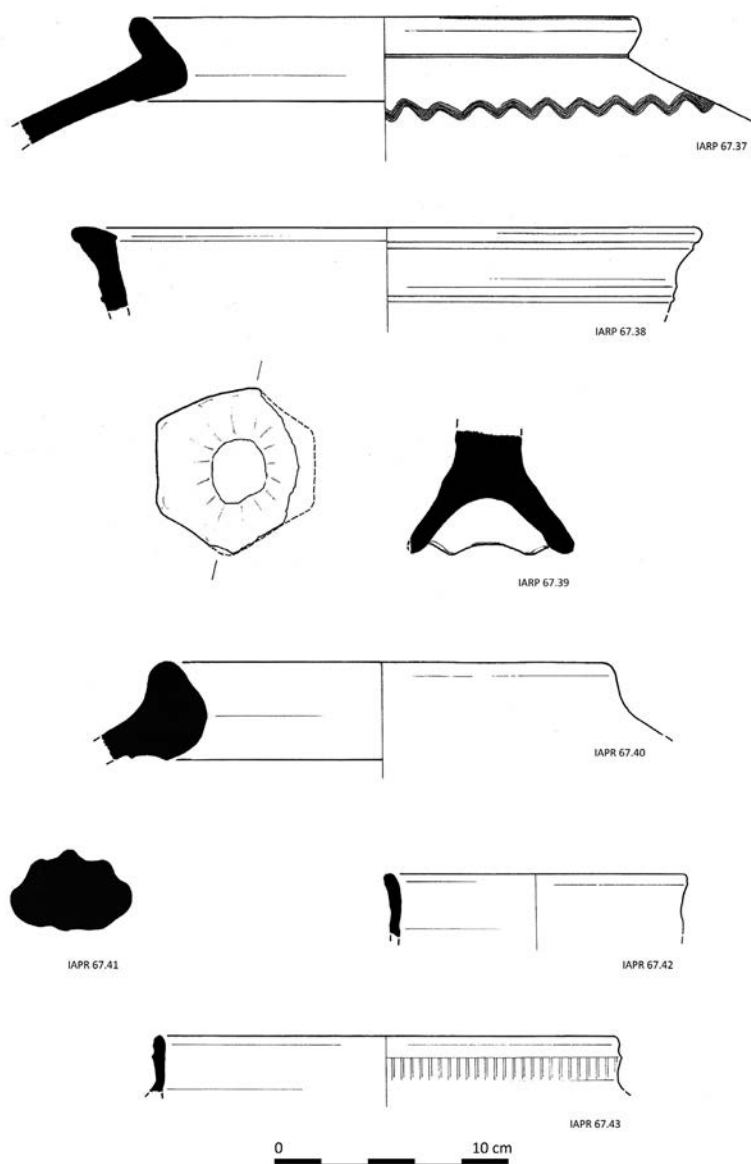


Fig. 6. Sara surface pottery, 1983, selection. Drawing by J. Humbert.



Fig. 7. Edges of ancient fields on the eastern slope of Wadi Rakhm (northern tributary of Wadi al-Shita), below Sara (which is on top, left). Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, looking east, from a spot close to site 125, Khirbet al-Muqsayr (or Umm Qusayr).



Fig. 8. Two metres thick archaeological deposits (dumps ?) exposed in a bulldozer cut under the southern fence of Sara. The *qasr* is on top, left. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, towards north.

the fourth known course of the other walls of the *Qasr*). There was no evidence that they were once higher, which may suggest that they delimit a platform or something like that (the space between walls D and F, though apparently not paved, was relatively flat). These walls were a little narrower than those of the *Qasr* (2–2.10 m, as opposed to 2.60 m). They were bonded together (E-F-G) but were not bonded with wall D. In contrast to the *Qasr*, built only with “flint” blocks, walls E-F-G were of mixed material: partly big blocks of flint conglomerate, but with some of white limestone. In addition, in wall F, the eastern face was made of big stones placed as headers, while the western face, with limited thickness, was made of small stones. This is an additional argument in favour of a platform E-F-G added to the *Qasr*, maybe after the dismantling of its eastern wall D. The “flint” blocks used in the masonry of walls E-F-G could have been reused blocks derived from the dismantled courses of wall D.

Walls H to O formed the third group of walls belonging to the monumental complex, still with the same general east-west orientation as the whole complex. Taken together, these walls, that is wall J and the reconstructed wall O, in continuity with wall F, walls N and K with more or less continuity visible on the ground, and seemingly walls L and M being preserved parts of an eastern wall, all delimit a slightly distorted square, the sides of which measure 32.20 m on the south, 32.60 m on the east, 31.60 m (29.30 visible) on the north, and 32 m on the west. These walls were badly destroyed and in places (south: middle; east: middle; north-west, where wall O is logically proposed, but not seen), were no longer visible above the ground. The thickness of these walls varies greatly, from 1.05 m to 1.95 m. Wall J and the proposed wall O abut the south-east and north-east angles of the “platform” E-F-G: thus wall F must be considered as forming the main part of the western limit of the space delimited by walls J, K, L, M, N and O.

Going deeper into the details, wall J was preserved up to the top level of the second visible course of the *Qasr* counting from the bottom, it was not bonded to E (or to the angle E/F), which means that it was built later. The wall

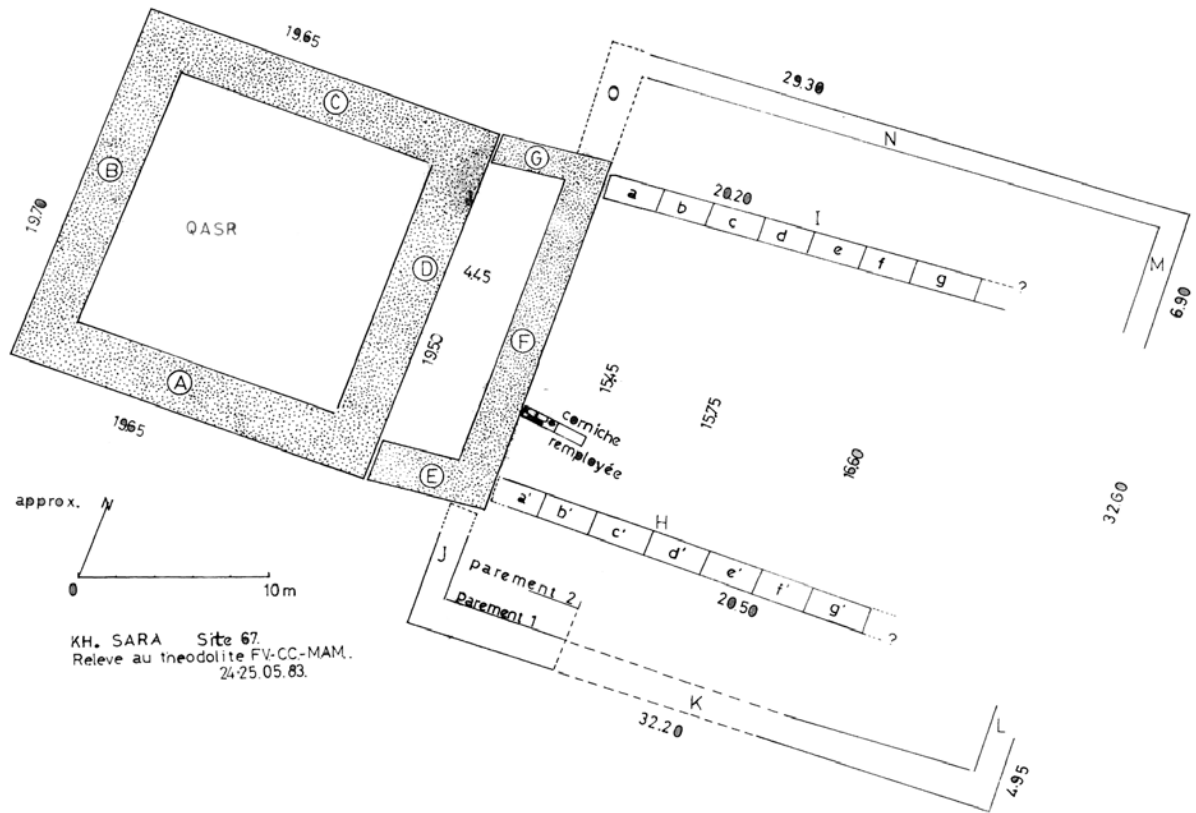


Fig. 9. Plan of the monumental area. F. Villeneuve, C. Crétaz, M.-A. Meyer, 1983.



Fig. 10. Qasr, west wall (B), from outside. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, looking east.

was double-sided, with internal filling. It was built with limestone, generally uncut stones. Wall K, thicker (1.40 m), was bonded with J and L. A length of over 10 m had disappeared in the middle; thus its continuity was not certain; for example there could have been a gate somewhere here. The break in the wall there allowed observation of the section of the wall, which showed that it was *ca.* 2 metres high, the top of the highest preserved course being at the same level as in wall J. Again, wall K was double-sided, with internal filling. Its masonry was a mix of limestone and “flint”. The blocks used in the sides were worked, but without care. Near the western end (corner K-J), there was an important thickening, over 7 m long, which doubles the thickness of the wall. It is probable that this formed the foundations of a massive stairway.



Fig. 11. *Qasr*, wall D. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, looking south.



Fig. 12. Wall F in foreground, and rows of arches I (left) and H (right). Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, looking south-east.

Wall L has the same characteristics as K and M (bonded with N), though it was narrower than the former. As evidenced by Fig. 9, L and M were preserved only over a length of a few metres each, close to the angles K-L and M-N. There was a strong possibility that L and M were the remaining parts of an eastern wall of which the major central part had disappeared. Another possibility was that an extremely wide opening, or an apse, or a rectangular exedra, etc., could have existed there. No architectural features were visible at the level of the top of the preserved courses of “walls” L and M.

The long northern wall N was comparable to wall K, though it was narrower (1.10 m). Its continuation was not absolutely established. Its western end was missing; thus finally the short north-west wall O, not seen, is a proposed reconstruction.

Elements I and H were two rows of arches – 7 arches visible in each row – running in a west-east direction, starting against wall F and the visible elements extending over a length of 20.50 m (I) and 20.20 m (H) [Fig. 12]. They were roughly parallel (and parallel to walls N and K) but the distance between them increases from west (15.45 m) to east (16.60 m). They were built of well-cut limestone blocks. The western ends (arches a and a') of both rows abut wall F: the rows of arches were built after the “platform” E-F-G. The eastern ends of both rows were too badly destroyed and obscured by debris to know if there had been more than seven arches. Theoretically, there was room for three more arches, thus 10 arches in total for both rows, before reaching wall(s) L-M.

Every arch was built of seven voussoirs [Fig. 13]. The width of the rows (the thickness of the arches) was 1.20 m, the measurements of the sections of the square piers were 1.20 m, and the width between two piers (or length of each arched section) was 1.60 m. Only the north faces of the arches of row H and south faces of the arches of row I were decorated by mouldings. These mouldings were characterized by the following succession: *fascia*, quarter round, *fascia*, *fascia*, fillet, band. On the contrary, the other faces, facing walls K and N, not only were undecorated, but were not properly dressed, and only irregularly cut. The surface of the tops of the arches d, e, f [Fig. 12] in row I was cut horizontally by large, almost square (0.95 x 0.85 m) mortises 10 cm deep, which testifies necessarily to the presence of courses of a wall – or of a horizontal decoration such as an architrave, frieze – over the arches.

There was no trace of any built element between the rows, or walls, H and I:¹ no pier, no column, etc. So the space delimited by walls F, H, I and (possibly) L-M was necessarily an open-air space: a courtyard, measuring roughly 16.50 m north-south by ca. 29 m west-east. On the contrary, it was possible to roof the narrower spaces on both sides of the courtyard, between wall K and arches H, between arches I and wall N, being 5 m to 5.50 m wide.

In addition to the mouldings of the arches and to the reused moulded cornice (see footnote 1), seven other architectural blocks of the Roman period were observed, none of them *in situ*, all of them in limestone. Inside the *Qasr* lay three column bases, with moulding: one broken in two fragments [Fig. 14]; another one complete but extremely eroded; a third one with drum in addition to the base. The diameter of the three drums was 0.80 m. Another column-drum, 0.75 m in diameter, lay in front of the *Qasr*, immediately to the east of wall D. Close to it, between walls E, F and G, lay the corner of a rectangular base (of an altar or pedestal), 0.50 m high, 0.60 by 0.60 m wide, with moulding on two sides [Fig. 15]. A worn fragment of triglyph or biglyph (of a relatively large size: minimum height 0.30 m) of a Doric frieze was also observed. Finally, among the ruined dwellings in the southern part of the site lay a substantial fragment of a probable architrave, carefully cut, decorated with two *fasciae*, one band, and a row of worn eggs [Fig. 16]. The right end of the stone, with a strong angle of the band, becoming a curve, and the intermediate *fascia* as well, suggests strongly that this was actually part of the left side of an arch: thus an archivolt over a gate. Obviously, the stone had been reused as building material in the late dwellings of that area, and its original position had, like other decorative blocks, been in the monumental area.

The chronological relationship between the ruins of the dwellings and the structures of the monumental area is problematic, since there is no architectural connection between them. The residential area was extensive, as noted by Conder (see above), and in the constructions of medieval villages in this part of the Levant, walls were rarely of a thickness of about 1.20 m. However, the small size of the rooms, the random use of flint or limestone, the absence of traces of cutting and the use of large blocks, finally the presence of at least one stone reused from the monumental area are evidence for these constructions belonging to a late period. Tentatively, the ruined dwellings can be associated with the significant amount of Ayyubid–Mamlouk pottery found on the ground around them. However, earlier occupations of the same area (Late Iron Age, Roman, and Late Byzantine / Umayyad since material of those periods too is present) cannot be excluded.

The relative chronology inside the monumental complex is clear, as evidenced by architectural connections or disconnections (see above). The *Qasr*, walls A-B-C-D, was built first, then walls E-F-G, then the eastern monument

¹ With the very small exception of a narrow and short element of wall against wall F, in the south-western corner of the courtyard, reusing an element of moulded limestone cornice, length = 1.72 m (*cyma* profile).



Fig. 13. Wall (row of arches) H: north face of arch f. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983, looking south.

in limestone: walls J-O plus the rows of arches H and I (although there is *stricto sensu* no archaeological proof that the perimeter wall J-O and the arcades were built simultaneously).

The *Qasr* was at first a large square strong tower, with a large internal room 14 x 14 m. Its entrance was probably in the eastern wall (D, later partly dismantled). Due to later alterations, it was impossible to say anything of any possible original internal partitions, the presence of an upper storey, roofing, and total height. *Qasr al-Sara*, however, looks much like many other strong buildings of the western neighbourhood of Amman, either rectangular / square or round, commonly called “Ammonite towers”.² The general picture produced by our 1980–1987 survey of that area and the valleys of Sir, Shita, Bahhath and Kufrayn leads us to consider them as fortified agricultural settlements (including ordinary dwellings beside the tower) rather than elements of a chain of fortifications. It also indicates that their date was late in the Iron Age II, frequently Persian and possibly even Early Hellenistic. Despite the small quantity of Iron Age pottery at Sara, we suggest that *Qasr al-Sara* was originally the main building of a fortified Ammonite farm of the Babylonian, Persian or Early Hellenistic period.

We cannot imagine a function for the E-F-G addition in itself. There was no evidence that these walls were once higher than the podium height seen in 1983. It is difficult to see the 14 x 4.45 square metres that they delimit as a room or rooms. It is highly probable that walls E-F-G were built reusing the stones from dismantling of wall D. This process of dismantling and building therefore transformed the former *Qasr* into a totally different building, open towards the east and preceded by an elevated platform. Since all the decorative architectural blocks of Roman date (including columns), except one, were found either inside the *Qasr*, or on the platform, or reused immediately in front of it, I conclude that the newly reorganised building was a Roman temple, probably of *prostylos* type, an idea already proposed by Glueck. Certainly, the choice of transforming a rough building of the mid-first millennium BC built of huge flint-conglomerate blocks into a temple is in itself extremely surprising. A number of explanations may exist for this, such as the presence of early religious traditions there, or the need to establish a border-temple in a spectacular position on the western limits of Philadelphia / Amman territory, along the highway from Amman to the Jordan.³

² Butler's statement (1919: 33) that the *Qasr* is a very ancient temple does not sound reasonable at all.

³ Conder 1889: 153: “The ancient west road from Amman passes by it”.



Fig. 14. Fragment of column base, limestone, lying inside the *Qasr*. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983.



Fig. 15. Corner of altar or pedestal base, limestone, lying on platform E-F-G. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983.

If the arcades H-I and the perimeter wall J-O were contemporary, the Roman date (second century AD rather than first or third, in view of the mouldings) of the eastern component of the monument – large rectangular courtyard and north and south corridors or aisles or naves – is clear. An interpretation as an early Christian church with basilical plan, and totally lost apse to the east, is impossible. This is due to the date of the mouldings of the arch and to the width of the central space, which cannot have been roofed, thus cannot be a central nave.

Butler (1904), who took correct measurements of the arches, does not hesitate to describe the arcades as *arcosolia*. His drawing shows two walls immediately adjacent and parallel to the arches, behind them – the one immediately to the south of H, the other immediately to the north of I. He explicitly states that he saw sarcophagi in the *arcosolia* being looted by the Circassians living nearby. Both affirmations are impossible to accept. None of the other explorers mention rear walls behind the arches; there was no trace of them in 1983, and it is very unlikely that they had been totally dismantled, becoming invisible everywhere, between 1904 and 1983, especially as all other parts of the monumental complex had remained extremely stable since Conder's first description in 1881. As far as sarcophagi



Fig. 16. Fragment of architrave (and archivolt), limestone, lying among the ruins of dwellings, south of the *Qasr*. Photo F. Villeneuve, 1983.

are concerned, Conder, more than 30 years before Butler, did not see them under the arches, but he writes: “on the north, by the roadside, six sarcophagi were found lying in a square enclosure”. The location of that square enclosure is now far to the north of the modern archaeological fence and certainly now non-existent; Conder’s description thus documents a funerary zone for the elites, which is an important complement to what remains of the site at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Butler’s mistake is of a type frequently found in his publications of “minor” sites. It seems his team usually spent a very short time (here one hour only),⁴ while the final editing of the notes and the drawing took place many years later. Without sarcophagi under the arches, the idea of *arcosolia* becomes fanciful, since we do not know of any archaeological example of an open-air necropolis made of two rows of *arcosolia* facing each other on both sides of a 15 m wide courtyard. Additionally, the *arcosolia* hypothesis does not take into consideration the perimeter walls J-O and the long rooms between H and K, and I and N.

It is much simpler to assume that the large courtyard was that of a *temenos* with a vanished monumental entrance to the east (the archivolt block, Fig. 16, being maybe the sole remains of that entrance) and that the arches were the arcades of two porticos on either side of the courtyard. Due to the destruction of the eastern end of the complex, there are two possibilities in the east: either the north and south arcades continued up to the eastern wall (L-M) or they connected to a north-south eastern arcade. Due to the difference of level between the courtyard and the prostyle vestibule E-F-G, there was probably a stairway, not visible in 1983, in front of wall F, on the east-west axis of the courtyard. Arched porticos are indeed much less common than the columnated porticos, but are not unknown in the Roman Levant, as evidenced by the Wadi Farasa complex in Petra. The space between the piers (*inter axes*), 2.80 m, is correct for the façade of a portico. The width of the north and south porticos,⁵ however, 5 to 5.50 m, was greater than usual, and there was no trace of rooms behind walls N and K, which appear to be elements of the *peribolos* wall (as well as J-O and L-M). These two remarks taken together suggest that the two long and wide porticos were used as rooms, or at least shelters, by worshippers of that sanctuary. That leads us again to the idea of a road sanctuary used by travellers after finishing the terrible ascent from the Jordan valley en route to Philadelphia or before starting the dangerous descent towards Palestine.

On the whole, we suggest that Sara was originally an agricultural settlement of the sixth–third centuries BC built around a strong tower, transformed in the Roman period into a sanctuary for travellers from Amman to Jerusalem – with a funerary area at a distance, near the road itself – inhabited in the late Byzantine and Umayyad periods, and more densely, as a village, in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.

⁴ Butler *et al.* 1930: 6, where the author says that they measured “a building of no particular importance”.

⁵ The stairway which we propose to see in the south-west corner of the southern portico, along wall K, would have given access to the roof of the portico(s).

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